# The differential portrayals of people who seek asylum along notions of postcolonial legacies

Thesis

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## Abstract

In Dutch media, people seeking asylum are predominantly portrayed either as a threat to the recipient country or as passive victims, both of which adversely affect their societal position. Academic research understands these differential portrayals through the lens of securitization, which posits that migration shifts from regular politics to an issue of security. However, this perspective is criticized for focusing solely on singular shifts, neglecting broader historical and contextual factors. In this thesis, I contend that a postcolonial perspective offers a more comprehensive explanation of Dutch media's constructions of asylum-seeking people. It elucidates how postcolonial power structures and hierarchies perpetuate practices of othering in their representations. Based on a critical discourse analysis of 60 Dutch news articles on asylum seeking people published between 2020 and 2024, I demonstrate how postcolonial legacies, such as dehumanization and notions of cultural superiority are reflected in the portrayals of asylum-seeking people. Dehumanization is manifested through various depictions of asylum-seeking people as depersonalized non-human entities - such as crises, burdens, waves and trends. Cultural superiority is underscored by the emphasis on integration. Depictions such as these contribute to constructing asylum-seeking people as a threat, as victims and/or as problems. These postcolonial legacies are instrumental in constructing asylum-seeking people in ways that uphold their distance from the host society, while simultaneously functioning to self-construct the European or Dutch Self in a way that reinforces their hegemonic power.



**Keywords:** Asylum, Critical discourse analysis, Media framing, Postcolonial legacies, Securitization

## Introduction

In late 2014, Europe experienced a significant arrival of people who sought asylum[1] that quickly became known as the ‘migration’ or ‘refugee crisis’. Although refugees were presented as bearing the responsibility of this crisis through these terms in the public and political debate, it was mainly the varying and inefficient reception policies of EU member states which, according to some migration scholars, caused the consequent geopolitical tensions (Dempsey & McDowell, 2019). In the Netherlands, the failing refugee reception policy came to a low point when in late August 2022, a *Médecins Sans Frontières* delegation had to be deployed outside the gates of the main registration center for people seeking asylum (MSF International, 2022). Due to such exceeding of this reception center's capacities, more than 700 people were forced to sleep outside the gates, and were exposed to inhumane conditions. Emergency coordinator of the MSF-project Karel Hendriks emphasized in a press release the shortcomings of the Dutch state: "We must not forget it is the responsibility of the Dutch government to provide asylum seekers with adequate care and humane reception conditions” (MSF International, 2022).

Despite widely shared criticism of the Dutch government, this event was reported on in the media in different tones. For example, two days after MSF's deployment, the Telegraaf reported with regard to the stress asylum-seeking children were experiencing at the hands of the Dutch immigration service (IND), that "It is irresponsible behavior by migrant parents." to send children ‘ahead’ to apply for asylum (Jansen, 2022). In contrast, there is a Volkskrant report illustrating ‘*de lamlendige sfeer*’ (‘the lamentable atmosphere’) by describing a

[1] Although ‘asylum seeker’ is generally the most commonly used term for this group, it often carries pejorative and negative connotations (Lynn & Lea, 2003). To avoid perpetuating stigmatizing language, I will use the term ‘people who seek asylum’ or ‘asylum-seeking people’.

number of asylum-seeking individuals who epitomized the "distressing cases" that were treated by MSF in terms of medical status, hygiene, and privacy (Van Den Berg, 2022).

These contrasting reports exemplify a commonly observed and often discussed phenomenon: the differential construction of (groups of) migrants. Arguably one of the most identified patterns in these constructions is the frame of threat and victimization, also named the *as/at risk frame* by Aradau (2004) and Gray and Franck (2019). In this frame, asylum-seeking people are primarily portrayed as a group that either poses a threat to the host society in the economic, criminal, social and cultural sense, or are reduced to victims who have close to no agency at all (Aradau, 2004; Smets et al., 2019; Gray & Franck, 2019; Horsti, 2013). These threat and victim frames are not the only constructions of asylum-seeking people that are prevalent in media, but these have become dominant. Despite being socially constructed, these frames are real in their harmful consequences for their position. For example, research on the influence of media frames on the opinions and behaviors of Dutch citizens, showed that negative media coverage of people labeled as ‘ethnic minorities’ may result in a decrease in willingness to collective action (Bos et al.,2016). In addition, research suggests that media framing directs public opinion (Verleyen & Becker, 2023), individual attitudes towards migrants and voting behavior (Bos et al., 2016).

Previous academic studies detail various (theoretical) perspectives on what processes underlie these differential portrayals of asylum-seeking people. Concepts such as crimmigration, moral panics (Brouwer et al., 2017), (membership) categorization (Goodman & Speer, 2007), and uncertainty about national identity and unknown ‘others’ (Esses et al., 2013, p. 521) have been identified as primary mechanisms underpinning such portrayals. The majority of these studies highlight the powerful properties and position of the media, and mainly address the effects of the differential constructions of asylum-seeking people on host-country residents, politics, policies and themselves. However, the structure of the power

relations and dynamics that produce these differential constructions of asylum-seeking people is rarely addressed as the principal subject. This is also true for *the securitization of migration* (Huysmans, 2000; Ehrkamp, 2016; Gray & Franck, 2019), a perspective often applied to studies of migrants' portrayals. Securitization concerns the process, which some argue is intensifying (Ehrkamp, 2016), in which migrants become framed as a threat to a state's multiple dimensions of security, and in which the management of migration moves from normal politics to 'security politics' (Ehrkamp, 2016, Gray & Franck, 2019). Consequently, migration has become a security issue leading to an increasing number of means being considered permissible in 'combating' this alleged 'threat'.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, in the United States intensified the ongoing course of securitization (Gray & Franck, 2019, p. 279; Ehrkamp, 2016). Post-9/11, the spatial dimension of borders became increasingly dynamic, with nation-states now extending protective measures beyond immediate territorial boundaries, such as offshore detention (Ehrkamp, 2016). Furthermore, new migration governance strategies have emerged internationally, aimed at obstructing refugees, such as indefinite confinement in camps (Ehrkamp, 2016). This post-9/11 period is characterized by an intensified erosion of refugee rights (Gray and Frank, 2019), problematization of integration and increased racialization of individuals from Arabic or Muslims backgrounds due to intensified securitisation and anti-terrorism policies (Avraamidou, 2020).

Although securitization is a commonly adopted perspective for interpreting the portrayal of migrants (McDonald, 2008), it faces considerable criticisms. For instance, McDonald (2008) argues that securitization is too "narrow" because it is limited to the 'moment' when an issue of concern escalates into a security issue. This ignores long-term processes and historical contexts of power struggles and conflicts that are often essential to understanding how securitization is facilitated. McDonald poses a question that securitization

theory is thus only quite limitedly equipped to answer: “Why then, and in that context, did a particular actor represent an issue as an existential threat, and more importantly why was that actor supported in that securitization by a particular constituency?” (2008, p. 576). Gray and Franck (2019) therefore argue that focusing on postcolonial legacies that enable securitization, rather than on securitization itself, facilitates a better understanding of migration and its contemporary media framing. Following this line of critique I argue in this thesis, that a postcolonial perspective enables migration-related issues such as the one presented in this introduