

## 4. (Re-)Framing the Afghan Fundamentalist in *West of Kabul, East of New York*

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CONAN: This is TALK OF THE NATION. I'm Neal Conan in Aspen, Colorado. We're at the Aspen Ideas Festival in the Grand Ballroom of the Hotel Jerome. Nearly 10 years after the worst terror attacks in U.S. history, lessons continue to play out on the battlefields of Afghanistan and Iraq, in the halls of the Central Intelligence Agency and the FBI and Congress and the White House and at dinner tables across the country. (Chertoff et al.)

Even ten years after the attacks of 9/11, there is primarily one scenario which Americans associate with Afghanistan: terrorism. Even though the plane hijackers of 9/11 did not come from Afghanistan, the country has become the epitome of evil and is regarded as the breeding ground for Muslim fundamentalism. Afghanistan is the country where America loses its beloved soldiers, more of them every day. For about 65,000 Arabs living in the U.S. today, Afghanistan is a very different place. It is their home country. They know Afghanistan in a way which CIA, FBI, and the American Congress are still struggling hard to grasp. For Afghan Americans, their home country is not only the incubator of terrorism and violence. Instead of retreating to the “dinner tables across the country” to discuss the aftermath of terrorism on public radio shows, many of them have therefore set out to tell their own stories of Afghanistan in autobiographical writing (Whitlock 51). The journalist Tamim Ansary was amongst the first to present his views. His memoir *West of Kabul, East of New York* was published in 2003. What the author presents here is not one of the common journalistic reports from the war front.<sup>1</sup> Rather, it is an intimate record of

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1 Whitlock puts great emphasis on autobiographies from war-struck nations. “Life narratives from Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq are compelling and urgent, and autobiographical

his experience in Afghanistan which combines multiple frames of interpretation to create a complex picture of Muslim American identity with the aim of intervening in the discourse on terror.

## 4.1 JOURNALISTIC AGENCY BETWEEN EAST AND WEST (V<sub>1</sub>)<sup>2</sup>

### Author and Structure of *West of Kabul*

“Growing up bicultural is like straddling a crack in the Earth, especially when the two cultures are as vastly disparate as America and Afghanistan. The memoir is an account of just such a life,” Tamim Ansary reveals in a short biographical statement on his homepage. Ansary was born in Kabul in 1948. His father was a university professor who married an American English teacher who came to live with him in Afghanistan. Ansary describes this intercultural marriage on the opening pages of his memoir. “I was born into that world when it was virtually untouched by the West. I emphasize the word virtually. Some penetration had already occurred – my sister and I embodied it. Not only was our mother American; she was the only American woman in Kabul when she arrived there in 1945” (Ansary, *West of Kabul* 42).<sup>3</sup> His mother therefore was not “any” American, but a secular feminist, something quite unknown in the traditional world of Afghanistan (*WK* 9). In Afghan society, she was thus considered “neither female nor male, but American” (*WK* 24).

This life between two cultures, between two worlds, America and Afghanistan, *East* and *West*, would also become the life of Tamim Ansary himself. After coming to the United States as a high-school student, he engaged in a career as a journalist. Ansary now lives in San Francisco as a writer, lecturer, and editor of fiction and non-fiction (Ansary, Home page). His memoir reflects this life and constant journey

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acts are enmeshed and active in conflicts where lives are at risk here and now” (9). On the one hand, this extreme focus on the context of war underlines the double meaning of life narratives as “soft weapons.” This also concedes life writing a new role in public discourse which has formerly been underestimated. On the other hand, however, the use of weapons as metaphors of life narrative also achieves the contrary effect by reiterating the WOT surrounding the definition of Arab identity. This reproduction of the most popular media frame severely reduces the value of Whitlock’s otherwise novel approach.

- 2 The abbreviation in parentheses, e.g. V<sub>1</sub>, in the following subchapters of the text analysis is provided to immediately establish the connection to the analytical variables V<sub>1</sub> to V<sub>4</sub> identified in the theoretical model.
- 3 All further references are to the same edition, abbreviated by *WK*.

between two worlds and two cultures. As he states: “West of Kabul is my account of the struggle to reconcile two great civilizations and to find some point in the imagination where they might meet” (Home page). After having engaged in this struggle of reconciliation in the past, Ansary today is convinced that he will only remain part of *one* of these worlds. In an interview conducted in September 2011 on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, he presented this life in one world as a conscious decision. Except for occasional visits, as he declared, “I personally don’t plan to go back to Afghanistan because my life is here in the West” (Interview with Menten).

This dichotomy between two worlds could nowhere be more clearly emphasized than in the title of Ansary’s memoir. *West of Kabul, East of New York* above all draws attention to place and opposition. Whereas in the days before 9/11, Kabul in contrast to New York counted as a forgotten village for most Americans, this situation has dramatically changed in the days of the WOT. This altered awareness of Afghanistan as the Garden of Eden for terrorists which the media have fostered also changed Ansary’s conception of his memoir. As he reveals, he originally planned to focus on the questions of “bicultural identity” and the negotiation between two cultures in his book. With the event of 9/11, however, this outline underwent a revision. From then on, Ansary wanted to respond to the discourse on terrorism and its relation to “East and West,” as he states retrospectively. This binary opposition therefore moved to the center of his attention (Interview with Menten). The immediate impact of 9/11 as a key event that altered the structure and conceptual framework of his book emphasizes the immense relevance of mediated discourse for autobiographical production.

The importance of places, such as *East* and *West*, and the position of the individual subject therein, not only plays a dominant role in the title. It rather serves as a mental mindmap for the structure of the entire memoir. Instead of following a chronological order in his narrative, as is typical of autobiographical narration, location and the change of location turn out to form the overall structure when looking at the table of contents. The first part of the memoir following the prologue is entitled “The Lost World” (WK 13). Subsequent chapters in this section adhere to the names of places, such as “Villages and Compounds” (WK 16) and “Leaving Afghanistan” (WK 86). This geographic structure spans like a red thread through the entire book, particularly in the form of chapter titles mentioning country names, such as “Crossing Morocco” (WK 143), “Crossing Algeria” (WK 156), “Bus to Turkey” (WK 188), and “Istanbul” (WK 194). Overall, this place-focused scaffold represents a virtual map for the narrative to follow. It can be read as a direct continuation of the title and signals a high degree of narrative construction. Different from life narrative as the random recollection of various events or the chronological enlisting of key events, this very obvious geographical structure from the start draws attention to a larger frame drawn in the narrative.

This larger frame of Ansary's narrative is contained in the chapter overview which mentions various locations turning out to be the destinations Ansary visits on his trip to the Arab world and ultimately to his own past. Travel and the literal change of location thus become intertwined with the life journey of the author. This journey, however, does not start in the past, as the common pattern of autobiography might suggest. Rather, it starts in the present of the post-9/11 world in which the autobiographer positions himself as an agent to translate between two worlds.

## Public Agency

Then came September 11, 2001. The day after those airplanes brought down the twin towers, an email I wrote to a few friends went viral on the Internet, and I found myself derailed from my previous career (whatever that was) into speaking for Afghanistan and trying to interpret the Islamic world for the West – because at the time there was no one else to do it. (Ansary, Home page)

Ansary shares these lines on his personal website.<sup>4</sup> They give a vivid impression of the day that changed his life and career as much as the one of many people around the world. This event also comes to constitute the beginning of Ansary's life narrative. He describes himself driving around in San Francisco on September 12, 2001. He listens to the radio broadcast focusing on the prominent topic of Afghanistan. A woman calls in, obviously in tears, because she does not want the U.S. to go to war. Another caller shortly thereafter makes a suggestion quite to the contrary: "Nuke that place. Those people have to learn. Put a fence around it! Cut them off from medicine! From food! Make those people starve!" he states (*WK* 4).

While listening to these words, Ansary imagines his grandmother in Afghanistan to be dying once again because of the public denigration of her homeland. An important thought then crosses Ansary's mind: those "people" who "have to learn," are certainly not the Afghan people. Rather, those who have to learn, by means of words and not through bombs, are the American people. Instead of calling into the radio show, which he feels "too shy for," as he admits, he decides to write

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4 The personal homepage of Ansary offers comprehensive information on his literary and political engagement. The user finds detailed information on his biography, current projects, and links to current articles. Also, a schedule with upcoming public appearances is available. The site is designed in the fashion of online newspapers with various cross-references and detailed excerpts from Ansary's work. There is also a series of comments and articles on current events referring to the Middle East and Afghanistan. The site also functions as a marketing tool for Ansary's books, whereby summaries of his works are accompanied by journalistic reviews. Overall, the homepage is highly professional and underlines Ansary's role as a public persona, political spokesperson and social activist.

down his thoughts in an e-mail to a circle of friends (*WK 5*). “I poured out to them what I would have said to the public if I could have mustered the courage to call that talk show,” he explains his motivation and ultimately feels better after hitting the “SEND” button (*WK 5*). Ansary at this point does not anticipate that the public indeed becomes his audience. “My e-mail spread like a virus throughout the United States and across the world,” he later recalls (*WOK 6*). His e-mail in fact ended up reaching thousands of people. Even radio and TV stations cited his text. “The media seized on me as a pundit,” Ansary remembers (*WK 7*). The e-mail is not quoted in full length in the prologue of the memoir. Ansary only provides a glimpse of the “brutal” vocabulary he used in his letter.

CULT  
of IGNORANT  
PSYCHOTICS.  
When you think BIN LADEN, think  
HITLER. (*WK 7*)

The full text of the letter written on September 12, 2001 is added as an attachment chapter entitled “The E-Mail” following the epilogue and preceding the afterword of the life narrative (*WK 287*).<sup>5</sup> “Dear Friends – I’ve been hearing a lot of talk about ‘bombing Afghanistan back to the Stone Age,’” Ansary begins, before enumerating the various myths surrounding Afghanistan in the heated media debate right after the attacks (*WK 289*). From the beginning, he clarifies that the Afghanistan others only know from the news is a country which he is well familiar with and which he has remained attached to by constantly following the events there. “So I want to tell anyone who will listen how it all looks from where I’m standing,” he explains (*WK 289*). This very position, as he underlines, is not the one of a terrorist, as the public media coverage might suggest. “I speak as one who hates the Taliban and Osama bin Laden,” he thus adds before elaborating on the devastating economic and political situation the country finds itself in (*WK 290*). He then quickly responds to the public claims in favor of a military operation against Afghanistan:

We come now to the question of bombing Afghanistan back to the Stone Age. Trouble is, that’s been done. The Soviets took care of it already. Make the Afghans suffer? They’re already suffering. Level their houses? Done. Turn their schools into piles of rubble? Done. Eradicate their hospitals? Done. Destroy their infrastructure? Cut them off from medicine and healthcare? Too late. Someone already did all that. (*WK 290-91*)

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5 Various major newspapers and TV stations still offer the text of the e-mail online, such as CNN (“Text of Ansary’s E-Mail”).

This crucial passage of the letter stands out in terms of form and poignancy. The short sentences and the anaphora of “Done” emphasize the emotional attachment and the rage which Ansary seeks to convey. This passage makes it very clear that “bombing Afghanistan” is not merely an invention of the present, nor is it merely the problem of Afghanistan itself. Rather, these lines strikingly bring Afghanistan to the forefront of the American reader’s consciousness because Ansary leaves no doubt that the “Someone” who took care of the destruction leading to Afghanistan’s debilitating state is the U.S. This sudden erasure of the geographic distance between the two countries appears even more drastic when Ansary flips around the direction of destruction and presents the U.S. as potential victim of its own military warfare. “What’s actually on the table is Americans dying,” he speculates (WK 291).

This unexpected turn to transplant a likely war in a forgotten country somewhere in the Middle East to the heart of North America becomes even more tangible for the reader when put into a global context. Ansary offers this contextualization in the fatal conclusion of his e-mail. “We’re flirting with a world war between Islam and the West,” he exclaims (WK 292). It is exactly this type of war that would play into the hands of Osama bin Laden, as he adds:

He [Bin Laden] really believes Islam would beat the West. It might seem ridiculous, but he figures if he can polarize the world into Islam and the West, he’s got a billion soldiers. If the West wreaks a holocaust in those lands, that’s a billion people with nothing left to lose; that’s even better from Bin Laden’s point of view. He’s probably wrong – in the end the West would win, whatever that would mean – but the war would last for years and millions would die, not just theirs but ours. (WK 292)

Again, this passage is marked by the use of strong keywords which evoke lively emotions and images of war and death, such as the one of the holocaust. Particularly striking is how Ansary seeks to convince his readers that this particular war, no matter how long and dreadful, takes place under the umbrella of the larger confrontation between West and East, between America and the Middle East. This strongly highlights the significance of the geographic binary Ansary alludes to in his title. With respect to the importance of positioning oneself somewhere along the virtual pathways connecting East and West, Ansary points to the significance of different perspectives arising from different locations. It is the “point of view” that matters in speculations about life and death. What is noteworthy, however, is that Ansary in this passage clearly positions himself on the American side of the border delineating the world. When speaking of the possible victims of the war as “not just theirs but ours,” he obviously includes himself as part of the American collective. Despite the agency derived from his insights as an Afghan native, the identification with the *us* that defines *them* emphasizes his American voice.

This function as a public speaker for a political cause in the aftermath of the e-mail becomes one of Ansary's major obligations. Yet, it is one he struggles with from the beginning. Ansary describes his rise as a public figure in the fight against anti-Afghan rhetoric in the U.S. He recalls a representative of the Northern Alliance approaching him. "You have the ear of the American media," the man tells him. "You know how to say things. We know what things must be said. Let us work together. From now on, you must be the spokesman" (WK 9). At first, Ansary does not think he is capable of fulfilling this task. "Look, I have nothing to tell people but my own small story," he replies. After a moment of hesitation, he adds: "Maybe I can help Americans see that Afghans are just human beings like anyone else. That's about all I can do." The man agrees: "That's important, too [...]," he responds (WK 10). What here appears to be a minor side effect of Ansary's spontaneous reaction to 9/11, however, quickly turns out as the major focus of his existence. This transformation into a public spokesperson thus had a tremendous impact on his personal and professional life, as he later reflects. Despite his initial understatement to simply show that Afghans are "just human beings," he is very aware that the public role he plays in negotiating between two worlds is decisive. He also knows, however, that he is one of the few who have the knowledge and opportunity to do so (Ansary, Home page).

Read from the background of the e-mail, it quickly unfolds that Ansary's "small story" is of much more social and political significance than the reader might think at first. The self-positioning of Ansary in the opening lines of the memoir points to the authenticity which he seeks to claim from the very start. Although he describes the circumstances leading to his status as a public figure as more or less coincidental, this depiction leaves no doubt that he is a well-known opinion leader who managed to raise public awareness in unprecedented ways. As one critic put it, the e-mail "was powerful stuff, to be sure. And it had an impact" (Nichols). Due to this strong association with his political impact, Ansary does not evoke any expectations on the part of the reader to find a semi-fictional tale about the author's life. Rather, the integration of the e-mail in the memoir, as well as the diary-like recollection of his life in the days of 9/11, point to the overall aim of the narrative as authentic and truthful record. This record is embedded in the political and social trajectories of his time. Ansary presents seemingly familiar arguments of terrorism and fundamentalism to his audience in order to quickly reverse them and move them onto American ground by means of powerful words.

This pathbreaking role of Ansary's e-mail for his reputation as a political voice, however, should not be confused with his autobiographical intentions. As he decisively claims, the "memoir" must not be seen as a "follower" of the e-mail (Interview with Menten). Ansary here insists on using the term memoir to refer to his book to clearly separate it from his public role. His earlier announcement to tell his personal story from where he is standing puts particular stress on the fact that he

speaks for himself in the memoir, not for a collective. Nevertheless, this emphasis on personal perspective does not limit his aim to make a larger discursive impact on the way in which Afghanistan, the Afghan people, and the Arab world at large are seen and interpreted. On the contrary, the fact that such a task requires an authentic insider view even adds to his agency as a public figure. Above all, this agency is underscored by Ansary's multi-cultural identity.

### **Arab Afghan Authenticity**

As the subtitle of Ansary's memoir emphasizes, the story of Afghanistan conveyed on the pages hidden by the book cover is not the account of an embedded American journalist in the war in Afghanistan, neither is it the one-sided account of an Afghan spokesperson trying to draw a counter-image to the public media frenzy. As the subheading states, the reader will find "*An Afghan American Story*." This dual identity directly draws attention to the binary contrast between *East* and *West* as conveyed by the title. Similar to this geographic opposition, the emphasis on multi-cultural identity also from the beginning positions Ansary in a space in-between, which nevertheless allows the author to be in touch with both worlds (Fritsch-al-Alaoui 23). Instead of focusing on this aspect of multi-ethnic identity negotiation as main subject of the life narrative, as previous research on ethnic writing might suggest (Abdelrazek 124; Majaj, "Arab-American Literature Today" 129; Hatem 382), Ansary employs ethnic hybridity<sup>6</sup> for a larger autobiographical purpose. To him, his Arab American identity only becomes a helpful means to pursue his aim of changing the frames surrounding Afghan identity.

"For many years, my siblings and I thought we were the only Afghans in America" (*WK* 1). These are the opening words of Ansary's actual narrative following his highly political prologue. Right from the beginning, he draws attention to the message that an Afghan speaks based on his life experience in America. This alternation between the worlds of America and Afghanistan, between *West* and *East*, becomes a permanent narrative lens throughout the memoir. Ansary's bi-cultural

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6 The concept of hybridity has become extremely popular in contemporary postcolonial research and in Cultural Studies. Hybridity according to its etymology describes an "amalgam" combining different elements which lose their individual entity and consequently form an "indistinguishable whole" (Rapport and Dawson qtd. in Abdelrazek 171; Fadda-Conrey, "Arab American Literature" 202). The concept is often used alongside the term hyphenation. Since hybridity, however, is linked to the complete erasure of borders, this conceptional equation of both terms poses severe theoretical problems (S. Schmidt, "Arabian Dance" 62). Ansary's identity struggle points to these shortages since interior borders remain prevalent, no matter how much cultural adaptation blends different ethnic predispositions. Hybridity as the disappearance of all borders is therefore hard to achieve.

voice is based on the history of his parents, a past which endowed the children of the family with an exceptional status. His American mother met his father in Chicago, as he recalls, “where the Afghan government had sent him to acquire Western knowledge” (WK 20). With this educational task, his father continued a tradition started by one of his brothers who previously had won one of the first scholarships “to a university in the West” (WK 21). This importance of intellectual skills acquired in “the West” also gets reflected in Ansary’s own life. Following the example of his uncle who “was the first Ansary and one of the first Afghans of nonroyal blood to study in the West [...]” (WK 33) and who “attended conferences in the West” (WK 34), Ansary comes to pursue a similar path.

When recalling the history of his education, Ansary at first focuses on his American identity. Especially during his childhood, this posed a cultural burden on him. Since his mother dressed the children in “American clothes,” he felt quite uncomfortable in the Afghan school environment (WK 45). In addition, the difficulty of not speaking Farsi placed him as an “obvious foreigner in the class,” as he painfully remembers (WK 52). This changes when the family moves to “American Lashkargah”<sup>7</sup> (WK 62), a city inhabited by many Afghan Americans – “people like us,” Ansary recalls (WK 66). Here, Ansary feels secure with his American identity and the American part of Lashkargah becomes the children’s “world” (WK 67). Although the young Ansary can play with his American friends and engage in teenage activities, there remains a gap between his American peers and himself.

Ansary remembers a scene at a youth clubhouse where the young boys supposedly had “sex,” which to him sounded “intriguingly American” (WK 67), Ansary is not allowed to enter. “‘Don’t let those dirty Afghans in here!’” the boys exclaim. “I was shocked and confused,” Ansary describes his reaction, “not just that he was calling Afghans dirty but that he was calling us Afghans. After all, among the Afghans, we were Americans; so if we weren’t Americans, either, what were we?” (WK 67). In the memoir, this question becomes a rhetorical one and Ansary answers it by stating that the family members “remained Americans with an asterisk” (WK 67). Even the strong impact of his mother and her teaching of the American curriculum cannot change this torn identity (WK 68-69). “I always felt like an American wanna-be,” Ansary utters in his reflection on life in American Lashkargah (WK 72). At least when learning how to kiss and do “teen stuff,” he feels a little more American. “Such, then, was the American half of my divided life,” he summarizes (WK 77).

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7 Lashkargah is a city in southern Afghanistan. The name literally means “army barracks” which were installed in the region thousand years ago. In the 1950s, Lashkargah then became the headquarters of American engineers involved in irrigation development projects. The city therefore was largely built according to the American architectural model with brick houses and tree-lined streets (Grey 19).

All these detailed recollections of a life between two identities, between two educational systems, put strong emphasis on the claim that the author knows both worlds very well. They strongly underline Ansary's bi-cultural authenticity. At the same time, however, his childhood experiences and the rejection he faced by both, Americans and Afghans, also underline that this two-sided perspective continues to be challenged. This urge to position oneself on only one end of the multi-cultural identity spectrum, though, is not only the product of outside pressure Ansary clarifies. Rather, he finds that there is an inner need to unambiguously identify oneself:

Two systems. The mind cannot contain both as legitimate. That's my testimony. When you're in the two worlds so different, your mind is forced to say that one is legitimate and the other is a crock. My mind chose the Americans [sic] ethos as legitimate. Why? Because it promised more fun? I don't know. I do know, however, that on this issue of sex, Afghanistan and I parted ways. And parting ways on this, we parted ways on everything. (WK 91-92)

These lines highlight that a life in-between "two worlds" in Ansary's case was not a durable solution. The word "testimony" here puts particular emphasis on the inner conviction Ansary expresses in this passage. Even more noteworthy, however, is the effect these lines have on the American reader. Above all, this is a turning point in the memoir where Ansary demonstrates to the American reader that he departed from his Afghan identity. In other words, he shifted from *East* to *West*. This mental change of location is underlined by the physical relocation he recalls next when referring to his high school life in the U.S.

When the school applications arrive in the family's mail box in Afghanistan, the dream of going to America awakens in Ansary. To him, America is not just a single country, it is part of a different mindset, "that charmed otherworld, the West" (WK 93). It does not take long and he indeed finds himself at the embassy preparing for the family's emigration to this "otherworld." Since his mother never lost her American citizenship, the legal procedure is fairly easy which makes Ansary happily conclude: "We were Americans after all!" (WK 94). This "American" family thus soon returns to its origins and in Ansary this also evokes the hope that his dual identity struggle will come to an end in the U.S. "The next thing I knew, we were landing in Tehran and our journey to the West had truly begun. Soon I would be relieved of the discomforts of a divided self, free to roam the world as just one person: Tamim Ansary, American guy" (WK 97).

This emphasis on Ansary's longing to fully become and feel American certainly increases his credibility in the eyes of the American readership. He thus aims to underscore his authenticity by demonstrating that he as an Arab American not only knows about both worlds of *East* and *West*, but he is also aware of the mutual longing of these worlds to reduce the complexity of this dualism to one part – by either identifying as American or Afghan. This continuous negotiation process remains

part of Ansary's entire life in America. What also remains fairly stable is his leaning toward the American side. This becomes particularly obvious when he describes his feelings from a later period in his life. Upon moving to San Francisco, he remembers that "my life became splendidly American" (WK 103). What exactly this means, he reveals in the sentences that follow by enumerating almost stereotypical features of American life, such as having a good job, making money, and going on plenty of dates.

Critics reading this narrative merely alongside other examples of ethnic life writing could point to the fact that the identity negotiation described by Ansary constitutes the major theme of the memoir. When applying the model of framing to the dynamics of the book, however, a different pattern starts to unfold. Ansary with his continuous emphasis on American and Afghan identity, especially at the beginning of the narrative, above all builds up multi-ethnic authenticity. This aspect continues to be reiterated throughout the book, whereby the author places strong emphasis on the binary of *East* and *West*. This indicates the strong influence of the familiar Orientalist binary for Ansary's own memory recollection. This multi-ethnic identity negotiation sets the stage for gaining further credibility on the part of the reader, which is a necessary condition for the creation of alternative frames of interpretation. Ansary's legitimacy, however, does not only rest on his multi-ethnic identity status. Rather, it is furthermore strengthened by his journalistic profession.

## Journalistic Agency

*West of Kabul* is not only the story of a man negotiating his personal life. It is also the account of a writer finding his path in his profession as a journalist. Writing, in turn, not only constitutes an important theme in the memoir, it also allows for detailed insights into the writing process of a memoir at large. Ansary throughout the narrative pays close attention to the mediatic environment surrounding his life. Just like this life is shaped by the alternation between two worlds, the media and reality often present alternative rather than complimentary truths. Ansary's professional ability to disentangle but also participate in these mediated realities endows him with additional agency to frame his life story.

At the time of his birth, Afghanistan still lacked the means of modern mass communication. These "ancient" structures Ansary recalls were marked by the circumstance that Afghanistan had "no media except rumors, storytelling, and the word of travelers passing through" (WK 15). Storytelling and travel become major components of Ansary's own life as a sojourner between the worlds. Instead of watching television, the relatives spend hours exchanging family stories (WK 27). "Endlessly, we told and retold our family stories, honing them into folklore, absorbing them into the soil from which grew our greater self, the tree of which we were

just the buds, the leaves, the branches” (WK 41). Ansary links his attachment to these stories to his reading ability. “I think I had learned to read because I had such a hunger for stories,” he explains (WK 27). Every new experience and impression he encounters in real life thus becomes added to the register of stories he knows from home, e.g., tales of religious figures and of God. These accounts represent “remarkable stories of an enormous fellow who watched us from the sky,” he recalls his magic childhood memories (WK 60). As he underlines, however, learning about faith to him was not the most important part of storytelling. What mattered most to him was learning as such and the related quest to get beyond storytelling. “I wanted to know what was *true*,” he underlines (WK 60).

These childhood memories of Ansary and his deep attachment to storytelling in a world which lacked the modern means of televised entertainment demonstrate Ansary’s close attention to the way in which discursive trajectories shape one’s life. Throughout the narrative, storytelling thus becomes a theoretical lens through which Ansary looks at his life while sharing this perspective with the reader. In tracing the process and meaning of storytelling in his own life and in society at large, he puts particular emphasis on the cultural distinction between Afghanistan and the U.S. The importance of storytelling as a deep-rooted Afghan tradition is thus indirectly juxtaposed to the lack of such an oral culture in the U.S. At the same time, this appreciation of narration reverses the common misbelief that life narrative constitutes an inherently Western tradition (WK 41). Ansary thus displays a comprehensive concern for the genre of memoir at large, which exceeds the borders of his own life narrative. He describes this fascination with the underlying trajectories of life writing in an interview:

The role of memoir and of memory in general is something that I think is very important. It’s my view that you find the meaning of your life in the arc that unfolds as you live. I am very interested in pushing this view here in America, because I think the opposite point of view has a great hold on the American imagination, which is that the past doesn’t matter – you don’t need to think about it; just start from here and go towards tomorrow. My view is so strongly [sic] that there is no “right here” without the past, and that remembering and finding the patterns and meaning of the past is very much not the same thing as living in the past. It’s an attempt to find the meaningful pattern in what you’re doing and where you are going. (Interview with Menten)

Ansary in this interview very clearly addresses the different approaches toward past and present which separate the “American imagination” from life concepts persisting in other parts of the world. On the one hand, he clearly locates himself “here in America” in this statement. As he also highlights, though, his mindset and ultimately his approach to memory writing are centered in a different cultural tradition. Read from the background of the narrative tradition he comes from, this insepara-

bility of the past from the present in the search for meaning stands in contrast to the Western ideals of progress and constant modernization.

The detailed reflection on *Eastern* and *Western* narrative traditions also leads Ansary to dig deeper into questions related to truth and memory reconstruction. When trying to remember one of his best friends Jeff, he is only able to recollect bits and pieces. Instead of conscious and detailed memory, he finds himself “in that state of almost remembering” and adds: “I capture flickers of strange, deep, dream-like emotions and prehistoric imagery [...]” (WK 43). Despite his obvious awareness of the fluidity and futility of human memory and narrative construction, he nevertheless believes in the ultimate truth hidden in it. The search and intensive thematization of truth finding thus constitutes an important issue in the life narrative. In addition to his journalistic quest for truthful storytelling, several incidents in his personal life cause him to engage with the issue of truth telling and memory reconstruction. A striking instance in this context occurs toward the end of his story. In a fight with his brother Riaz which ultimately leads to their irreversible separation, Ansary again is reminded of the liability of human memory. “Sometimes a bad experience acts like a flashbulb, puts a harsh glare on memory,” he ponders while still adhering to his overall goal of authentic memory writing. “But I don’t think I’m falsifying or exaggerating,” he thus adds (WK 255). This strong and sometimes paradoxical emphasis on the truth of memory despite its constructed nature, which has so much shaped the history of autobiography research, therefore also comes to permeate the life story of Ansary. The climax of this paradox is depicted on one of the last pages of the narrative, on which the author insists that “whatever shape-shifting my narrative has gone through, the accident of history that gave me a divided soul has always been the original fact” (WK 282).

Eventually, this interest in revealing the truth and his fascination in writing served as major motivations for Ansary to become a journalist, as he later reveals. While living as a hippie in Portland, he just “wanted to be a writer,” he recalls, but ends up editing a newspaper, which ultimately leads him into the field of journalism (WK 102). Obviously, this seeming frustration with the course of his career underlines that writing is a nuanced task. Being merely a journalist and being a “writer” obviously are two different things for him. This does not stop him from plunging into his journalistic life, however, which he masters with increasing success.

This detailed tracing of his development as a professional writer demonstrates the nuanced meaning Ansary ascribes to writing and storytelling in a larger sense. This aspect gains special importance with respect to the relationship to his father who remained in Afghanistan when the family went to the U.S. Writing in this case becomes the major means of attachment between father and son. Strikingly, this bond gains further impetus only after the death of the father and during the process of mourning (WK 240). On the plane returning from his father’s funeral, Ansary takes out a poem his father had once written to him and which he previously never

paid due respect to, partly because it is written in Farsi (*WK 244*). When he reads it again, however, this experience gains an almost revelational dimension:

Translating my father's poem became my way of getting to know his mind. Too bad I started after he was dead. But you know what? A relationship doesn't end with death. It doesn't even stop growing. I have discovered that my father's thoughts and works and spirit permeate my life. I continue to learn more about him as I ponder his narrative and meet people who knew him. (*WK 246-47*)

This very emotional description of the role writing and storytelling come to play in the relationship between father and son is exemplary of the status these themes gain in the life of Ansary and hence, also in his life narrative. As a journalist, writing is his instrument to constantly get to the bottom of things, to reveal their true nature and continue to learn and teach, just like the poem made him learn about his father. Read alongside his dual ethnic identity, the detailed engagement with the power of writing underlines Ansary's ultimate aim to interfere in public discourse. His profession as a journalist allows him to do so. Armed with the legitimacy of a truthful writer, he constantly reminds his readers that he conveys more than fictional stories. Instead he reframes the public image of Afghanistan on the basis of his authentic accounts from a different world standing in sharp contrast to the media images.

## 4.2 REFRAMING THE MUSLIM FUNDAMENTALIST ( $V_2$ AND $V_3$ )

### The Religious Frame

But I had grown up in the most purely Islamic society of modern times, and I had never heard of a hand being chopped off, a tongue being ripped out, or an adulterer being stoned. I wondered if I might not break into a career as a macho journalist by traveling through the Islamic world and writing the real story of Islam. (*WK 108*)

At the outset of his journey to the Middle East, Ansary is deeply aware of the frame surrounding the definition of the Afghan as barbaric Other and adherent of ancient rules of punishment. As Ansary reveals in these lines, these notions are closely intertwined with religious images. "In the West, indeed, most people had only the vaguest notions of Islam itself, and the papers were full of articles purporting to 'educate' the public about this religion," Ansary explains (*WK 108*). Consequently, he turns this shortcoming into a personal calling and decides to "educate" the public from his point of view – from the perspective of one who "had grown up" in this society. He does so under the camouflage of a supposed "macho journalist." This

macho journalist, however, has no easier goal than revealing the “real story of Islam.” Obviously, this story stands in diametrical opposition to the story of the Arab world and its religion depicted in the media. Ansary therefore does not write a newspaper article to pursue his quest. The truth he wants to unfold requires his own small story in the form of his memoir as a means to reframe the image of the Afghan fundamentalist. This story begins with a journey to his past and its religion.

Ansary introduces the issue frame of religion by drawing on his family past. “But ever since, Islam has been divided into the Shiite Muslims, who backed Ali, and the Sunni Muslims, who backed the first three khalifahs,” he explains. “My family were Sunnis, as are most Afghans” (WK 51). The family, though, is all but united when it comes to the matter of faith. While the majority of family members do not seem to put great emphasis on religious practice as such, his brother Riaz represents an exception. His religious devotion continuously increases to the result that he undertakes a spiritual and literal journey to Pakistan where he converts to orthodox Islam (WK 117). This step, however, does not remain a matter of personal faith but has lasting consequences for the two brothers. Their otherwise close relationship comes to a sudden halt at a religious scene which Ansary remembers very vividly: the killing of a lamb.

Ansary visits his newly converted brother at a local halal farm in Maryland. Here, he witnesses the slaughtering of a lamb carried out by his brother who mumbles the traditional Qur’anic verses during the ritual (WK 119-20). In Ansary, the orthodoxy and fierceness with which his brother pursues his religion raises critique. He shares his doubts with Riaz and tells him that in his opinion, Islam due to its insistence on strict rules and absolute devotion does not advocate an integrative approach to humanity: “If this is what God demands,” he asks Riaz, “most of humanity is going to be excluded. How can that possibly be right?” (WK 122). His brother’s reply denies the fatalism perceived by Ansary: “To me, Islam points out a middle path between self-denial to the point of abuse and self-indulgent chasing after glitter and ostentation. Accepting Islam doesn’t mean forsaking the world; it just changes the focus. The acts of living take on a meaning of which they are bereft in a materialist framework,” Riaz explains (WK 122).

The recollection of this conversation with his brother Riaz marks a key passage in Ansary’s thematic framing of the narrative. In contradistinction to merely talking *about* religion, as is the practice of the media and experts around the globe, Ansary lets those speak who represent this religion, in this case his brother. As a counterpole to this view, Ansary employs his own voice to raise doubts as they are often found by critics of Islam. These doubts are the popular ones ruling in the *West* as consequence of the intensive religious media framing of Arab and Muslim affairs. The perceived fatalism of Islam and the seemingly submissive devotion of Muslims to find higher meaning in religious practice are thus juxtaposed to the materialism and rationalism presiding in the U.S. Usually, this contrast is presented based on the

superior view of the *Western* secular audience mocking the primitivism of Islam. Ansary, however, does not allow his voice to dominate the one of his brother by means of *Western* paternalism. Rather, the reader is given the chance to directly learn from the believer. The impact of this immediate exchange between religious insider and outsider gets highlighted by Ansary's own experience, as he starts being caught up by the way in which his brother pursues his religion. When he joins Riaz in his prayers, he starts feeling a degree of closeness and even physical tension toward the Qur'an which he had not known before. Suddenly, he even remembers verses he had learned in school. In this moment of enormous religious tension, an idea emerges in his mind concerning his trip to the Middle East: "Instead of telling people I was a writer looking for a story, I would tell them I was a lapsed Muslim looking for his roots. That might get people to open up more. I would learn a few verses from Riaz's Koran, so as to put the story across more effectively" (WK 123).

With this decision in mind and with his intention to write "the true story of Islam," Ansary endows his entire journey with a religious frame. At first, however, this religious motivation for his trip appears rather superficial. After all, Ansary consciously instrumentalizes religion and Muslim identity to pursue his journalistic interest. This attitude then quickly starts to change as soon as he finds himself in an Islamic environment. In Tangier, his first destination, Ansary walks around telling people he wants to learn about Islam to find his own religious roots. What starts out with a false pretense thus soon turns into an unexpectedly serious endeavor for Ansary as he gradually learns how much meaning these "religious roots" have in his life. Everyone he meets is willing to talk about religion and what previously seemed like a lie to himself, such as the story of his birth as a Muslim and his childhood in Afghanistan, suddenly becomes part of Ansary's present life. His past and whatever fictional pretense Ansary added to pursue his truth-telling task turn into immediate reality. "And I got my cover story out with less compunction than I had feared, because it was so close to the truth. So close that I felt my psyche leaning out of myself to hear their answers – almost as if I had a personal interest in this issue and not merely a journalist's curiosity" (WK 130).

As these lines emphasize, Ansary gets more and more drawn into the world of Islam, a religion that indeed constitutes an important part of his own past. Yet, he almost violently tries to hold on to his professional distance in his pursuit of learning and teaching about Islam in the *West*. Despite his increasing emotional entanglement with his religious origins, Ansary does not give up on this knowledge project. Wherever suitable, he provides information on important religious practices by means of contrasting them to Christian customs. Anyone not familiar with the Muslim faith can therefore easily learn about major differences. An example of this narrative strategy occurs in a passage in which Ansary recalls his conversation with an acquaintance from Morocco. He asks the latter about the role of religion in the Qaddafi regime. The Moroccan man pauses for a moment and then emphasizes that

Khomeini is a Shiite. This allows Ansary to almost unnoticeably add further information on Islam. “Shiism and Sunnism are the two main branches of Islam, as I mentioned earlier, and Moroccans are Sunnis. It reminded me of a talk show I’d heard once in America, about whether Catholics could be considered Christians,” he remembers (*WK* 131). This passage serves as another example of the way in which Ansary gives voice to the people who do not have a voice in the public media discourse. Instead of simply pointing to contrasts in their attitudes and religious beliefs, Ansary clings to his task of “teaching” by putting emphasis on detailed information. Mentioning the “talk show” he once saw concerning the challenged view of Catholics immediately points to the close connection between the media discourse on religion and the detailed religious knowledge Ansary seeks to convey. In addition, this parallel opens up a bridge of understanding to his American audience. Next to clarifying what the two branches of Islam are, he also allows his readers to identify with these different denominations by alluding to the similar debate taking place on Christianity in America. This move signals that the term Muslim offers far more complexity than is commonly assumed. Furthermore, it highlights that Muslim does not equal fundamentalist after all.

The task of erasing the image of the Muslim as monolithic other continues to occupy the author on his journey. Ansary carefully describes his observations of differences among Muslims. Some Muslims are rather “lax” in their pursuit of religious ideals but try hard to “be better,” he learns (*WK* 131). Other Muslims Ansary meets consider themselves “true” Muslims who carefully follow the rules of their faith (*WK* 132). When he is invited to take part in the prayers, he accurately watches the rituals and learns about religious dress (*WK* 133). In doing so, he remains the interested outsider learning about a religious world which he is not familiar with in detail. When his Moroccan hosts talks about the obligation of a Muslim to guide his family in finding the “sunna of the Prophet,” Ansary ingenuously asks; “is that different from the sharia?” (*WK* 134). “Yes,” the Moroccan man replies, the “sunna is the way the Prophet lived his life. God gave us the sunna of the Prophet as an example,” he explicates (*WK* 134). Especially the Muslims in Europe, he then states, have turned away from this path which makes them “careless” (*WK* 135).

This encounter with praying Muslims marks another striking example of how Ansary makes his readership join in on a virtual trip to explore a religion which the American public in particular is not familiar with. Ansary does so in a very detailed manner by conveying much information without, however, displaying the mentality of a textbook lecture on Islam written by self-declared cultural insiders. Rather, he insists on his own outsider status and lack of knowledge of Islam, despite his childhood in a Muslim environment. He thus functions as a mediator absorbing and conveying the information he gains from others. Repeatedly, Ansary does not speak *for* the Muslims he meets but lets them speak by replicating their points of view in direct speech. Just like Ansary, the reader thus becomes a traveler and student while

learning about Islam. The result of the multitude of information is a complex and multi-layered picture of Muslim identity and Islam as a whole. This complexity is mediated by Ansary and therefore easier to grasp for the reader, since he repeatedly employs the method of comparing multiple perspectives on Islam as they circulate in the public media discourse.

This contradiction between outside stereotype and insider knowledge, between media frame and the interpretative frame based on detailed knowledge, is strongly highlighted in the words uttered by one of Ansary's further acquaintances named Abdullah. "In the West," the latter states, "people picture a Muslim as a fat rich guy lolling on cushions" (WK 136). A comment like this one from a man Ansary randomly meets in the streets of Cairo provokingly presents a mirror to the face of the American audience. As the multitude of research on stereotypical representations of Arabs shows, the image Abdullah draws indeed depicts the way in which Americans and other *Westerners* think about Muslims. Even more important than the mirroring of this stereotypical image itself is the fact that it is uttered by someone who usually only appears as a stereotype in the public discourse. The strong voice of Abdullah thus additionally scatters the picture of the Third World barbarian who does not know about world affairs because he lacks access to modern means of mass communication. All these myths about the supposedly backward and, from the Western perspective, simple-minded Middle Easterner, are at once destroyed by the obvious awareness Abdullah displays of the global media discourse.

Ansary's own reaction to all these experiences is one of confusion. He realizes that he was at least close to counting among those imagining the Muslim as "fat rich guy lolling on cushions." The complexity of Muslim identity surprises him and it makes him feel uneasy to write his true story of Islam. Consequently, his devout attachment to the notion of absolute truth starts to shatter. The images he sees in the streets of Tunisia and Morocco do not conform to a clear image of either the "good" or the "bad" Muslim. The Muslims he talked to did say they believed in God, yet, they also disobeyed the rules of the Qur'an by drinking or not following the prayer rituals. Ansary tries to make sense of his observations by enforcing an explanation. He then arrives at the following preliminary conclusion: "I had already decided what was true: the people had turned to Islam out of poverty and desperation" (WK 143). Again, the ideal of finding ultimate and simplified truth here becomes very obvious. Ansary, however, also becomes aware of this dilemma. He pauses upon catching himself making judgements he could have made without ever leaving the U.S. "Was I not merely trying to recast the whole situation in materialist terms," he asks himself (WK 143). As his growing self-criticism reveals, Ansary starts questioning not only the conclusions he arrives at but also the overarching thought patterns which lead to these prejudgemental conclusions. Slowly, a sense of ethnocentrism emerges based on the finding that his mostly American upbringing has taught him to prefer materialistic interpretations over the willingness to accept

the faith of Muslims as immaterial value (*WK* 144). This allusion to financial desperation as source of religious fervor also strongly underlines the binary division of the world into a rich *West* and a poor *East*.

Instead of giving in to his own prejudices or giving up on his project to write the story of Islam, Ansary is eager to collect more knowledge and information. To him, this seems to be the only way to eliminate the confusion between previous frames of interpretation and the reality he faces in the Arab world. Ansary then starts reading an intellectual history of Islam by a Pakistani scholar and shares this reading process with his own readers by providing long elaborations on the history of Islam, the different religious and doctrinal disputes, and the role of religious ideology in the context of politics (*WK* 145-48).<sup>8</sup> At the end of this in-depth recapitulation of Islamic history, Ansary provides his personal summary of the book:

Jews put the coming of the Messiah in the future. Christians seek individual salvation by accepting Jesus as a personal savior. Islam, however, focuses on the first Muslim community as the core religious fact. It proclaims that the truth about human history was incarnated in a historical moment, from which we've been receding ever since. Throughout the centuries, therefore, renewal movements in Islam have tended to look backward, have tended to preach the doctrine of getting back to the way it was. (*WK* 149)

Contrary to providing a conclusive overview of the details of Islamic history, Ansary here provides a comparative summary of the history of all major religions. He especially highlights the major differences of these religions with respect to their understanding of salvation. Exactly by pointing to these differences, he reveals their commonalities in their longing for a state of coherence and salvation. In particular, Ansary's stressing of religious renewal movements read from the background of Islamic history completely counters the view of Islam as ancient and barbaric custom. Rather, he presents the Islamic conception of progress as a logical step following history to constantly reinvent and renew Islam in a way which his American audience can directly compare to the other religions thus enumerated.

Ansary's religious quest continues as he makes his way to Tunisia. Here, he is given a religious teaching by a molluk, a function similar to the one of a mullah, as he explains. "I will tell you about Islam," the molluk begins. "It is the law of the universe, and not just for Muslims. It is the law that establishes the reason for the

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8 Ansary spends much time on explaining the role of the Mu'tazilites and their conservative influence on Islam (*WK* 149). The Mu'tazilite ideological school defends the notion that the teachings of God are accessible to rational thought and empirical inquiry because knowledge is derived from reason and thus functions as the ultimate authority to distinguish right from wrong (Stroumsa 289). This is particularly interesting when read in the context of Ansary's own adherence to the concept of absolute truth.

feminine and the reason for the masculine. It is the law that describes for each its duties, for each its place” (WK 179). From Ansary’s previous comments on the separation of the sexes in Islam, the reader is aware that he is not in favor of this concept. Despite this preconceived judgement, however, this religious lesson makes him consider various dimensions of Islam anew. He moves away from his intense preoccupation with the historical origins of the faith and its practices and starts pondering its social and ultimately political dimension.

After making his way to Tunisia, Algeria, and ultimately Turkey, this social dimension of Islam gains particular significance in the chapter “The True Believer” (WK 209). It opens up with Ansary walking into a bookstore in Istanbul carrying English language books. Here, he makes an unanticipated encounter with a man he describes as having “a coal black beard and shining dark eyes and a dark complexion [...]” (WK 210). He is struck when the man in “perfect English” tells him his name is Abdul Qayum (WK 210). Ansary in obvious surprise and excitement exclaims: “You’re American.” Abdul simply counters: “Not anymore [...], [n]ow I am a Muslim” (WK 210). Following this somewhat surprising introduction, the two then engage in an in-depth discussion of what being a Muslim means to Abdul. Amongst other things, this also involves being part of a Muslim brotherhood for Abdul. “That’s how it is,” he explains to Ansary, “once you become a Muslim. Everywhere you go, you find community” (WK 211). The conversation then continues to focus on the rights linked to the Muslim community, such as the freedom from tyranny and the legal code of the sharia (WK 214). Ansary tells Abdul, “that’s what people have trouble with,” and reminds him of the American viewpoint of religious law (WK 214). Abdul in turn proclaims that this law is “much more than a legal system.” Rather, punishment and behavior correction are seen as “markers” showing the right direction to becoming a good Muslim. Ultimately, Abdul tries to convince Ansary that Islam is more than a religion, it implies the idea of a “Muslim world” based on the “social project of Islam” (WK 213). Here, a “good Muslim” above all longs to attain “quality of the heart” (WK 215).

The long conversation with Abdul opens up completely new insights into Islam for Ansary. Not only is he able to gain more information on sharia law and its definition by a Muslim himself. In addition, Ansary learns about the comprehensive influence of Islam as guideline for daily life and for the social and political realm as linked to rights and liberties. It is a very community-oriented view of Islam which Abdul depicts. All these components do not coincide with the traditional notion of sharia law eminent in the *Western* public, Ansary reveals in the conversation. Most important in this further session of religious teaching is the fact that Abdul represents what Ansary himself hardly believes in the beginning: an American Muslim who now considers himself *Muslim* and not *American* anymore. For Abdul, this dominance of his religious over his national and cultural identity points to the incommensurateness of both realms which rely on very different value systems. His

emphasis on the ideal of being a “good Muslim” underscores this understanding. With respect to the effect this has on the American perspective, Abdul as American Muslim again shatters the simplified picture of the Muslim fundamentalist. Ansary’s own stereotypical description of Abdul’s complexion at the outset of their conversation highlights this frame. This is an Arab in a “business suit that looked expensive” who then turns out to have abandoned his American citizenship, Ansary illustrates (WK 210). Nevertheless, the outside appearance of this Muslim and his interior values do not stand in such a sharp contrast, after all, although he insists on his Muslim identity. Based on his authentic and honest depiction of Islam and the social ideals attached to it, he is able to unite pre-assumed dichotomies by showing that Islam shares many ideals with American views on nationalism, the belief in democracy, law, and justice.

Despite the decisive knowledge Ansary gains in his encounters, the conflict between his former frame of interpretation and the reality he meets exceeds his ability to cope with these binaries. After the meeting with Abdul, he tries to turn away from his religious project altogether, abandons his books, and instead turns toward reading *Odyssey*<sup>9</sup> (WK 216). His efforts of diversion, however, are not successful. Religion, as an overarching framework for looking at the countries of the Middle East he visits, continues to haunt him. The climax of the religious impact on his personal life appears in the context of his brother. The idea of Islam as “social project” thus unexpectedly turns into a very personal project, since it becomes the dividing line between him and Riaz. The clash between them occurs when Riaz sends him a book that outlines the very ideas which Abdul formerly described to him upon their meeting (WK 254). Ansary reads the Islamic project his brother imagines along political lines. The fact that Ansary has meanwhile become married to his wife Debby, who is Jewish, complicates the matter. The Palestine conflict thus turns into a conflict separating the two brothers irreversibly when Ansary discovers that the book his brother sent him contains references to literature denying the existence of “real Jews” by replacing them with “fake Jews” (WK 257). In light of Ansary’s newly gained knowledge about religion and particularly Islam, these thoughts go too far. The following passage describes the conclusion he draws after intensely engaging in his religious analysis:

As I reckon it, Muslims and Jews have no serious quarrel on theological grounds. Original Islam saw Muslims, Jews, and Christians as cousins nourished by a single message. Islam accepts Christ, David, Moses, and all the Judaic prophets and patriarchs as ‘messengers.’ In

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9 The fact that Homer’s *Odyssey* counts as one if not the classic of high *Western* culture heavily underscores the contrast to the literature on Islam as *Eastern* philosophy, which Ansary is now seeking to escape from.

light of this tenet, how can Muslims deny Jewish claims to a homeland in Palestine? (WK 257-58)

Since the only answer the books provide to this question is that “Israel was peopled by fake Jews, and therefore could be regarded without heresy as Satan’s beachhead in the Muslim world,” Ansary loses his patience with religious openness. He cannot understand how political fanaticism and nationalism can destroy the common religious grounds uniting Muslims, Christians, and Jews. His willingness to accept contrasting views in this respect reaches a dead end and he distances himself from Islam as well as from his brother (WK 258).

These passages on Islam as a social project and the latter’s very personal impact on Ansary’s family life open up yet another facet of the religious frame in the memoir. The topic of the Palestine conflict and its religious justification above all point to the omnipresence of the political conflict frame. Here, however, this conflict is not presented in the manner of CNN headlines standing in the tradition of a Zionist news frame which the American public is well familiar with. Instead, these ideological quarrels move to the background of perception, as Ansary is forced to reflect on the issue on a very personal level. He carefully traces the line of arguments based on the knowledge of religious history he has gained. This also leads him to a very thorough recapitulation of the meaning of knowledge and truth itself. Ansary delineates the way in which the religious “war between believers and unbelievers” is presented in the books he is reading (WK 259):

It sounds like something only a few scattered loonies could find convincing, right? Well, I, don’t know. What alarmed me was the internal coherence. Every plank supported every other plank. Once you’re inside such a house, you can never get another message from the outside world. The windows are all mirrors, and the house can reshape every incoming piece of information into another beam in its own framework. (WK 258)

This passage obviously recalls the trajectories of religious fanaticism in a very metaphorical and striking way. The particular relevance of these lines, however, exceeds the issue of religion itself. Ansary here thoroughly demonstrates how obviously outlandish arguments can be presented in such a way that their logical coherence is striking. This mechanism is not restricted to the religious realm but rather depicts the logic of ideology at large. Especially to the American reader, Ansary’s meta-analysis of the trajectories accompanying religious arguments provides a different explanation as to why religious fundamentalists actually deny Israel the right of existence. The focus on logic here is crucial to emphasize that these people are not backward barbarians who lack the skills of rational thinking. It is exactly the logic of the argument which turns them into followers. On an even more abstract level of interpretation, this careful delineation of ideological thought as interpreta-

tive monopoly of the mind reads like a definition of framing at large. The dominance of one mode of interpretation, the reciprocal workings of arguments in the same logical vein, the denial of contrasting information – all these are crucial components of framing. This impression is strikingly confirmed by Ansary’s choice of words when he explicitly refers to the trajectory he observes as “framework.” Although this significance of ideological frameworks is analyzed in the context of religion and the issue of the Palestine conflict here, the reader also becomes aware that the underlying mechanism is of universal importance. The fact that not just “scattered loonies” can become trapped in this framework of thinking highlights that human beings, Muslims and Christians, Americans and Arabs, are susceptible to ideological thought patterns.

For Ansary, this very personal confrontation with Islam and the impact of religious framing, connected to the dangers resulting from it, underscores his decision to depart from his religious project. The omnipresence of the religious frame in public discourse, however, prevents this. In the course of Ansary’s narration, religion gains an increasingly political connotation. This blurring of religious and political boundaries reaches its climax in the latter section of the memoir where the author reflects on the post-9/11 era and its impact as a key event on religious identity definition. The issue of religion is thus abruptly transplanted from the Arab world onto American soil. After his return to the U.S., Ansary recalls a scene in a New York taxi. When the Egyptian cab driver learns about his passenger’s Afghan origin, he immediately calls him a “*true* Muslim [...]” “You are the ones living the pure Islam,” the man explains his conviction. “Thank God for the Taliban. Now at last, God will help us to sweep away all this filth [...]. I hate America [...],” the man adds (WK 275). The fervor with which the driver presents his views truly scares Ansary. “I’ve heard other people say, ‘I hate America,’ but once I heard this man, I knew that none of them had ever really meant it,” he explains his uneasiness (WK 275). Following this incident, Ansary has a different sense of the Taliban threat. By again emphasizing his knowledge of Islam, he recapitulates that the Taliban’s themes indeed are in line with some original Islamic ideals of the first community. This finding eventually forces him to eliminate the artificial border in his mind between the *Muslim World* and *America*. “I had thought of the Taliban as terrible for Afghanistan,” he concludes. “Now, suddenly, I saw them as a potential menace far beyond their borders” (WK 278).

This key concept of border-crossing puts a bracket around the religious frame of Ansary’s account. At this point, he leaves the reader with the political reality of the present which he personally experiences as being threatened by Islam. In contrast to the average American media consumer, this conviction does not derive from a mental shortcut, as his thorough dealing with the issue of religion throughout the memoir underlines. Ansary’s own lack of trust emerges after thoroughly sketching a complex and multi-faceted picture of Muslims living in different countries of the

Arab world. He lets them speak to explain what they believe. Ansary's own Afghan American background allows him to present a balanced and self-reflective account of Muslim identity. His learning process about Islam as religion thus also becomes the one of the audience. The readers are given the opportunity to use the religious frame to add information to their image of the Muslim. Instead of being presented merely with a counter-story of the favorable Muslim pursuing his faith, they get a picture of Islam as religious but also social and political framework. Finally, the reality of the political world also leads Ansary to ponder the negative role religion plays in the Palestine conflict and the WOT. The fact that this religious frame shows a clear structure and thematic dramaturgy, for different aspects of religion are analyzed in an almost didactic way, speaks to the constructed nature of the account. Ansary starts with history and ends with the present political state of Islam just like a book on religious history would. History, however, not only plays a role in the religious framing of the memoir. History itself can be identified as the second dominant frame of Ansary's life account.

### **The History Frame**

Ansary's journey from the past of Islam to its present position in the world motivates his trip to the Middle East. The history of religion, however, is only one reason for his journey. His preoccupation with the past and its relation to the present exceeds religious issues and turns into another frame of the account at large. "Traveling can erase everything except the present, and turn the present into a hallucination," Ansary notes (*WK* 184). Before the stage of hallucination is reached, though, the present becomes an exciting intellectual adventure for the author. This adventure is driven by Ansary's thorough exploration of the history of Afghanistan and its revelatory nature for the present state of the *Western* world as well.

From the very beginning of the account, Ansary embeds his personal memories in a very detailed historical framework. Most opening sentences in the chapters recall detailed descriptions of the political or historical circumstances surrounding a certain event or time period. This historical focus is introduced to the reader in the very first chapter of the book: "In 1948, when I was born, most of Afghanistan might as well have been living in Neolithic times. It was a world of walled villages, each one inhabited by a few large families, themselves linked in countless ways through intermarriages stretching into the dim historical memories of the eldest elders," Ansary writes (*WK* 16). Contrary to the stereotypical notion of memoir as "I narrative," Ansary here rather talks about the world which he was born into than merely about himself. The tone and the pictorial scenery he creates make the reader easily slip into the very historical era Ansary is describing. Again, this era is marked by severe differences to the present and to the cultural realm which Ansary

and his readers live in. Most importantly, however, the author conveys information on two textual levels at the same time. The passage is not merely a description about the past as he records it, but a meta-depiction of the ways in which history is recorded in much broader terms. In the Afghanistan of his childhood, oral narrative was the basis of historiography, as Ansary's mentioning of the "dim historical memories of the eldest elders" reveals.

This strong focus on history as another dominant frame in the narrative continues with Ansary's long descriptions of historical anecdotes he remembers from his childhood and their religious entanglement with Islam, the prophets, Byzantine, and different rulers of the Uman (WK 47-50). Amidst this indulgence in historical analysis, Ansary makes the following observation:

All of human history can be seen, can it not, as an argument between those who try to explode the existing forms and those who try to freeze things as they are. The second impulse always wins in the end, except it's never the end. The cosmic winner is always change, except change can never settle in as the permanent state. History is a river, except people can live only in lakes, so they dam the current and build villages by still waters – but the dam always breaks. (WK 50)

The author in this passage provides an insightful analysis of historiography and the power struggles involved in it. Human beings try to retain history, even "freeze" it; yet, they are never successful in doing so. History resists attempts of enforced stagnation, as he explains, and to a large extent writes itself. The language Ansary employs here is severely metaphorical. The dynamics of history are presented as inescapable, as the metaphor of water as uncontrollable natural force suggests.

The imagery of waters and dams, however, is not only used as a means of illustration. Instead, the landscape thus depicted is linked to the very economic and political history of Afghanistan. Ansary thus uses this passage to lead over to his narration of the specific history of the Helmand Valley in Afghanistan. As part of a larger development program, the U.S. in the 1960s funded an irrigation project in this area that is full of history, as Ansary explains. "About this land, certain stories were told, stories that went back a thousand years, to the days of the Ghaznavid Empire" (WK 55). This ancient history then becomes part of Ansary's family history as well. Due to his friendship to a high official in the Afghan government who comes to preside over the irrigation project, his father becomes promoted as the vice president of the Helmand Valley Authority. He gets chosen "out of the ranks of the Western-educated commoners," Ansary underlines the special significance of an education in the *enlightened West* again (WK 57). This promotion ultimately causes the family to move to Lashkargha which flourishes due to the number of American engineers living there. The water project, however, not only aims at building dams and straightening the river. In addition to these very practical aims,

Ansary identifies a clear political rationale behind the development program, i.e., “to impose Western progress on the Afghan people [...]” (WK 69).

Just as the human attempt to control or even escape the trajectories of history can never be successful, the human intrusion into the natural path of the river turns out as failure. Ansary describes this sobering devolution of the project in his chapter “Unintended Consequences” (WK 83). Ultimately, these unintended consequences become the hallmark of an entire historical era in Afghanistan. As Ansary explains, the government-initiated irrigation project originally aimed at taming the Helmand River. The officials, however, designed the project without taking into consideration that further downstream, villagers had already invented their own irrigation systems which recognized the natural pattern of the river. The new system made this historical installation ineffective and the crops of the farmers failed. These Afghan peasants thus fell victim to “the law of unintended consequences,” Ansary infers, “the one law in history you can really count on” (WK 83).

This episode about the failure of the American-aided irrigation project, when read alongside Ansary’s earlier depictions of the dynamics of history, serves as a powerful example of the author’s larger concern about the history of the *East* as written and influenced by the *West*. The water project failed because the *West*, as represented by American engineers, tried to impose its knowledge and technological skills onto an environment and a people which for centuries had succeeded in developing their own ways to nurture and sustain themselves. This life in harmony with nature and with history then comes to a sudden breakdown with the intervention of American technology. The irrigation project and the supposed ingenuity of American engineers thus serves as a metaphor of the well-known Orientalist reflex to convert barbarism into civilization by means of *development*, *modernization*, and ultimately *Westernization*. The fact that this project fails illustrates the historical irony of colonialism at large, though, Ansary makes it very clear that the reason is not the inability or unwillingness of the *East* to develop. Instead, as he points out, the Afghans were never informed about the details of the American project and therefore the “villages never knew why the river was flowing differently [...]” (WK 83). The reader, however, becomes well aware that the *West* failed by interfering with the natural cause of history and nature, by disrespecting historical systems of water supply, and by paternalizing the village people.

The episode of the development program is only one instance of the Western entanglement with Afghanistan Ansary recalls in his historical reflection. As he also depicts in his historical reflections, political interferences by the U.S. in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were not limited to environmental development. Another sector of engagement was education, one of the key areas to impact the cultural capital and development of a country (Barker, *Sage Dictionary* 37). Again, the U.S. engagement in this context caused more conflict than common progress, Ansary remembers. One such instance was the foreign enforcement of co-education in Kandahar. The

conservative religious leaders here got outraged over this non-traditional way of education. What followed was a bloody uprising against the “Westerners and the officials” in Kabul (WK 79). Yet, the *West* and particularly the Americans kept pressing their finger prints on the education system by “educating boys: Westernizing them, secularizing them, deculturating them [...],” the author summarizes (WK 84). This also left marks on the architecture of the cities. When describing his first impression upon moving to Kabul, Ansary remembers that each of the “high schools had been built by a different Western country” (WK 90).

The traces of this historical intervention of the *West* in the political and social development of Afghanistan confirm the pattern Ansary reveals in the previous case of the irrigation project. The *West* interferes in a colonial manner that disregards whatever former structure and cultural custom was in place before. The main consequence this causes, as he emphasizes, is not only deculturation but violence and death on the part of those colonized (WK 79). The uprising against *Western* officials and the government thus turned out to be a “master plan” for those who did not know how to protect themselves differently against the foreign power. Ansary thus learns in the present that the past and mostly unsuccessful violent attempts of resistance could have brought the death of most *Westerners* in Lashkargah and also the death of Ansary’s own family (WK 78). Despite the fact that Afghans here are depicted as violent perpetrators by the author, the nuanced illustration of the circumstances leading to bloodshed contradict the common image of Afghans as political tyrants. Rather, Ansary makes it very clear that the occupation of political violence is a result of the previous *Western* suppression without, however, euphemizing or even excusing political violence as such. The complexity of the depiction thus resists both the simplified image of the *Eastern* barbarian as well as the defensive view of suppressed colonized victimhood. Most importantly, Afghans within this historical framework of interpretation are not blind fundamentalists. They are described as reacting to the historical interference in their culture. Ansary once again reiterates these tragic trajectories toward the end of the chapter by calling them “Unintended consequences” (WK 84).

While the unintended consequences of the water project and America’s attempts to co-educate Afghans took place within historically rather limited time frames, further colonial interferences encompassed much longer historical periods in the context of the Cold War. Ansary remembers the dynamics of this development very specifically. The unintended consequences deriving from the sum of foreign interventions by the U.S. in the region turned Afghanistan into the microcosm of the global confrontation of *East* and *West*. Instead of providing a detached episodic snapshot of the Cold War, as the common media practice tends to do, Ansary embeds his reflection on Soviet rule in his overall historical framework. He thus interprets the support for communism by young Afghan adherents in the military as an immediate result of the former education failure of the U.S. (WK 84). As he ex-

plains, this military movement finally overthrows the monarchy in 1978. The Soviet Union again has its own ideas of how to run the country. Education is one of them, and while the Americans fostered co-education, the Communists propagate “women’s education,” which again causes uproar among the tribes (WK 85). The result is characterized by violence and destruction. Ansary’s summary in this case is marked by critical historical insight, linguistic verve, and a good portion of cynicism: “And so they rose up against the outside power in rage and fear, determined not to die, and as those clans and tribes fought for survival, their cells died like ants in a war that demolished Afghan culture and shredded the social fabric over the next twenty-three years. Unintended consequences? You can count on them” (WK 85).

The rhetorical question Ansary poses here can be read as a hallmark of the method he employs in his entire historical framing of the memoir. He does not introduce any kind of preconceived evaluation as to who was the most fatal occupier in the country, either the U.S. or the Soviet Union. This normative stance would transfer the ideology of the Cold War to his own argumentation. Instead, Ansary, as in the case of the religious issue frame, connects singular historical events and points to overarching patterns of control and financial destruction which both occupiers forced onto the country. Calling the severe effects of these acts “unintentional consequences” at first seems to free the ones to blame from responsibility. Yet, the repetitive nature of the same destructive pattern of foreign control that Ansary reveals eventually sheds light on the very predictability of these “unintended consequences” if one is only willing to read and learn from history. Exactly this drawing of lessons from history, which he invites the reader to adopt, is something society has lacked in the past, as the metaphor of the broken dams in the water project again underlines. Instead of accepting and learning from history, humans still tend to forcefully change it. This seems particularly true for the most powerful actors, as Ansary demonstrates.

How quickly the unintended historical consequences of the Cold War can have very personal but similarly unintended effects Ansary learns in the context of his own trip to Afghanistan. As was the case with the religious lens through which Ansary observes the country, his engagement with history does not end at the level of distanced analysis. Right before Ansary starts his trip, the Iranian hostage crisis breaks out. He sees the pictures of students storming the embassy on TV (WK 112). This event continues to overshadow Ansary’s trip and his planned route. On his way, he closely follows the international news which are full of violence. “Soviet tanks were crushing Afghanistan. Blood was running in the streets of Kabul [...]. American tourists had been stoned in Syria. American diplomats had been attacked in Egypt [...].” (WK 159). The climax of the conflict in Tehran is reached when Ansary finds himself on a train in Algiers. In this instance, the struggle between *East* and *West* culminates when he meets a group of soldiers on the train:

The whole Islamic world was in an uproar. Just that weekend, Libyans had burned down the American embassy. Muslims triumphant; Western dogs, go home, Muslim power hooray; Yankee nothing: We spit on you, and what are you going to do about it? Fuck with us, we'll take more of you hostage. Yeah. We'll cut the heads off your so-called diplomats – your fuckin' spies. (164)

Due to his American background, Ansary here involuntarily becomes involved in the emotional outbreak of the Algerians, a clash motivated by the conflict between East and West, between the “whole Islamic world” and the rest. In this historical instance, however, there is hope for the suppressed underdog to win the struggle. The images of “Muslim power” and “Yankee nothing” reverse familiar power roles while the tension of this historical moment and possible overthrowing of a century-old colonial order become almost tangible for Ansary. He explains the historical significance of the situation by taking the perspective of the formerly colonized as he alludes to the *we/they* dichotomy separating the world. “But this ‘we’ was bigger and more intense,” he remembers. “For three centuries, the West had slowly been forcing the Muslim world to its knees, and not even noticing – that was the worst of it. Now at least – this year! this weekend! – Islam had risen again” (WK 165).

The given passage strikingly confirms the larger historical framework Ansary sets up in his memoir. This framework is deeply shaped by his awareness of the binary between *East* and *West*. In addition, his use of the term “Islamic world” points to the close entanglement of the historical frame with the religious focus Ansary pursues on his journey and in the narrative thereof. As is the case with the religious frame ruling the coverage of the Middle East in the media, the issues of religion, politics, and history also remain intertwined as Ansary pursues his literal and figurative life journey. History is never absent from any of his observations. Ansary constantly reads the present he encounters on his trip through the lens of the past and invites his readers to do so with him.

In sum, the reading of history as power struggle between *East* and *West* forms the dominant mode of interpretation.<sup>10</sup> Instead of accepting this dichotomy as ideological legacy, Ansary’s strategy to solve this very binary is detailed historical enquiry. Only this, the memoir suggests, can lift the veil of misinformation and mystery which turn history into a threat for the present. “To the untutored eye, history looks like a wriggling snake pit full of disparate but interwoven dramas; the Romans battling the Parthians, Columbus discovering America, the Industrial Revolution, World War II, etc.,” Ansary explains (WK 256). With the framing of his own small story in larger historical terms, he actively works toward tutoring his

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10 The clash with Ansary’s brother can also be read as another instance of the strong reliance on historical interpretation. After all, it is the intentional misrepresentation of religious history, as Ansary perceives it, which leads him to end the relationship with Riaz.

audience. Eventually, his reading of history as power struggle, however, does not only dominate the historical frame of Ansary's narrative. Due to its far-reaching effects, it also permeates the issue of culture to a large extent.

## The Culture Frame

The dichotomy between *East* and *West* is not only an abstract concept in the literature of postcolonialism. Instead, this binary is still reflected in the daily life of people around the globe whose diverging cultural routines also account for different social structures. "Growing up bicultural" naturally involves a constant exposure, but also learning process, to get to know both sides, as Ansary is well aware of (*WK* 279). His trip to the Middle East sheds new light on this bicultural tightrope walk. Writing about this life between cultures allows the reader to get involved in this learning process to ultimately see both worlds through a differentiated cultural frame. As Ansary clarifies at the very outset, in the case of Afghanistan, a cultural interpreter between *East* and *West* has to start from scratch.

At the very beginning of his account, the author points to the shortcoming that the culture of Afghanistan, despite its prominent role in the WOT, has mostly remained a black box to the *Western* audience. In his opening chapter "Villages and Compounds," he therefore gives a detailed description of the Afghan environment and life circumstances he grew up in (*WK* 15). This was a world of farmers and rural life in the countryside, unchanged by modern technology, as he illustrates (*WK* 15). The city of Kabul was crowded with people. A postal service existed, but the mailman hardly knew individual names. Somehow, however, letters made their way to their recipients because someone might have "heard of you," Ansary notes (*WK* 16). "Oh not you in particular; you were just a leaf, a bud. He'd know the branch, the trunk, the tree itself: your people," he adds. This focus on the family, "your people," is also reflected in the life circumstances that accompanied Ansary's childhood. People in the countryside lived on farms whereas urban families resided in compounds together with many other family members, "surrounded by walls that divided the world into a public and a private realm," he explains (*WK* 16). To the foreigner, only one of these worlds was visible. "Those who came from the West didn't even know our private universe existed, or that life inside it was warm and sweet," he continues (*WK* 16-17).

Ansary in these lines introduces the reader to the hidden realms of Afghan life. The tone is somewhat romanticizing and nostalgic. However, the need to make the *Western* visitor look behind the walls of Afghan life is at least as important for the present as it was at the time of Ansary's childhood. The only major difference is that the foreign visitor to the Orient used to encounter the brick walls separating Afghan privacy only when he actually went there. Today, these walls are drawn by

television news and public stereotypes. The spectator merely proceeds as far as the cameras and embedded journalists of the media allow him to. Although in the era described by Ansary, Afghanistan was still unaware of the technological advances taking place in other countries, there is no sense of inferiority or backwardness in his description. Rather, the author draws a very inviting picture of the culture and environment he grew up in, which is not marked by a perfect infrastructure and modern means of communication. The culture Ansary obviously treasures is dominated by people. “As far as I can tell, none of my Afghan relatives was ever alone or ever wanted to be,” he explains (WK 17). This demonstrates in how far the idea of a “group self” outweighs the importance of “individual selves” in Afghan society (WK 17). This is linked to a different concept of kinship altogether, he explains when attempting to describe his family structures. This need derives from a linguistic problem that he encounters when trying to find the right words. “*Family* doesn’t cover it,” he points out (WK 17). “Even *extended family* feels too small. *Tribe*, however, is too big. I’m inclined to hijack the term *clan* from anthropology,” Ansary decides before admitting that the word, as he uses it, also lacks some of the formal characteristics of the textbook definition (WK 17).

With this almost scientific approach to describing his family structures, Ansary’s memoir assumes traces of a college textbook on Middle Eastern culture. The differentiation between collective versus individual identity, as well as the crucial delineation between different concepts of kinship<sup>11</sup> which in Europe and North America are all summarized by the term ‘family,’ reveal an intensely didactic tendency. Especially the clarification of the term “tribe” gains a demystifying function since this concept in particular has gained a negative connotation in Orientalist discourse and especially in the WOT.<sup>12</sup> This contrasting of the specific cultural meaning of seemingly familiar terms alerts the reader to not succumb to culturally relativist practice at a very early stage of the memoir. Ansary additionally highlights this tendency by referring to his own rootedness in *Western* culture. As he admits, this culture shapes the individual and his feeling of well-being:

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11 In Arabic and in Farsi, there is no single word for family as such. The terms always describe specific family structures. A similar logic applies to different family relationships. General terms such as cousin or brother in law do not exist, since the terms to describe family connections already imply further specifications as to the exact lineage.

12 The negative connotation of the term tribe could again be observed in the context of the Arab Revolution. Several of the political leaders who were expelled from their state positions or countries had indeed been nepotists. In the public discourse on the events, however, these cases were largely generalized in familiar Orientalist ways. This meant that tribal culture as common feature of supposedly backward countries was denigrated as the major reason for political disorder and corruption in the Middle East (Cole).

And that's [Afghan concept of social environment] so different from my life today, here in the West. Because I write for a living, I spend most of my waking hours alone in my basement office [...]. If I'm too much with other people I balance this with some downtime. Most of the people I know are like this. We need solitude, because when we're alone, we're free from obligations, we don't need to put on a show, and we can hear our own thoughts. (*WK* 17)

With the "people I know," Ansary refers to Americans in his current life who, instead of focusing on collective identity, highly value the cultural trait of individualism and increased solitude. The fact that this often leads to putting on a "show" ironically plays on a cultural stereotype of America as the nation of Broadway and Hollywood. Read from the background of Ansary's rather scientific elaborations on cultural concepts, this personal experience complements the detailed insights the author provides into Afghan culture in comparison to the one prevailing in America. One of the most crucial messages he conveys here is that the self cannot be separated from its cultural surroundings. As his own experience as trespasser between two worlds also signals, this cultural groundedness is not static since cultural needs and preferences change depending on the culture one lives in.

How important these cultural surroundings are for one's self-definition, Ansary learns on each day of his trip. Hardly a day passes without him being forcefully reminded of his deep-rooted cultural predispositions as an American – not an Afghan. One of these deeply ingrained cultural legacies is revealed in the context of money. Coming from the capitalist culture of the U.S. where anything can be bought at any time with any credit card, Ansary on his trip finds himself constantly facing money shortages. When he tries to withdraw money in Morocco, for example, the bank teller reacts helpless. He does accept traveler checks from a number of small European banks, he explains to Ansary, before enumerating all the names of these banks. To the latter's surprise and frustration, however, the "only financial institution on earth he'd [bank teller] never heard of was American Express" (*WK* 152). When Ansary after serious efforts finally manages to exchange some money for Algerian bills, a sign at the Algerian border warns him: "IT IS FORBIDDEN TO BRING ALGERIAN MONEY INTO ALGERIA," it reads (*WK* 153). He nevertheless attempts to smuggle in some bills before discovering that he lost part of his travelers checks in Morocco, a country which he cannot reenter (*WK* 154). Ansary's financial struggle therefore continues. Yet, his frustration does not prevent him from clinging to the conventional materialistic pattern he knows from home: Everything has a certain price and everything is available as long as one is willing to pay for it. This logic again becomes turned upside down when he tries to proceed to Algiers on a train. Ansary repeatedly asks for a "first-class ticket" in order to escape turmoils in the economy section of the train (*WK* 157). He becomes more and more impatient until someone finally explains to him: "There is no first class,

second class here. You're in socialist Algeria, brother. There is only one class here, first class, and you are in it" (WK 164).

This highly ironic way in which Ansary describes his own naiveté and cultural ethnocentrism reverses the familiar pattern of colonization. He becomes helpless and lost in a culture in which no general currency exists and nobody cares about American credit cards. The fact that "American Express" is not accepted by the bank, but several minor European credit institutions are, specifically ridicules the position of the U.S. as supposed financial hegemon. Ultimately, these incidents make Ansary aware that the materialist culture he is so used to is worth almost nothing in a cultural environment where class, at least officially, does not exist. These experiences once more demonstrate to him how much he is rooted in American culture. This awareness also comes to change the way in which Ansary interacts with others. Upon meeting another American in Algeria, he makes a striking self-observation. According to dress and general appearance, the stranger would rather scare than attract him if they had met in the U.S., as he admits. In his present situation as a cultural stranger in a foreign country, however, the American feels like an outright ally to him. "In the United States, I would have put a great distance between me and this guy right away. Here in Algeria, he felt like my wayward brother," he explains with in a tone expressing relief and the awareness that shared cultural experience creates a bond, which is hard to explain in rational terms (WK 160).

Ansary's changed awareness of cultural predispositions is also reflected in the criteria he applies when meeting other people. He starts assessing acquaintances in terms of cultural similarities and dissimilarities, particularly with respect to outside racial markers. An example of this is provided in his description of Hocine, a young man he meets in Tunisia. "His skin had a European pallor that suggested bicultural genes. He wore oversized glasses and a leather jacket, a striped T-shirt, khaki pants – European clothes with a Western flair," Ansary illustrates (WK 172). He then points to the sharp contrast the appearance of the man represents in comparison to the traditionally-dressed Tunisians surrounding him. Hocine's European orientation is not limited to clothing, though. "In fact, Hocine was a Euroculture groupie. He plied me with questions about the West," Ansary continues and recalls how Hocine wants to learn more about U.S. TV shows, dating culture, hamburgers, bars, and picnics (WK 173). Obviously, Ansary does not feel annoyed by the stereotypical image of the *West* Hocine seems to have in mind. On the contrary, he even develops admiration and closeness to the man who seems to be so attached to his own cultural homeland. The conclusion he therefore draws based on this single example is that "Tunis apparently was much more Westernized than Algeria" (WK 173). Compared to the cultural alienation he experienced in Algiers, this finding comforts him.

The encounter with the European-looking and -thinking Hocine serves as an example of *Westernization* in the Muslim world for Ansary. Furthermore, the situation also puts emphasis on the dynamics of cultural coping which Ansary develops in

the course of his trip. He increasingly longs for peers who share the same cultural background. This cultural background is much more detached from the Arab customs that accompanied his childhood and which he experiences on his journey, as he comes to realize. The longing to re-establish cultural companionship also touches on the aspect of language. When Ansary tries to write after visiting Turkey, he is not able to: “I tried to write. Thousands of miles on the ground, months on the road, hundreds of conversations with Muslims, and I had not shaped a single coherent article. Without English around me, my head felt empty, as if my thoughts were only internalized visions of my conversations” (WK 208). This reflection on the perceived loss of language strikingly underlines the increasing importance Ansary attests to cultural issues. At the same time, the link between language as most important means of expression and the thoughts guiding it serves as a metaphor of postcolonial agency, whereby those who are bereft of their culture and language also lose the ability to formulate proper thoughts.

All these instances of cultural alienation demonstrate to Ansary how much he is attached to *Western* culture, as he experiences it. This becomes even more explicit in a conversation with his acquaintance Uger in Turkey. With Uger, he meets a man whose family history has endowed him with a similar history as his own.<sup>13</sup> Just like Ansary’s past was closely entangled with the political faith of Afghanistan, the young Turk reveals that political unrest in Turkey severely affected his family. Ansary immediately recognizes his own story in the account and acknowledges its effect on his present political consciousness. “I had many of the same elements in my psyche,” he explains. “My family was part of the leading edge of rational secularism in Afghanistan. We were the Westernized ones, as Uger was in Turkish society; and then in American society, I had been a hard-core member of the radical counterculture, a leftist by any measure,” (WK 197). The term counterculture here is particularly noteworthy since it carries political as well as cultural meaning. According to Ansary’s conception, the “Westernized” obviously formate a counter-standpoint opposed to the culturally familiar. This common identity of the outsider and cultural Other eventually forms a common bond, as the example of his conversation with Uger suggests, and it also separates him from Arabs without the experience of *Westernization*. After listening to the story of Uger that concludes with the death of the latter’s mother, Ansary makes a striking statement: “In America, as far as I can tell, human relationships pass out of one’s life all the time,” he concludes (WK 207). This observation can be read as a preliminary summary of his

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13 Ansary’s stay in Turkey also offers various instances in which the historical framing of the narrative becomes particularly strong. The author here provides extremely lengthy accounts of the history of the Ottoman Empire, the Atatürk regime and the position of modern Turkey (WK 196).

cultural learning experience at large which highlights the fundamental difference between human versus material values in the Arab world.

The immense importance of cultural alienation and its impact on personal interaction, however, only strike Ansary after his return from the “Islamic world,” as he calls it (WK 223). When spending time amongst Afghan students in San Francisco, he more and more gains the feeling that he does not share their cultural orientation and habits. “I’d felt awkward among them; I’d felt like I didn’t know all the secret handshakes of Afghan culture anymore. They shared references to times and places I had left behind,” he explains his feeling of estrangement (WK 223). This inability to connect to his former cultural allies increases when the students ask him to join them on a committee in order to raise money for refugees from Afghanistan (WK 224). As Ansary admits, he merely joins in order to “alleviate the guilt I felt over being safe and sound in America” (WK 225). This self-declared privileged status thus clearly separates him from the current immigrants and also from the genuine cause the other Afghan students are seeking. During his involvement, further committees start forming and tensions arise between them based on cultural hostilities boiling in their homeland. Ansary consequently loses his feeling of cultural bonding as well as his patience and recedes from his committee position. “I lost faith in my ability to work on any project with other Afghans,” he laments. “They operated by rules I could not decipher” (WK 237).

Ansary’s multifaceted experience of being both, a stranger in the “Arab World” as well as estranged to his own countrymen in America, makes him reflect on the larger trajectories of culture and migration in a very complex manner throughout the narrative. His final reflection on the issue of culture mirrors the difficulties that have accompanied Ansary’s bicultural origins throughout his life and journey. He thus suspects that his losing track of Afghan culture results from the fact that almost all his family members came to America. “My Afghanistan came here,” he summarizes (WK 264). At first, the family tried to import Afghan culture to America. Yet, the pull of acculturation in the new homeland left its marks on their identity. “I think all of us Afghans tried at first to establish here a sense of those private family villages we grew up with, but in America, you can’t keep out what’s public. You watch TV, you go to work, you make friends there, you have no walls around your house, and you live next to strangers” (WK 265). Ansary at this stage has obviously learned that the immediate transfer of one culture to another country, of one place to another, cannot be successful. The place cultural migrants long to adhere to cannot be created in the new country of residence. Rather, the distorting dynamics of memory transform the very memories of the homeland which thus gets transformed into a “mythical place, that didn’t exist, that couldn’t exist in America” (WK 265).

The cultural lessons Ansary draws from his journey remind him of the binary framework dividing Afghan and American culture. Being a good father, a “good citizen,” successful at work and making friends – these are his “preoccupations as

an American,” Ansary notes (*WK* 266). Being a good host and caring about kinship, these are the “preoccupations of an Afghan,” he contrasts (*WK* 266). This makes him return to his theoretical elaborations on the different definitions of kinship once more. As Ansary explains, many of the latter values stem from the institution of an “extended-extended-extended family” which does not even know an equivalent term in American culture (*WK* 266). Keeping up with both facets, however, is hardly possible. Although the relatives who came to America and brought their culture with them “had to fit into the clockwork schedules of America,” he metaphorically notes (*WK* 267). From this reflection, Ansary infers an equation in which the gain of one cultural component requires the loss of another. “My American self makes me a little less Afghan,” he ponders and suspects this to be the major reason why he was drawn to the American side of the cultural spectrum. Here, the loss can be limited, it seems. “It was more that being an Afghan among Americans made me no less American. After all, most Americans are something else, as well. America’s characteristic flavor is made of the otherness we all bring to this stew” (*WK* 281).

The theory of cultural gain and loss Ansary lays out here provides a powerful summary of the cultural frame he offers his audience. This frame designs a nuanced map of cultural experience based on theoretical as well as personal insights. He constantly contrasts the cultural realms of *East* and *West* by focusing on their values and benefits, not merely on their shortcomings. Especially the above-cited summary he provides toward the end of his account appears like a remarkable reiteration of the century-old ideal of America as a melting pot, where every individual, no matter from which background, becomes amalgamated into the “stew” of multiculturalism and individualism. Ansary presents this image in a positive light without succumbing to naiveté, stereotyping, or blind idealization. The personal struggles he describes and the loss going along with multi-cultural identity negotiation in America endow his elaboration with much realism. The pressure to choose a defined cultural identity gains a compulsive component that separates Ansary’s version of the melting pot from reductionist images (*WK* 282). His own life story and the multiple stories he depicts therein serve as empirical evidence for this complex cultural framework between bi- and multi-polarity.

Overall, the cultural frame Ansary designs for his American audience again relies on techniques of interpretation similar to the previous frames of religion and history. The detailed information he is able to provide allows the reader to gain insights into Muslim and American cultures which are hard to attain otherwise. Above all, this leads to the effect that cultural complexity as a seemingly familiar concept gains new meaning. This nuanced approach stands in sharp contrast to the concept of culture as a mere symbol of separation, as it is conveyed by the media. Ansary seems well aware that his two-sided analysis of Muslim and American identity remains an exception in the public discourse on Afghanistan in which lasting stereotypes prevail. As he reminds his readers at the very end of his account,

“Americans seem to think of Afghans as bearded gunmen who live for war, but actually, for Afghans, generosity far outweighs military prowess” (WK 266). Obviously, this reinforces the significance culture plays in the maintenance of media stereotypes. Simply reminding his readers of the existence of these stereotypes does not suffice for Ansary, though. Instead, he designs an alternative media frame in his own narrative by revealing the very dynamics the media employ for their discursive hegemony on Muslims.

## The Media Frame

The Afghan as bearded gunman is the most pervasive stereotype constructed by the media’s framing of the WOT. Due to Ansary’s status as a public voice in the context of 9/11, which the reader learns about at the very beginning of the narrative, the political frame remains visible in the reconstruction of Ansary’s memories. Based on his journalistic agency, the author does not make any efforts to merely deny or counter the stereotypes he and his audience are very aware of. Rather, he addresses the media and their practices as a dominant issue in his entire narrative. Eventually, this leads to the effect that the media’s perspective on the Middle East also becomes a lens through which Ansary reflects on his own experiences. Instead of merely reproducing the media’s practices, Ansary engages in a thorough analysis of media framing. This task accompanies him from the very beginning of his journalistic journey to the Muslim world.

Right before Ansary leaves for his trip, he introduces the reader to the news coverage prevailing at the time of his departure. It mostly centers on the Soviet conflict played out on Afghan soil (WK 124). These are the TV images left in Ansary’s mind when he finally takes off to his first destination Morocco. As he gets closer to the region where these images are captured, a different reality starts unfolding. Right after his arrival in Tangier, he walks around in the city and is instantly reminded of how much the global media coverage has come to shape the worldview of the audience – not only in the U.S. but in the Arab world as well. Young people ask the obvious stranger where he is from. Upon telling them that he is from the United States, he is met with a very revealing reaction. As he recalls, “they cheerfully mimed shooting pistols and said, ‘Bang bang! Cowboys!’” (WK 126). When Ansary reminds them that this image rather reflects Texas but that he comes from San Francisco, they have more bangs to distribute. “Bang bang! Karl Malden! *The Streets of San Francisco*,” they reply (WK 127).

This episode in the medina of Tangier gives Ansary a first taste of how he is seen by the Muslims whom he would like to interview about Islam and religion. Not only do they immediately associate Americans with guns, they also reveal the source of this knowledge by relating to a Hollywood classic. This at once reminds

Ansary and his readers that Morocco is not some backward country where access to a TV set counts as an exception. This encounter ironically underlines that the *West's* media culture has penetrated the world to such an extent that Hollywood is everywhere. The global impact of the media culture, however, is only one aspect hinted at in this scene. Another ironic move with a highly political connotation is the reversal of the gunned villain as central mediated stereotype. The Moroccans are imitating something they think is typically American: namely, guns and violence. How strong this conviction is, Ansary learns in his failed attempts to convince them of a different reality. The image the Moroccans have of Americans is highly resistant against counter-arguments, and there seems to be no room for complex differentiations between different types of Americans living in different states. For them, the Moroccans he meets, there exists one universal American and this American likes playing with guns. The obvious irony behind this strong adherence to a mediated stereotype is that the roles are reversed. In the tradition of Orientalist discourse, it has always been the *West* who engaged in essentializing the *East* by reducing the Arab to the image of the violent barbarian. The notion that the very same process might be taking place on the part of the Arab/Muslim was mostly ruled out by the fact that the Orient counted as backward and thus unable to conceive of the world at large. In this instance, however, the direction of Orientalism is reversed with the *Orientalists* mocking the violent American cowboy. This demolishes the image of the Other as misinformed outsider of the world. Furthermore, it sends a crucial first signal to the reader of the memoir by suggesting that the media practice of essentializing is not a *Western* monopoly.

The binary mode of thinking and the importance of the political frame around Arab identity definition become even more emphasized in the further course of Ansary's encounter with the young Moroccans. Because of the political relevance at the time, their conversation turns to the Cold War conflict. When Ansary reveals that he was born in Afghanistan, they again take out their virtual pistols. "Russians! Bang bang! Muslims support Afghanistan!" (WK 127). Obviously, they are informed about world news and besides that, they know who is *with us* or *against us*, as their reaction demonstrates. The *Us* that is implied in their determined taking of sides is the Arab/Muslim world. The most important characteristic of this perspective, as they clarify, is the belief in "One God, not two" (WK 127). Therefore, it does not really matter to them if Ansary is from Afghanistan, Iraq, or some other country in the Middle East. As long as he believes in one God, he is part of *their* world and this world is fighting the suppression of the Afghans by Russia. The simplistic manner in which the young Moroccans express their worldview here underlines the reductionist nature of the Orientalist division of the world at large. Ansary does not ridicule them. Rather, it becomes obvious that this simplified binary logic infuses the Cold War conflict. How essentialized this logic really is becomes even more visible in another conversation Ansary recalls with a man he

interviews about Islam in Morocco. “The Iranians and the Afghans – they are the front line now, in the battle for the honor of Islam,” the man explains to him (*WK* 131). When Ansary interjects that both fight on “opposite sides, of course,” the man refuses to listen and insists that both “are brothers” (*WK* 131-32). “But Iran is battling the United States. The Afghans are battling the Soviet Communists. Those are opposite sides,” Ansary attempts to explain (*WK* 132). “Soviets, Americans – same thing,” is the Moroccan’s conclusion (*WK* 132).

This vivid description of the Middle East as stage of the Cold War emphasizes the important meaning political events have always had for the perception of the region by others and by Arabs and Muslims themselves. As revealed by the empirical framing studies, this political frame of the Cold War has meanwhile come to be replaced by the WOT, yet, the far-reaching impact of this political framing has not changed. Although at the time of Ansary’s journey, 9/11 was still unthought of, the impact of this key event and the effect it had on global media framing obviously also plays a role in his depiction of the Cold War. The extreme essentialist mindset he finds in the men who insist on their preconceived black-and-white-logic constitutes the core of the binary media framing of the WOT. The same held true for the Cold War. Just like the Moroccan does not differentiate between Soviets and Americans because to him, *all* Americans employ force to pursue their interests, the Middle Easterner today represents the other end of the axis of evil because *all* Middle Easterners are terrorists. Although Ansary in these instances does not immediately address the media as major agents in this binary framing, his depiction leaves little doubt that the people he talks to derived their knowledge from the media – be it Hollywood or CNN. The practice of the Moroccan Muslims to constantly refer to the binary division of the world underlines the universality of the media frame. Moreover, the negative comments Ansary’s acquaintances drop make the reader aware that the image of Americans is highly problematic.

This confrontation with negative images of America receives further confirmation when Ansary finds himself on a train to Algeria. Stereotypes here boarded the train long before Ansary does so. Not only do the soldiers he meets not care about the American obsession with capitalism, they also do not take his aim of learning about Islam seriously. The soldiers then ask him if he eats pig meat. “We don’t eat pig meat,” they emphasize (*WK* 166). “I’m a Muslim, too,” he tells them. “But you lived in America! *They* eat pig meat,” they point out, before they go on speculating about Americans supposedly eating “horse testicles” and “snake meat” (*WK* 166). “Traveler,” they finally address him, “you have seen these places. Tell us: Do Americans eat excrement?” (*WK* 166). Their real interest in the *truth* behind these rumors is rather limited. Before Ansary can give an answer to their questions, a debate erupts about whether he should be thrown off the train. “You’re not going to throw a Muslim off your train,” Ansary tries to intervene. Since his Muslim identity

is challenged by the soldiers, this argument does not count much. Eventually, the conflict ceases, yet, the Algerians' mistrust in his Muslim identity prevails.

This confrontation on the train marks another key scene in which the American in Ansary is confronted with severe mediated stereotypes about Americans. Most striking about this depiction and the way in which the Muslim soldiers treat Ansary is the high degree of humiliation and ridicule they inflict on him. According to their normative framework, an American eating pork and other things which they regard as excrement represents the lowest step of civilization. The basis for their judgment is rooted in their Muslim faith, which, as Ansary in his religious framework demonstrates, is linked to several social and cultural conventions. Since American rules are not in line with their rules as Muslims, the fact that Ansary considers himself an American Muslim does not change much. As in the case of Ansary's bookstore acquaintance, the two identities seem to be mutually exclusive. This incongruous binary is highlighted by the emphasis Ansary puts on their statement that "*They*," in italics, "eat pig meat." Contrary to the Orientalist definition of *they* as the Middle East, the respective reference here clearly refers to the Americans as cultural and moral Others. This reversal of the dominant discursive trope strikingly holds the mirror to the American media audience which this time is put into the position of the inferior and uncivilized pig eater.

The moral vilification of Americans by Muslims obviously is the result of mediated stereotypes they have in their minds. Ansary's reflection on these stereotypes does not remain at the level of merely dealing with the consequences of these images. Rather, he also explores *how* these stereotypes get produced by the media. This ultimately takes him to reveal the framing mechanisms underlying journalistic work. As in the case of all other conceptual frames Ansary builds up, he does not choose a one-sided approach to his media analysis. From the beginning, he focuses on the difficult bridge between the media as unique source of information and the media as distortion module of reality. His trip provides striking examples of both functions. The news he sees on TV and in foreign-language papers are his only contact to the outside world since the time of internet and e-mail communication was still in the distant future in the 1980s, as he reminds the reader (*WK* 138). Yet, Ansary does not travel as a mere *recipient* of this information. As a "macho journalist" he also observes his surroundings through the lens of an information *provider*. An example of this dual role is given when Ansary gets into an in-depth discussion with his acquaintance Uger in Turkey. The latter engages him in an eight-hour long information session on the social and political struggles of Turkey. Ansary describes his reaction as follows: "He had me sitting up. Hey, maybe this could be my story. Turkey sounded like an explosion waiting to happen – about to be overrun by neo-Nazis or Muslim fundamentalists. Events had moved too fast for me in the Islam story, but with Turkey, I would be ahead of the news" (*WK* 192).

The picture Ansary draws of his extreme excitement based on the information he gains from Uger leaves the reader with an ambiguous picture of journalists. Ansary indeed seems to be interested in the information he gains. His urge to get “ahead of the news,” however, also sheds negative light on his personal quest and on the role of journalists in general. The relevance and content of the information does not seem to matter as much as the fact that the “story” is important and interesting enough to let him take the lead in the hunt for sensational news reports. Journalists working with this motivation do not seem to care much about truthful accounts but stories which sell, as Ansary’s depiction suggests. The problem remains that he is not talking about *any* profession in this case. Ansary is talking about *his* profession and therefore also about his own normative struggles as a journalist. The gap between sensationalism and truthful storytelling thus comes to be the source of a severe identity conflict that starts to dominate his memoir. Especially as the distance between his original professional quest and his personal life starts eroding in the course of his journey, he increasingly tries to build up an artificial professional distance to the events.

These efforts of separating himself from the negative traits of journalists turn out to be rather unsuccessful. Ansary’s bicultural identity struggle and his oscillation between “macho journalist” and a Muslim in search of his roots reach a climax in the chapter “Embassy” (WK 201). Ansary wants to travel from Turkey to Pakistan, which means he has to go through Iran in the middle of the hostage crisis. When he hears that Americans are not likely to safely make their way through, he goes to the embassy in Turkey to find out about the conditions. There, he meets a group of Iranian students and starts speaking to them in Farsi, “which I spoke with a convincing Afghan accent,” he underlines (WK 203). This conversation then unexpectedly forces Ansary to give up any professional pretense. When he shares his real longing to explore his cultural roots, his connection to the Afghan homeland and the story of his left-behind father, an emotional barrier breaks. This is when he realizes that his journalistic endeavor has only been a farce. “All this time, I had thought I was pretending to be on a personal quest in order to pursue my real goal of bagging a story. Now I realized I was pretending to be a journalist in order to pursue my real goal of exploring my roots, nailing down my identity. From Morocco to Istanbul, I had been telling the truth,” he confesses to himself and to the reader (WK 203). This revelation brings tears into the eyes of his Iranian soul-mates who immediately identify with the issues of “exile and the homeland” (WK 203). When the Afghan students treat him as one of their kind, Ansary’s professional posture fully collapses. “This is Tamim Ansary, our brother Afghan,” they embrace him in their circle, “long lost in the wilderness of the West, now returning to his home [...]” (WK 203).

This incident for Ansary marks a true turning point, not only for his further trip but for his identity negotiation. It emphasizes that he cannot keep up with the pro-

fessional and sensational nature of journalistic story-seeking anymore. Clearly, these are the characteristics that he marks as important determinants for being a successful reporter. What distinguishes him from the journalist, though, is his insistence on honesty and “truth.” This focus on authentic recording thus remains a prominent theme throughout the memoir. While it discredits journalism as seeking stories but not truth, Ansary’s own credibility is underlined by this statement. The neglect of truthful reporting, however, is only one of the ethical violations Ansary reveals as inherent to the journalistic procedure. The tendency to avoid laws and other official regulations in order to get ahead of the news is another one. Both obviously require a degree of emotional detachment and ruthlessness which Ansary cannot identify with anymore.

How severely the loss of this professional shield can turn into a severe personal burden, Ansary also learns at the embassy. After seemingly having won the Iranian’s honest admiration and trust as one of their kind, he has to admit that he is traveling on an “American passport” (*WK* 204). This makes the face of the officer and the young men around him freeze immediately. Their heartfelt bondage instantly turns into absolute coldness and abomination. The American passport cuts off whatever shared experience might have existed only seconds ago. Ansary is denied the visa. This, in turn, completely ruins whatever journalistic façade might be left at that point. “For a true macho journalist, this would have been merely the beginning,” Ansary honestly explains. “A true MJ would have found some way to sneak across the border disguised as a truck driver. But I was not a macho journalist, it turned out” (*WK* 205).

Although Ansary here seemingly gives up the journalistic authority he has built up from the very opening description of his persona, his withdrawal from the evils of journalism does not impede his agency. On the contrary, by revealing the often dubious and partly immoral methods of journalists, he additionally underlines his comprehensive knowledge about the mechanics of news media production. At the same time, he denies adhering to them. The emotional impact of this sudden revelation is so significant that he decides to put an end to his entire journey. He does not reach his final destination Pakistan therefore, yet, he reaches a destination in himself which he hardly thought about before: “Clearly, my trip was over. No, I didn’t get a news story. All I did was learn about myself – that I was not a macho journalist, and that my soul was not on the road or in the East. The Islamic world was someone else’s, not mine,” he recapitulates (*WK* 219). Ansary then moves to San Francisco and engages in an American life that seems to be much less stressful for his identity negotiation, a “life as one unconflicted soul: Tamim Ansary, American guy,” he states with relief (*WK* 219).

Obviously, Ansary’s greatest loss, the lesson that he is not a true “macho journalist” and the fact that he is less Afghan than expected, also means the greatest gain to him. To a large extent, he turns his back to the “Islamic world” and fully

embraces his American identity. This decision is an involuntary one since he could not escape the constant reminders of the people he met on his trip who tended to reduce him to his American identity. This retreat from his Afghan identity, though, does not make him turn away from the Middle East as prominent concern in his life. After his return, Ansary keeps following the news from the region closely, and his engagement with the role of the media in shaping America's view of the country remains as intense as ever. One day, Ansary's journalistic work takes him to meet an Afghan refugee. The school girl by the name of Na'eed tells him the story of how she protested against the Soviets in the streets of Kabul. The girl walking next to her was killed by gunfire, but she picked up her country flag and kept marching fearlessly (WK 228-29). "Here in America, her story got out to the media, and she was briefly canonized as the 'Afghan Joan of Arc,'" Ansary explains (WK 229). "She even got a photo op with President Reagan," he then adds (WK 229).

By using the example of the young refugee girl, Ansary wraps up his comprehensive analysis of the role of the media in the conflict frame surrounding the Arab world. He thereby reveals the trajectories of media framing in general and the particular cognitive lens this creates in American discourse. The way in which the U.S. reports on the Afghan resistance to Soviet rule is clearly dominated by U.S. political and ideological interests. This underlines the workings of the larger Cold War frame at the time. The fact that the refugee girl even "got a photo op" with the president endows the story with a critical connotation, once again underlining the sensationalist verve of journalists to get good footage for their stories. At the same time, Ansary here makes the reader aware of how the mere presence in the media can turn ordinary people, even if they have fulfilled inordinary deeds, into public heroes within the blink of an eye. The multi-faceted picture Ansary provides of the impact of media discourse on the public framing of the Arab/Muslim highlights the high degree of reflection which enables Ansary to address the media as major issue in his memoir. He does not only renarrate the pictures the audience is already familiar with, but explains to his audience how these pictures frame the American perception of Afghans and Muslims at large.

On the flip side of the coin, this framing effect also occurs with respect to issues going unnoticed by the public because they do not find the ear of the media. Ansary mentions the story of Massoud to demonstrate this point. The Afghan nationalist warned of further foreign invasions in the country and smuggled out video tapes "to Afghans in the West," Ansary describes Massoud's story (WK 272). But "none of these tapes were ever shown on television, because the war in Afghanistan had no audience," Ansary criticizes. He identifies a similar problem of public neglect deriving from the lack of media presence in the case of the land mine problem in Afghanistan. The mines made thousands of victims in Afghanistan lose their limbs as a consequence of the Soviet war. While "the global land mine problem is widely

publicized today,” Ansary reminds his readers, “[...] back then, the issue was lost in the noise of all the other causes” (*WK* 273).

With these powerful examples, Ansary further underlines the immense role, the global media play in framing the world and particularly the *East*. As the definition of framing revealed, frames are results of both; information which is provided and information which is left out of the coverage. Ansary highlights this mechanism by pointing to the various *stories* which never reach the *West* because they do not fit into the dominant media frame of the time or simply lack the characteristics of a *good story* to attract the audience. The author is able to express these observations only by following a comprehensive approach to news media production and reception. He always keeps the audience in mind. This focus on media processing therefore marks another key component of Ansary’s own mediatic issue framing of his narrative. By looking at his life through the mechanisms of journalistic production, he allows his readers to look beyond the news media images present in their minds. Ansary does not get tired of reminding his *Western* audience of these stereotypes. As he states on one of the final pages of his memoir, the “only thing most people knew about Afghans was that ‘they oppress women.’ Never mind that most Afghans *were* women. To the American public, Afghanistan equaled Taliban” (*WK* 273-74). Although Ansary here uses the past tense, the constant consideration of the current media discourse leaves no doubt that this framed view of Afghanistan has not changed considerably between the time of the Cold War and the present WOT.

Ansary’s personal conclusion following all these detailed insights into media framing is a rather bleak one. To a certain extent, he doubts that the discursive monopoly of the media can be challenged by individual stories or cultural insider knowledge. “Undoubtedly, the media will find a better story than Afghanistan itself in the days to come, and the land of my father will again slip into obscurity,” he wearily infers (*WK* 284). This conclusion puts brackets around the media frame Ansary creates in his narrative. Despite the hopelessness to challenge the media’s monopoly in framing the public view of peoples and nations, his narrative itself provides an instrument to achieving this aim. The constant alternation between the media images of the public and the *truth* which Ansary seeks to unveil is the most important technique in this respect. It allows the audience to look at Afghanistan not only through the eyes of the media consumer, but through the eyes of the journalist who shares his knowledge about the creation of these images. This method of getting beyond conventional frames of interpretation also marks Ansary’s personal theory of life writing. His elaborations on this theory come to serve as a testimony to life writing as (re-)framing strategy.

## Reframing the Afghan Fundamentalist as Theory of Memory Writing

The complex interplay between memory recollection and the analysis of this memory by means of overlapping issue frames suggests Ansary's conscious employment of memoir as medium. He develops a complex image of the Muslim, Muslim America, and Afghanistan. As he states in the final sentence of the epilogue: "I am a kaleidoscope of parts now – and so is Afghanistan. So is the world, when you get right down to it" (*WK* 285). This multi-colored potpourri of Afghan identity stands in contrast to the reductionist image of Afghanistan and the *East* as conveyed by the media. Memory writing, by means of employing the strategy of framing as an instrument of activism, can make a difference to changing public discourse, as Ansary's own theory of memoir suggests.

"Every memoir is full of unfinished stories, I suppose," Ansary opens his "Afterword" (*WK* 293). The latter ultimately reads like an instruction manual to reading his memoir and the media world surrounding it. By pointing to the incompleteness of his own narrative, Ansary also emphasizes the fact that any writing, any media content, only represents a fragment of the kaleidoscope of parts. There are always facts and events which remain excluded. This instance of complexity reduction based on selectivity obviously reflects a key characteristic of framing. Ansary even explicitly mentions this term with respect to his own narrative construction. "Other stories ended outside the frame of my own narrative, and yet they are worth noting," he explains (*WK* 293). One of these noteworthy stories is his somewhat unfinished identity, "my own unfinished story," as he calls it (*WK* 294). This story, despite his rejection of Afghanistan and his attempt of "Forgetting Afghanistan" (*WK* 221), makes him go back to visit Kabul shortly after the publication of the book. Here, he traces the shadows of his past, visits relatives, gains a new picture of the old memories of Kabul he has in mind. Yet, even this experience does not put a definite end to his identity quest, just like there can be no endings in writing and in the writing of life stories, as he suggests: "So you never know. That's what I have concluded. Even the past can change, depending on what happens next – or at least the meaning of the past can change, which is what counts. [...] The pattern is never visible until it's over – and it's never over. Endings don't exist" (*WK* 300).

With this ending describing the denial of endings, Ansary leaves the reader with a seemingly paradoxical, yet, powerful piece of advice as to how to approach life and life writing. His emphasis on the changed meaning of the past resulting from different interpretive frames in his own story highlights the crucial function framing has in his narrative. As the framing analysis has revealed, the issue frame of history here gains prominence and shows the most intensive overlapping to some of the other frames. The most important indicator of this finding is the large amount of

historical information Ansary provides throughout the narrative. He treats history as a key to understanding the past and the present, which clearly also affects the construction of other frames in the memoir. Ansary thus regards life writing as an instrument to interfere in historical discourse. He confirms this notion in an interview:

It's all very good to have official histories and dry texts taught by Harvard professors about the unfolding history of our times, but I think memoirs are the lifeblood of history. It's important to keep remembering that history, seen up close, is nothing but myriad memoirs interlocking and intertwining. So I'm adding my little bit to that tapestry. (Interview with Menten)

These words speak to the dominance of the history frame in Ansary's life narrative, and they also point to the importance Ansary devotes to history in his entire life and career as a writer. The publication of a history book in 2009 with the heading *Destiny Disrupted: A History of the World through Islamic Eyes* serves as additional evidence of this. The metaphorical title of the book reflects Ansary's insights into frames of interpretation. This goes along with his larger aim to facilitate alternative readings of history and of Muslim identity by providing insider information based on thorough historical analysis.<sup>14</sup>

The historical frame, however, is not the only one that receives retrospective confirmation by Ansary. He also stresses the importance of culture for the re-framing of *Eastern* identity in the *West*:

In the whole first part of the book where I describe my childhood in Afghanistan, I'm speaking in my American voice about not just my Afghan self, but also the context that gave rise to that Afghan self. I feel that the culture of Afghanistan in those days before the war was something that nobody had been situated to describe in a way that could make Americans really see it. [...] I think I am using whatever voice I have to speak for not just Afghanistan, but also for a certain kind of cultural and social coherence that has passed away in a lot of places, especially in the parts of the world we now describe as the developing world. I think it is only recently that secular Western civilization, thoroughly industrialized and technology-driven, has come in contact with cultural frameworks that are much more traditional and more ancient. (Interview with Menten)

This statement testifies to the significance of the cultural frame found in the close-reading analysis. Ansary in the interview carefully delineates the different issues separating the "developing world" from "Western civilization." From his viewpoint, culture and the different concepts connected to it are crucial to mutual under-

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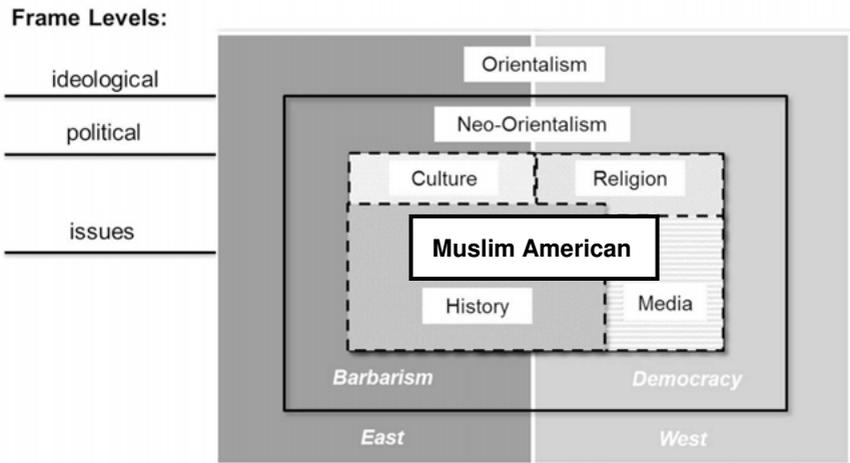
14 Ansary in the interview also announces that history will most likely remain his major focus. He therefore thinks about writing a historical novel ("Interview").

standing in both worlds, which also drives his motivation to clarify these “cultural frameworks.”

Ansary in the same interview also underlines the importance of religious issues for the collective image of Afghans and for his own identity negotiation. As someone who has spent life “between the traditional Islamic society of his youth and the secular Western culture he came to call his home,” his intention remains to look at religion from “two angles,” as he states (Interview with Menten). “I think that in portraying the peaceful Muslim society of my youth, I did want to bring this vision of Islam to Americans and show that this is how a lot of Muslims live and want to live. At the same time, I became aware that there was an emerging political ideology in the world that had its roots in Islam” (Interview with Menten). Ansary’s achievement in the memoir is to delineate these different dimensions and to provide alternative information on Islam as religion in opposition to Islam as political ideology. The complex discussion of these issues within different frameworks allows for this separation.

When integrating the issue frames revealed in the analysis based on the variables of authorial authenticity, truth claims, and use of language, the following model emerges:

*Graph 5: Frame Model of West of Kabul, East of New York*



As the graph illustrates, the history frame turns out to be the most dominant one, affecting all other issue frames. Due to this focus, the reader is invited to change the existing image of Afghanistan through a historical lens. When recalling the results of the meta-analyses of media frames on the Islamic world, it becomes obvious that this historical frame offers a novel reading of Muslim identity, since history is not a

dominant frame in the media coverage on the Middle East. This reframing gets complemented by the other issue frames installed by the author, namely: religion, culture, and the media frame. Whereas religion has been found to be a strong frame in media coverage, culture has fallen out of the picture post 9/11. The memoir thus puts emphasis on an issue which is mostly absent from public discourse. The same holds true for the media frame which deserves further attention.

The very existence of the media as dominant issue in the memoir highlights the strong impact of mediated discourse on the production of memoir in contemporary times. Even more important, however, is the finding that this issue frame has never appeared in conventional empirical analyses on the coverage of the Middle East. Literary authors and empirical media scholars such as Jack Shaheen, Edward Said and many others have, of course, repeatedly addressed the media as source of misrepresentation. Ansary's thorough analysis of the self-reflexive mechanisms of framing in the media coverage, however, adds a new theoretical dimension to the issue. This novelty is especially remarkable since journalists in general tend to conceal rather than expose their own means of reporting. In Ansary's case, memoir provides the appropriate format to look behind the scenes of media framing while at the same time practicing the technique of framing to arrive at these insights.

When looking at the outer frames surrounding the issue frames in the given model, i.e., the neo-Orientalist frame linked to the WOT and the Orientalist frame marked by the vocabulary of *us* versus *them*, a surprising finding evolves. Although an Afghan American author can be assumed to *counter* the stereotypes linked to the respective frames, they are still omnipresent in the memoir. As the analysis on the level of issue frames has revealed, Ansary's method of contrasting is full of *East/West*-binaries. This vocabulary becomes the most dominant mode through which Ansary structures his past and present experiences. The same holds true for the impact of the neo-Orientalist frame and of the WOT. Although Ansary provides a series of alternative issue frames to look at the Afghan through a different lens, it cannot be denied that the political circumstances of the present severely shape the construction of the memoir. In contrast to a one-sided processing of both frames, Ansary's bicultural position and his technique of letting other voices speak allow for a two-sided view of *East* and *West*. Ansary points to this nuanced approach to binary differences at the end of his memoir when describing the focus on individualism in American culture. "And *different* was an inescapable part of my identity from the start, so I gravitated to the one place where *different* didn't mean *suspect*" (WK 282).

This (re-)framing of the image of the Afghan by providing alternative frames of interpretation and by filling existing frames with more complex information should not conceal the fact that the very language of binary thinking connected to it remains highly visible. This overall dominance of *East* versus *West* vocabulary, which is already suggested in the title, thus brackets Ansary's life and his narrative.

He summarizes this with respect to the different paths his own family members have taken and returns to the theme of positioning oneself in either *East* or *West* toward the end of his account: “My siblings and I grew up with such divided souls, and we responded in different ways,” he summarizes (*WK* 279). His sister Rebecca “shifted almost entirely to the West,” as he explains in the epilogue (*WK* 279). She married a man who “appreciated her American persona,” and in her professional life she focuses on “Western theater” as a university professor (*WK* 279-80). Ansary’s brother Riaz, on the other hand, “shifted to the East as thoroughly as he was able,” he observes (*WK* 280). He has ultimately left the United States to live in the United Arab Emirates and teaches Arabic there. “Riaz’ soul ended up even east of Kabul,” Ansary plays on the title of the book (*WK* 280-81).

As to Ansary himself, his soul remains “bicultural” as he states, yet, he clearly positions himself on the American side. “I shifted my weight quite definitely over to my American foot,” he metaphorically puts it (*WK* 281). This does not prevent him from actively engaging with the other foot. With his continued mental and physical oscillation between both worlds, Ansary uses his American agency to engage in the public discourse between both worlds. In his memoir, he definitely does not achieve this by creating a mere counter-narrative, as the theory and practice of ethnic life writing suggests. Instead, Ansary reframes the outside view of *East* and *West* with detailed insider knowledge based on his authority as a bicultural writer and public figure. At the same time, he cannot deny to be restrained by the existing frames surrounding him in the present media environment. The dichotomy between *East* and *West* therefore remains omnipresent. To Ansary, however, this is not a normative burden, as Postcolonial Literary Studies might suggest. Rather, this division of the world obviously constitutes the mental framework through which the public clusters information about the respective Other. Dichotomies therefore do not prevent the dissolving of stereotypes in this case. Instead, the stereotypes are altered on the basis of detailed information on Muslim and Afghan identity. The method of contrasting helps achieve this function of complexity creation.

Ansary obviously believes in the success of this method of reframing based on binary thinking and continues the path he has opened up with his memoir and with his e-mail. His life remains the one of a journalist, writer, and public spokesperson. All these functions allow him to (re-)frame the public discourse on Afghanistan, the Muslim world, and the *East* at large. The basis of this is information, not counter-stereotyping. As he announces in an interview: “I’m going to continue to do what I’ve done in the last six to seven months, which is bring information from that part of the world to this part of the world” (Interview with Menten).

### 4.3 RECEPTION: THE (RE-)FRAMED MUSLIM FUNDAMENTALIST AND HIS AUDIENCE (V<sub>4</sub>)

A framing analysis of Ansary's memoir on the basis of a theory of production and reception would be incomplete if it ended with the discussion of the authorial and textual frames. It still remains to be explored which effects the detected frames have on the readership. More precisely, this reception-oriented analysis seeks to reveal in how far Ansary's frames resonate in the views and discursive patterns of the audience and whether this leads to a reframed notion of the Afghan Muslim. *West of Kabul* provides a very promising study object for such a holistic analysis since some of the frames found in the memoir are not found in the common media discourse on Afghanistan and the Middle East. A thorough investigation of the audience's reaction to the book lays the groundwork for more far-reaching findings on the usefulness of frame analysis in life writing studies. Reception, as the theoretical model suggests, comprises a multi-faceted process, which acknowledges the role of the memoir in the media environment at large. This also includes the realm of the marketplace where Ansary's book proved quite successful.

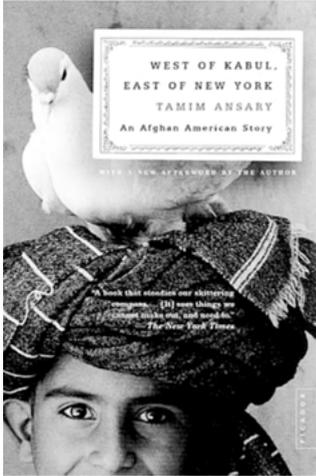
#### ***West of Kabul, East of New York in the Marketplace***

One of the supposedly most decisive differences between *East* and *West* is the latter's obsession with materialism and unlimited commercial indulgence. Ansary himself admits having adopted this credo of American culture when giving in to his own "materialist" impulse on his trip. Nevertheless, no book would ever be successful outside the academic realm if nobody bought it. This simple equation of supply and demand lies at the basis of economic thought, although it does not meet the taste of many postcolonial scholars, intellectual leftists, and adherents of high culture. If Literary Studies really want to leave their anti-materialist corner and move beyond the ivory tower, the importance of economics in the reception of literature has to be accounted for. Especially in the case of Afghan life narratives, such a move indeed promises new insights into the mindset of the readership. "If we are what we consume," Whitlock in this context states, "buying life narratives from Afghanistan is a way of indicating cosmopolitan tastes, openness, sympathy, political commitment, and benevolent interest in cultural difference" (55).<sup>15</sup> In fact, the marketing of *West of Kabul* seems to have appealed to all of the above sentiments.

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15 Despite making detailed speculations about audience preferences and predispositions, Whitlock never reveals the sales figures of the works she discusses.

Image 5: Book Cover of *West of Kabul, East of New York*



Source: Front cover of the memoir (“WK, Front Cover”).

*West of Kabul, East of New York* was published in March 2003 by Picador. The cover of the book shows a young, supposedly Afghan, boy wearing a turban. On his head sits a white dove, the common symbol of peace. The boy is smiling shily, his eyes are shining. He clearly represents the “exotic” Other who promises to take the reader to an unknown world. The back cover first lists quotes from reviews of major newspapers, which prize the book as “Urbane, accessible, compulsively readable” (*Los Angeles Times*), “[s]tirring” (*Santa Fe New Mexian*), “delicious” (*Esquire*), as well as “emotional and moving” (*The Times-Picayune*). The blurb underneath the reviews mostly focuses on Ansary’s “divided self” and his search for a united identity on his journey. It also immediately relates to the events at the World Trade Center and Ansary’s e-mail which brought about his public popularity. The short text ultimately closes by regarding the e-mail as “the culmination of his lifelong struggle” whereby the memoir represents “his story.” Next to the paragraph, a picture of Ansary is printed and a one-sentence bio mentioning his publication of several children’s books and his authorial contributions for *Encarta*.<sup>16</sup>

The publication of the memoir fell roughly 1.5 years after the 9/11 attacks and in the middle of the military intervention of the U.S. in Iraq. The operation followed the previous intervention of U.S. forces in Afghanistan in October 2001.<sup>17</sup> This immediate political involvement in the Arab world made the demand for books on the Middle East rise considerably. As the *New York Times* journalist Martin Arnold noticed in October 2001, ten out of 15 books on the *New York Times* bestseller list were related to terrorism or similar topics. “Even the Koran has become a big sell-

16 *Encarta* counts as one of the leading electronic encyclopedias. Ansary’s contributions again emphasize his focus on historical research. Moreover, at the center of *Encarta* is a virtual map of the world which the user can interact with to seek information on global, regional, and local histories. Metaphorically speaking, Ansary with his focus on geography and geographic position shifting creates a similar map in his memoir.

17 In June 2011, president Obama announced the withdrawal of 30,000 troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2012. As the president declared in the fall of 2011: “After nearly 9 years, America’s war in Iraq will be over” (Montopoli, “Obama Announces”). Still, about 40,000 non-combat troops are to remain in the country at the time of writing.

er,” he writes (E.3).<sup>18</sup> Ansary’s memoir obviously appeared at the peak of this period. The blurb on the book cover emphasizes this link to the WOT. The mentioning of Ansary’s multi-ethnic identity, however, exceeds this political focus and appeals to a readership concerned with identity negotiation and ethnic identity conflict apart from current political quarrels. Based on these hints, the target audience of the book certainly includes American readers eager to get insights into a world they only know from television newscasts and the context of war. In addition, a larger audience of readers identifying with multi-ethnic identity negotiation, such as Afghan Americans or members of other ethnic minorities, can count as possible consumers of the narrative. Especially the emotional adjectives used in the newspaper reviews appeal to the latter aspect of personal involvement. Since the book is clearly described as memoir, readers with a general interest in life writing are also included in the potential readership.

The actual sales numbers of the memoir confirm the large target audience. About 55,000 copies of the book were sold by the end of 2011 (Ansary, “Your Questions”). This number by far exceeds the sales figures of most other Arab American narratives.<sup>19</sup> The marketing of the book in print format was complemented by the publication of *West of Kabul* as audio book in March 2007 (Baskin 112). This time, the press was Blackstone Audio Inc.<sup>20</sup> The fact that there exists an audio version points to the high commercial success of the book. So far, hardly any other contemporary memoir by a Muslim or Arab American has been transformed into an audio version. Despite the fairly long time lapse between the book publication and the launching of the audio book, the marketing material remains largely the same. The editorial reviews found on prominent sales pages offering the electronic version of *West of Kabul* therefore have not been replaced.

Changes have indeed occurred, however, in the case of the outer appearance of the memoir as audiobook. The front cover differs significantly from the one of the print version and lacks the high degree of personalization. The new cover is largely held in black with only a small lighter strip of sky spanning underneath the title. At the bottom, one can see the silhouette of a city under a foggy mist emerging. Surprisingly, this silhouette does not show the fragments of the bombed Kabul cityscape, as one might expect considering the gloomy atmosphere of the dark. Instead, a closer look at the picture makes one recognize the skyscrapers of New York with the Empire State Building in the center. Whereas the title therefore puts equal em-

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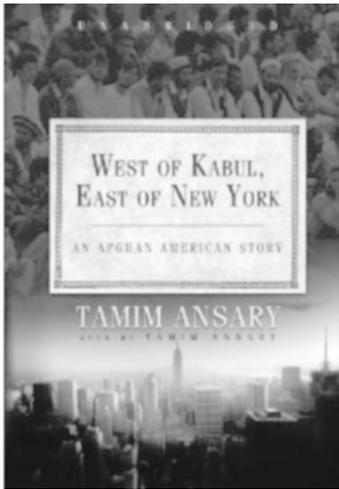
18 Yale also purchased rights for the term “Taliban” from Taurus London (Arnold E.3).

19 Another outstanding example of an Arab American bestseller in contemporary life narrative is *Lolita in Tehran* by Azar Nafisi, which was also published in 2003 and remained on the *New York Times* bestseller list for more than 100 weeks (Nafisi, Home page).

20 No reliable sales figures could be obtained for the audio book. The press bought all rights from the author and does not report to third parties (Ansary, “Your Questions”).

phasis on both worlds, *East* and *West*, the new edition geographically locates the memoir in the *West* with its prototypical image of the New York skyline. This stands in sharp contrast to the romanticized and Orientalized image of the young Afghan boy on the print version. The way in which the New York cityscape is presented under the black and dusty sky clearly evokes images of the 9/11 attacks. If any media image has burned itself into the memory of millions around the globe, it is this picture of a city that, for days, was covered under a black cloud of ashes. The scenes of people running disoriented in the streets and covered in white dust were repeated over and over again on CNN and other national and international broadcast stations. It comes as no surprise that the new front cover stirs these memories by what is obviously missing from the cityscape – the twin towers.

*Image 6: Audiobook Cover West of Kabul, East of New York vs. Press Photo 9/11*



Source: The left image shows the cover of the new audiobook version (“Audiobook Cover WK”). The right image depicts a press photo taken on 9/11 (Lederhandler).

Whether the different covers of the two versions are rooted in different demand patterns of the audience in dealing with the trauma of 9/11, or whether the presses merely pursue different marketing strategies, remains speculation. Clearly, however, each individual image sends a different message to the readers and listeners as to where the narrative they are about to consume might take them. Whereas the first might evoke classical ideas of Orientalism, the second one is located in the political climate of the here and now. Ansary himself was only involved in the selection of the cover of the print version. The cover of the

audiobook was chosen by the press. Ansary himself states, he does not have any reservations regarding the motif.<sup>21</sup>

This close look at the way in which the book has become anchored in the marketplace already leads to the emergence of certain frames. Whatever the reader sees when looking at the cover already raises specific expectations as to where in his cognitive framework the memoir might be placed. It now remains to be explored in how far this expectation goes in line with the frames found underneath the cover and to what extent these frames actually become internalized and reproduced in popular discourse. A close-reading analysis of audience reviews reveals this effect of frame resonance. Both the journalistic as well as the public readership are the agents in this process.

### The Journalistic Audience

Journalists who write about other journalists are rather an exception than the rule.<sup>22</sup> Mostly, this scenario happens whenever something is not right, as in the case of journalistic scandals or war coverage. In the case of Ansary's memoir as subject of their writing, however, everything seems to be more than right. Whereas the academic world has not shown much interest in Ansary's memoir so far, the public press and notable magazines discussed his work in a very detailed and benevolent way. One reason for this heightened interest in literature from Afghanistan by feuilleton journalists, of course, was the need to satisfy the demands of the readership post 9/11. As one reviewer notes: "Americans are hungry for that personal story – the human face of the country in which our government plays out its war on terrorism" (Smith Rakoff 53). Reading that "personal story" from someone who is not only Afghan American but a public media figure is even more exciting. It is therefore little wonder that most reviewers focus on the persona of Ansary first before dealing with the memoir itself. When doing so, however, it turns out that the textual issue frames indeed have a significant impact on the journalists' perception.

The majority of newspaper reviewers use Ansary's e-mail as the starting point of their discussion. As the subline of Joanna Smith Rakoff's review states, an "E-

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21 Ansary explains more details on the cover photo of the print version in an e-mail to the author. "I found and supplied the boy-with-dove photo. The cover designer used only part of the photo – the original is the whole boy, with some background" ("Your Questions").

22 This simplified categorization becomes more complicated when literary writers function as reviewers for magazines and thus write about the literary work of other journalists such as Ansary. An example of this is a review of *West of Kabul* by the Iranian American author Gelareh Asayesh. She also published a memoir entitled *Saffron Sky: A Life between Iran and America* ("The Stolen Education"). It remains debatable in how far literary involvement impacts the objectivity of journalistic writing in these cases.

Mail for Afghanistan Catapulted Him Into Celebrity” (53). The somewhat awkward preposition “for” instead of “from” here emphasizes Ansary’s taking of sides with his public involvement as a public agent. He is consequently described as a “sought after media pundit, an unofficial spokesperson for the Afghan people” (Smith Rakoff 53). Other reviews confirm this exceptional status of Ansary as an author who became “famous overnight” – not so much because of his books or other journalistic works, but because of the e-mail he sent the day following the attacks (Hilton 12). Others rather ironically refer to him as a “talkshow celebrity” due to the public visibility the author gained (Seaman 1186; Baker 13). All of these comments underline what Ansary himself explicates at the outset of his account. He is not just *some* Afghan American writing but *the* Afghan American who sent the e-mail. This underlining of his authorial agency based on personal status is certainly effective, as the journalistic reviews indicate.

These praises of Ansary’s public fame, however, are not based solely on the impact of his e-mail. Rather, this effect was only possible because Ansary’s bicultural identity endows him with an exceptional position in the public discourse on Afghanistan. The reviews take up this larger background of “bicultural existence” as underscoring Ansary’s power to influence his readership (Smith Rakoff 53). In his e-mail, he spoke “for Afghanistan with his American voice”; in his memoir, he derives his agency from the very same bicultural existence, as critics note (Asayesh, “Stepping Westward” T.15). A reviewer from *The Booklist* expresses this logic by using the familiar vocabulary of two worlds opposing each other: “Ansary embodies the East, the West, and the struggle between them” (Seaman 1186). Despite the fact that this also leads to severe identity conflict for Ansary, critics frequently highlight his positioning on the American side of the hyphen. They thus point to the lasting impact of his privileged upbringing in a “Western-educated family” (Smith Rakoff 53) and the family’s encounter with “the West” (Asayesh, “Stepping Westward” T.15). Some reviewers interpret this battle of the “divided self” explicitly in the context of the WOT by stating that this event has led to the result that Ansary’s “American self is winning the cultural wrestling match inside his head. His goals and desires are distinctly American [...]” (Smith Rakoff 53).

These reviews with their initial focus on Ansary as a public figure and on his bicultural identity confirm the blended relationship between the literary and the media market. The previous media contribution of Ansary and the coverage about this contribution in turn become the subject of the media discussion of Ansary’s memoir. This severe degree of self-referentiality as major feature of journalistic production also sets the basis for resulting framing effects and the reproduction of existing frames of interpretation. Often, the previous presence of a topic or persona in the media discourse becomes the very reason why a topic is discussed again. This is certainly the case with Ansary since it is no speculation to assume his memoir would have received much less attention had he not been *the* author of *the e-mail*.

In addition, the agency and authenticity he is granted by the journalistic readership are clearly based on his status as relying on his occupation as a journalist and his bicultural identity. This exactly reflects the way in which Ansary positions himself at the outset of the narrative. As the reviews also suggest, the credibility derived from his ethnic background is additionally underpinned by his conscious decision to lean toward the American side of the hyphen. A reviewer from the *The Washington Post* takes this up by quoting Ansary's own words from before the e-mail, when he was still a "regular American guy" (Asayesh, "Stepping Westward" T.15).

These insights stating that there is someone writing who does have bicultural expertise but, nevertheless, is an American and therefore part of the *West*, strengthens Ansary's potential to convince his audience with his writing. The necessary condition of credibility for framing is therefore affirmed. This is also reflected in the genre classification made by the journalistic readers. His autobiography is nowhere conceived to be a fictional creation of dubious memories. Rather, Ansary's truth claims are indeed accepted by the readers. A reviewer from *Publishers Weekly* thus notes that the "book chronicles, with calm insight and honesty" (Rotella 55). This focus on mere facts, however, is complemented by a sense of "nostalgia," as another journalistic review states (E.2:39). Instead of nostalgia as an emotional device typical of fiction writing, the reviewer adds that that nostalgia "can be as truthful as memory [...]" (E.2:39). The choice of words here is crucial for tracing how the textual frames actually transfer to the readership. Authenticity and truth are the major criteria underlying the reception of the memoir as fact, not as fiction.

This factual approach to the memoir as chronicle with a sense of "nostalgia" furthermore points to the enormous relevance of the history frame in Ansary's memoir. "Ansary's strategy is as simple as it is rare," a reviewer from the *Seattle Weekly* analyzes. "He speaks of the world and its grand events entirely through the spectrum of his own experience. He doesn't lecture us on Afghan history; he tells us as he learned it, growing up among the poor but privileged half-Westernized elite of royal Kabul in the early years of the Cold War" (Downey). These lines reflect the dominance of the historical frame in Ansary's memoir. As Downey explains, this effect is only possible based on the bicultural authenticity of the author. The fact that the reviewer uses the word "strategy" when praising Ansary's writing furthermore indicates that Ansary is assumed to intentionally construct his narrative around history. In contrast to the impulse of literary critics to escape questions of authorial intention, the journalistic readership obviously treats the strategic relevance of life writing not only as a given, but as a much acclaimed feature of the genre. The didactic purpose that the reviewer hints at when contrasting Ansary's strategy to the one of a university lecturer is furthermore highlighted by Downey's tartly inference that Ansary's goal is to "introduce previously immune Americans to

how it feels to be a target of the world historical process.”<sup>23</sup> The *New York Times* reviewer Richard Eder shares this impression by introducing the work as one that “delivered us from text into context, from crisis into history [...]” (E.2:39). Other reviews mention the history frame by referring to specific aspects of Ansary’s historical analysis, such as Afghanistan’s struggle between tradition and modernity, the Soviet rule, and the role of the Taliban<sup>24</sup> (Hilton 12).

Most important in the context of this resonance of the historical frame in the journalistic audience is the twofold nature of Ansary’s agency that allows for this effect. Ansary is not merely accredited by critics to convey historical knowledge based on personal experience, as the theory of life writing suggests as most important feature of memoir. This personal perspective only functions in connection with his historical expertise he conveys in the form of very illustrative writing. This allows the readers to instantly engage with a time and world which is utterly opposed to the America of the here and now. As *Capital Times* reviewer John Nichols states in this context, “it is refreshing to read of a time and a place where, instead of television, we had genealogy.” This praising of Ansary’s ability to transmit historical information in a comprehensive, yet, easily accessible way is complemented by the thematic range the author covers. Nichols probably provides the most striking testimony to the role of the book as historical inquiry exactly because it is not an official chronicle or a “polemic” against imperialism but a memoir of historical significance. As he concludes, the book “belongs to the broader library in which are considered the big questions about the price of progress in this perhaps too modern world.” This strong focus on Ansary’s historical insights which spans like a read thread through the majority of journalistic reviews thus altogether highlights the result of the textual frame analysis and the resonance of the historical frame in the journalistic readership.<sup>25</sup>

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23 Ansary himself confirmed this notion in an interview by stating that Americans have a need to learn about Afghan history but hardly are given the appropriate material for that (Interview with Menten).

24 Isabel Hilton also criticizes Ansary for his rather “medieval depiction” of the Taliban because, according to his stance, the Taliban represent the “Western (and the Soviet Union) vision of progress” (13).

25 Ansary’s thematic orientation toward historical analysis has drawn even more public attention in reviews on his historical book *Destiny Disrupted* (2009). The study has received international attention and already been translated into several languages, among them German. Interestingly, the title in German reads “*Die unbekannte Mitte der Welt: Globalgeschichte aus islamischer Sicht*,” which directly points to the lack of knowledge underlying the prominent history of the *East* as written by the *West*. Critics claims that the author’s major strategy is to pursue “history as narrative” by telling “two histories” in order to counter Fukuyama’s thesis of the end of history (Schneiders, my translation).

A similar impact of Ansary's memoir on the audience can be detected when looking at the religious frame. The issue of religion thus represents the second focus taken up by journalistic reviewers (Rotella 55). Similar to the historical frame, religion is largely discussed under the overall umbrella of 9/11, which most critics see as the basis of Ansary's narrative (Eder E.2:39). Ansary's aim to tell the true story of Islam comes to constitute a major issue occupying the critics' perception of the memoir at large. Especially the story of Ansary's brother and his orthodox conversion to Islam entirely "east of New York" is interpreted as a prototype of Islam's encompassing social and political function (Silverman 108). Again, critics here point to the significance of Ansary's interference in the WOT discourse based on his e-mail. The critics therefore read the memoir as a similar discursive intervention to explain the real reasons behind the "holy war between Islam<sup>26</sup> and the West" (Baker 13). Particularly, Ansary's picture of the Muslim youth and of its desperate economic situation is conceived of as highly illuminating by critics since it adds important information to the actual life circumstances surrounding religious upbringing (Asayesh, "Stepping Westward" T.15).<sup>27</sup> The fact that Ansary himself has ultimately rejected "the Muslim world" is read to endow him with additional agency to elaborate on the issue (Asayesh, "Stepping Westward" T.15). Based on his Muslim family background, he still counts as an insider while at the same time gaining the necessary analytical distance to convey reliable information otherwise unobtainable for the American readership.

The given reflections on the importance of religion in Ansary's memoir point to a similar effect as found in the case of the historical issue frame. Religion as major interpretative lens therefore does transfer to the journalistic audience. The reviews also reveal that the religious frame, just like the historical one, is of an encompassing nature because it overlaps with other issues. A striking indication of this interrelatedness is provided by the following statement of a reviewer who claims that the book represents an "exploration of militant Islam, with a smattering of contemporary Afghan history" (Asayesh, "Stepping Westward" T.15). The issues of politics, culture, and religion are thus also reflected in a large majority of reviews. Mostly, however, their importance is mentioned with respect to their interplay with historical and religious aspects, whereby the history frame clearly dominates.

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26 In regard to the journalistic reviews of Ansary's work, the terminological conflation of Islam with Eastern identity is nevertheless pervasive. Barker provides an example of this since he uses Islam as an umbrella term for the binary opposite of the "West" (Baker 13).

27 This relating of religious identity to economic circumstances can also be read as indication of a different media frame that is often applied by journalists, namely, the meta-frame of economic progress. This frame has also been found to constitute a global-meta-frame by Dahinden (107-08).

Another highly illuminating result in connection with the audience resonance of the various issue frames in the memoir can be found when looking at the media frame. Here, the journalistic reviews provide an equally striking confirmation of how Ansary is able to shape the vision of his readers. This refers to questions of method and technique as well as to content. In line with the critics' perception of Ansary's work as non-fiction, as opposed to literary, fictional, or semi-fictional life construction, critics praise the clarity of his prose as "subtle and addictive" (Smith Rakoff 53). Furthermore, the "directness" of his voice is celebrated in direct connection to his ability to integrate the voice of his travel acquaintances<sup>28</sup> (Asayesh, "Stepping Westward" T.15). The comments on the writing technique of Ansary underline the journalistic verve conveyed in the memoir. His story is therefore clearly read as the work of a reporter who expresses his insights based on fairly objective analysis, plain language, and a collection of information derived from interviews. This perception of Ansary's memoir as a work of journalism – with all the implications a journalistic media piece implies – is made explicit by another reviewer. Donna Seaman thus states that the memoir "illuminates more brightly than any news report or political analysis" (1186). This remark directly establishes the link between the memoir and its place in the larger media discourse. The *New York Times* reviewer even goes one step further by not only *comparing* the memoir to journalism but *equating* the two: "Such personalizing of an event is not only good journalism, but it illuminates history, too, and also is the stuff that may still capture interest long after the event" (Arnold E.3). Another confirmation of this is provided in the *Seattle Weekly* which contains even more powerful comparative images. As the reviewer states, the book "is one of those rare pieces of journalism – Rebecca West's<sup>29</sup> dispatches from Nuremberg come to mind, and John Hersey's Hiroshima – that don't just record history but make it" (Downey).

This comparison to a famous journalist who covered such dramatic historical events as the Nuremberg trials and the Hiroshima catastrophe strongly underlines the effect Ansary's journalistic persona has in the eyes of journalist critics. Not only do the reviewers confirm the inseparability of memoir from mediatic discourse based on similar narrative means employed. They also point to the actual – not only theorized – impact of memoir on public and "social discourse" (Asayesh, "Stepping Westward" T.15; Nichols). Obviously, this intervention is not achieved through the mere establishing of a counter-narrative, as ethnic autobiography theory has claimed. In fact, ethnicity, alterity discourse, and victimization do not appear as

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28 Asayesh critiques that the conversations Ansary recalls deviate too much from his own voice and thus "read more like lectures [...]" ("Stepping Westward" T.15).

29 West is acclaimed not only for her journalistic work but for the fact she has also made outstanding contributions in the literary field (Schweizer 29). This multifaceted approach to writing is in line with Ansary's broad interests by far exceed the realm of journalism.

frames in Ansary's story at all, neither do these themes appear in the reviews. The critics instead attest the work an almost didactic discursive function in a much larger sense than the mere focus on postcolonialism would suggest. Ansary does not engage in the normative condemnation or reversal of Orientalism. Rather, his method is based on the conveying of knowledge, i.e., cognitive and emotional information allowing the reader to develop a more complex picture of the Afghan. In effect, this leads to the emergence of a (re-)framed image of Muslims. The review in *Publishers Weekly* puts emphasis on the crucial function of detailed knowledge as key to changing stereotypes. Mark Rotella thus regards Ansary as an "educational writer"<sup>30</sup> who provides orientation for the reader and conveys the complexity of Afghan by using journalistic language which is plain and easy to process (54). Another reviewer metaphorically describes this learning effect by concluding that Ansary's memoir "steadies our [the American audience's] skittering compass" (Eder 2:39). In addition to the cognitive function of framing, this also hints at the importance of positionality and the geographic oscillation between *East* and *West*, as conveyed by the memoir's title.

In sum, the audience responses in the case of journalists reflect the frames revealed in the textual analysis. This also sheds light on the usefulness of framing as analytical tool in life writing studies. The tracing of frames starting with the authorial intention of the author, proceeding to the text itself, and finally leading over to the way in which frames resonate in audience discourse reveal insights into the processing of life writing which former theoretical approaches have not covered. Furthermore, the equalization of Ansary's memoir with journalism and with other non-literary works highlights that, even though all these formats represent different genres, their reception functions according to similar trajectories. This determines the very impact of non-fiction writing on social discourse. Ansary's "advocacy rather than activism" therefore is perceived by the audience to be of equal importance in his political and literary work (Smith Rakoff 53). This also underscores the impact of life writing on social discourse at large, which also means that any effort to seclude the genre merely into the literary arena is mistaken. One critic puts this argument into a nutshell by writing that "it can reasonably be argued that any sensitivity the United States and other Western governments showed Afghan civilians was in no small part a byproduct of Ansary's efforts" (Nichols). Since the

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30 This didactic orientation of Ansary's work at large, even in his memoir, is underlined by several reviews which recommend the memoir to academic libraries and as high school literature. The book is actually discussed in the section "Political Science" (Silverman 108). Ansary himself identifies with this educational purpose. On his homepage, he calls himself "Afghan American Author and Lecturer." In addition, under the rubric "My books," Ansary features *West of Kabul, East of New York* as "common freshman reading by colleges and universities [...]" (Home page).

American “sensitivity” not only depends on the government but on the body of the American people, this impact – if it holds true – also needs to be reflected in the reviews provided by the larger consumer readership.

## The Consumer Audience

When asked about the reaction of his readers to his memoir, Ansary recalls amiable experiences. Above all, Americans tell him that the picture he draws of himself in the book is quite “likeable.” To him, as he states, it is even more important that many readers indeed treasure that he is telling “the truth” and that he “got it right” (“Interview with Menten”). This reaction by the American readership again appeals to Ansary’s permanent quest to assure his own authenticity and credibility. As it turns out, this high degree of agency indeed caters to the general audience as well to the effect that the interpretative frames established in the memoir are mirrored in their reviews.

When speaking of the general readership of Ansary’s memoir, the still manageable number of copies sold suggests that the data available might not be overabundant. Still, the variety of reviews found on popular selling sites and book discussion platforms indicates a comparatively high engagement of the readers with the book and an equally high need to share their views. At the time of writing,<sup>31</sup> 31 reviews could be found on Amazon as well as 392 ratings and 95 rankings<sup>32</sup> on *Goodreads*. Sometimes, the reviewers very briefly state their spontaneous reaction right after reading the book. Other reviewers are quite thorough and elaborate in offering detailed thematic reflections. The following close-reading analysis of a selection<sup>33</sup> of these reviews offers a basis for determining if and how strongly the textual frames dominate the perception of the audience.

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31 As of November 2011.

32 A review comprises a rather thorough discussion of a book which usually focuses on specific topics and often mentions textual references. Rankings or ratings, in contrast, are quick evaluations of books which are usually expressed by distributing stars on a scale from one to five. Reviews and rankings have become helpful guides for potential readers who based their purchase decision of books on other customers’ views.

33 Since this study does not actually conduct a quantitative content analysis but a close-reading investigation of audience reviews to identify audience frames, the limited scope of the analysis requires a selection of a certain number of texts, e.g., by excluding very short reviews or by summarizing repetitive statements. In empirical terms, this procedure certainly bears a selection and interpretation bias on the part of the author. Since the goal of this analysis is not to provide a representative and methodologically unchallengeable study but an experimental one which points to the blending of different methods, this shortcoming is not only unavoidable but necessary.

The first aspect to notice in the reception analysis of *West of Kabul* is that reviews can be found in the section of non-fiction. Obviously, this corresponds to the category under which the book is listed by journalistic reviewers as well. The first responses to the book date back to the time right after the book's release and continue up to the present. Some recent reviews therefore refer to the audio version.<sup>34</sup> The comparatively high popularity of Ansary's memoir for the wider audience, as was already the case with the media attention the author gained, can largely be traced back to the post-9/11 e-mail. Most reviewers point to the e-mail and Ansary's involvement in the public debate on Afghanistan as major point of attention before turning to the content of the memoir. This awareness of Ansary's public persona is immediately linked to the agency accredited to him. As one reader states, Ansary provides an "honest, open perspective" on the events of 9/11 in his book (Community Reviews of *WK*). Another reader strongly underlines that the account is above all "realistic" (Community Reviews of *WK*).

These statements highlight that the general readership, in line with journalistic reviewers, places great weight on the authenticity and truth of the memoir. These are the criteria that determine the credibility devoted to the author and ultimately affect the way in which the work is processed. In Ansary's case, this truth-telling capability mostly rests on his bicultural identity, "his own predicament as a man divided between two cultures," as one reviewer puts it (Community Reviews of *WK*). This "description of straddling the east and west divide," endows him with the insight to "accurately" convey information on both worlds, a reviewer named Dalia points out (Community Reviews of *WK*). The importance of conveying cultural insider knowledge while at the same time maintaining a distanced analytical perspective is also stressed by many other reviewers. He thus counts as a "bicultural guy" (Community Reviews of *WK*) who allows his readers to look at the U.S. and Afghanistan "through a more balanced lens" (Community Reviews of *WK*).

These comments on the author's bicultural background reveal an interesting pattern which meets the theoretical assumptions of the framing model. While the majority of readers seem to be highly interested in the issue of ethnic identity negotiation as such, they do not see this as the major theme of the memoir.<sup>35</sup> Rather, An-

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34 Obviously, listening to an audio-recording and reading a print copy stand for two different ways of media consumption, connected to different processes of sensual information processing. Since the focus of the reception analysis here rests mostly on the content and structure of the work, which do not differ in both versions, reviews on the audiobook will therefore be included in the following.

35 Since many online reviewers do not reveal their full name, it is often hard to make inferences on their real identity and their ethnic background. In some cases, however, where a full name is given, it can be speculated that respective reviewers share an Arab and/or Muslim background with Ansary.

sary's dual perspective is perceived as the major foundation of his authorial power. It endows him with the agency to provide accurate information and in turn create interpretative frameworks. Any conventional reading of the memoir in the vein of postcolonialism's reductionist focus on identity negotiation as the major end in and of itself is too short-sighted. A critical comment by one of the readers makes this lack of the classical ethnic identity struggle very clear:

After more than 100 pages, there was still no true conflict. Ansary says it was awkward – and maybe a little unpleasant – growing up Afghan-American in Afghanistan. But his childhood seems to be pretty privileged (even by American standards). His father is employed by the government, which automatically makes him wealthier than about 80 or 90 percent of the country. He obtains a certain high status among children his age without much struggle. And he seems to have good memories of his childhood. There are no racial/ethnic conflicts. He's not picked on because he's too American or too Afghan. (Christina Kristofic)

It remains debatable whether there really is “no true conflict” with respect to Ansary's multi-ethnic background. The comment nevertheless emphasizes that readers of ethnic life narratives are used to stories which are much more focused on the theme of conflict-laden ethnic identity negotiation. Other readers who self-identify with Ansary's mixed background indeed report about an emotional bond emerging from the account. “Ansary's memoir is beautiful, heartbreaking, and honest,” one of them states. This also holds true for those who come from the Western side of the cultural divide as another reviewer indicates. “He [Ansary] writes about cultural, national, political, religious, and personal identity in a way that the reader can connect to him, even if our histories are different” (Community Reviews of *WK*)

The latter statement not only emphasizes the emotional component of Ansary's multi-ethnic identity struggle as basis of identification. Also, the prevalent themes mentioned by the reviewer point to the cognitive effect of the narrative. History for the readers here plays the most decisive role. Most reviewers do not primarily regard the narrative as personal storytelling but as an “analysis of Afghanistan's past and present [...]” (Community Reviews of *WK*). The reviewer Kim adds that she found it “intriguing to learn about the rich history” of the Middle East (Community Reviews of *WK*) and others characterize the book as “a chronicle of Afghanistan and their [the Afghans'] turbulent history [...]” (Community Reviews of *WK*). This stressing of the memoir as historical account gains even more prominence among readers who seem to have much historical knowledge themselves. Some of them reflect on the book in a very detailed manner and take up specific historical elaborations provided by Ansary. “Tamim made a fairly balanced analysis of Afghanistan's

past and present,” Intikhab Amir<sup>36</sup> writes. “His views about Pakistan are close to truth, though he misses the point that Pakistan is also a victim of Russian invasion of Afghanistan,” he then criticizes (Community Reviews of *WK*). This reaction shows that Ansary’s historical framing of his memoir fosters historical discourse on the part of the readers. In line with the autobiographical pact, credibility is the basis of this effect, which also draws the dividing line to other genres.<sup>37</sup> The readers place *West of Kabul* in the category of history books and are attracted by the way in which Ansary differs from the neutral and dry way of history education they know from their schooldays. The reviewer Jenny thus states that “it’s more than just a boring history read” (Community Reviews of *WK*). This is strikingly underlined by the comment of the following reader who describes herself as someone who is usually not a “non fiction reader but this is a biography by an Afghani-American – easy to read history and background on Afghanistan and Islam [...]” (Community Reviews of *WK*).

All these reactions underline the resonance of the historical frame. Yet, they are also closely connected to the issue frame of religion. Again, the comments on the importance of religion read more like reviews on college textbooks than on leisure literature. “A fabulous introduction to the Muslim world, through the eyes of an Afghan emigre. Really, really good,” Emily states (Community Reviews of *WK*). Other readers almost exclusively focus on the religious exploration provided by Ansary (Community Reviews of *WK*) and on specific religious information they were able to gain. Christina thanks the author for giving the “best explanation of the difference between Sunni and Shia Muslims I’ve ever read” (Community Reviews of *WK*). This also reveals more about the background of Ansary’s readers. While some obviously gain their first insights into Islam from the book, others have substantial prior knowledge. The strong religious framing of Ansary’s story, however, also raises critique. “The sub title of the books reads: ‘An Afghan American Story,’” S Khalili writes and corrects “really it should read ‘An Afghan American’s Personal Journey through the world of Islam’” (goodreads).

Although the high amount of religious knowledge derived from the memoir is appreciated by the majority of readers, some obviously feel annoyed by being forced to look at Ansary’s life and at Afghanistan through the religious lens. This

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36 Amir himself is a Pakistani journalist and writer who published numerous articles on the past and current historical situation of the Middle East and Asia and on multiculturalism.

37 The audience’s inner urge to place a literary work in a specific category which de Man already recognized gains confirmation in the case of Ansary’s memoir. While the large majority of readers clearly regard the work as non-fiction and historical account, others are confused about the status of the memoir. A reviewer named Kellie thus poses the following question: “This isn’t a biography. It’s not a work of fiction. So what is it?” (Community Reviews of *WK*).

critique, however, allows for a finding that exceeds the specific issue frame of religion. Obviously, the frustration on the part of the reader is founded on a gap between his original expectation and the information acquired from the book. This in turn confirms the importance of genre classifications for the reception of life writing and ultimately for the likelihood that interpretive patterns are willingly adopted by the audience. As the example demonstrates, readers approach autobiographies with a more specific interest in learning about selected issues and not just with the intention to read the story of someone's life.

This points to the larger meaning of knowledge mediation for the purpose of intervening in and changing public discourse. The fact that autobiography as non-fictional work does have the ability to participate in mediated discourse is the most important finding in the analysis of the audience frames. Almost without exception, the readers stress the aspect of information gain with respect to different issue frames as most important benefit. Terms like "informative" (Community Reviews of *WK*), bringing "insight" (Community Reviews of *WK*), and "enlightening" frequently appear in the reviews (Community Reviews of *WK*). Another reviewer describes the memoir as "brow-beaten with information" (Community Reviews of *WK*). Overall, this vast amount of factual knowledge leaves another reader "understanding a lot of the world better" (Community Reviews of *WK*). A reviewer named Adres summarizes: "Every chapter feels self contained and like there is a lesson to be learned" (Community Reviews of *WK*). Others explicitly mention the didactic context of the book by stating: "What a great education on Afghanistan" (Community Reviews of *WK*). This general appreciation of the memoir as learning experience about Afghanistan is specified by others who specifically refer to certain issue frames. As another reviewer therefore states: "Finally a book that explains a culture in terms I can understand" (Community Reviews of *WK*).

The given reviews are remarkable when considering that a memoir is being discussed here, not a history textbook in college. Yet, the educational aspect appears to be a recurrent need voiced by the readers. It particularly occurs with references to history and religion, whereas the issue frame of culture does not resonate with equal emphasis in the audience reflections. Although not all textual frames therefore transfer to the audience to an equal extent, the reception analysis strikingly confirms the relevance of memoir as non-fictional work and medium of knowledge acquisition. The role of memoir as medium therefore automatically places the work alongside other media formats which compete in public discourse. This reference to the media is also found in the remarks by the general audience. One reviewer highlights the capacity of the work to provide an alternative image of Afghanistan due to the "power of communication" it reveals (Community Reviews of *WK*). An even more striking confirmation of this capacity to reframe the public discourse on Afghanistan by mediating different positions is provided by another reviewer. By taking up the geographic dualism of the book's title, the reader states that Ansary's

narrative is a “timely mediation on the relationships between the East and the West” (Community Reviews of *WK*).

### Frame Resonance in Perspective

Especially the latter review builds the bridge to the former analysis of the journalistic audience and reveals that the reception mechanisms of both groups overlap to a large degree. The journalistic reviews as well as the reviews of the general readership strongly support the existence of the historical issue frame as most dominant interpretation pattern, followed by the religious issue frame. Both groups place high value on cognitive information gain. This stands in contrast to the fulfillment of escapist motives or emotional pleasure, which mostly determine the consumption of fictional works. The cultural frame found in the text is somewhat more reflected by the journalistic reviewers. The same holds true for the strong emphasis on the overall political frame of the *WOT*, which seems to play a more dominant role for journalists.<sup>38</sup> Both groups, however, clearly read the memoir with the political events of the present in mind. The salience of the *WOT* framing has certainly decreased in the recent decade, yet, the political context of the Middle East has remained conflict-laden ever since the memoir was first published.

What has not lost any salience, however, and this holds true for journalistic reviewers and the general readership alike, is the perseverance of the Orientalist framework surrounding the reception of Ansary’s work.<sup>39</sup> The vocabulary of the binary struggle between “East” and “West” is omnipresent in the majority of audience responses (see Eder E.239; Hilton 12; Rotella 55). The most noteworthy and metaphorical testimony to the transfer of this ideological frame is provided by the *New York Times* reviewer Richard Eder who concludes as follows: “Pointing east and west it [Ansary’s memoir] signals not galactic opposites but two ends of a needle we can hold in our hand” (E.2.39). On the part of the general audience, the reviewer Janelle takes up the binary of *East* and *West* in describing her interest in

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38 Certainly, the dynamic also needs to be accounted for when it comes to comparing journalistic and general audience reviews. The journalistic reviews at hand mostly stem from the period immediately following the publication of the memoir in 2003, when the impact of 9/11 was much more immediate. The reviews of the general readership, in contrast, were in part published much later, when the *WOT* had already lost some salience.

39 This linguistic differentiation between *East* and *West* is again the most striking characteristic appearing in reviews on Ansary’s history book. Especially German reviewers focus on the aspect of ethnocentrism. They describe Ansary’s book as an attempt to provide an alternative for the “Eurocentric model of history.” Furthermore, they constantly reiterate terms such as “narrative of the West” and “Western science” (Interview with Güvercin, my translation).

the book: “I read this book because Khlaed [sic] Hosseini<sup>40</sup> mentioned it as a book Westerners should read about Afghanistan [...]” (Community Reviews of *WK*).

This engagement with Afghanistan as the other world which Westerners should learn about indicates the lasting significance of Orientalism as reflected in the binary vocabulary of *East* and *West*. As demonstrated in the textual frame analysis of the memoir, this ideological framing constitutes a recurrent practice by Ansary to structure and convey his experiences. The readers obviously reproduce this mental framework. It allows them to position themselves in the mental map of the world and thus gain insights into historical, religious, and cultural practices which they are not familiar with. It is most important to emphasize that this dichotomy is not used in a derogatory way in most instances, neither by Ansary nor by his readership. Rather, it serves as a tool to contrast information in a systematic way. The respective issue frames are embedded in this binary framework on the lower level of the frame hierarchy. The following graph gives a comparative overview of the different frame categories identified in the text and their resonance in the audience.

Table 3: Frame Resonance Matrix of *West of Kabul, East of New York*

Frame Level	Frame	Text (Production/ Medium)	Journalistic Audience (Reception)	General Audience (Reception)
Ideological	Orientalism	***	***	***
Political	Neo-Orientalism	**	**	.
Issue Level	History	***	***	***
	Religion	**	**	**
	Culture	.	.	.
	Media	**	**	.

**Legend:** The number of dots marks the salience of the respective frame, as based on the close-reading analysis

The table illustrates the strong correlation between the frames identified in the text and their resonance in the audience, clustered by the journalistic as well as the general reading public. The results suggest that strong frames have an equally strong effect on the reception process of the readership. This particularly holds true for the issue frames of history and religion, as well as for the overarching ideological frame of Orientalism. Particularly noteworthy, again, is the resonance of the media frame in the audience. This suggests that readers are willing and able to engage

40 Khaled Hosseini is another famous Afghan American novelist who is best-known for his debut novel *The Kite Runner*.

with the mechanisms underlying media production on a high level of complexity and self-reflection. This supports their ability to adopt alternative frames of interpretation and thus look at established stereotypes, such as the Muslim fundamentalist, through a different interpretative lens. It can thus be concluded that Ansary's partial reproduction of existing media frames is complemented by effective reframing efforts. It remains to be explored in how far other autobiographies succeed in this task of reframing the Arab/Muslim.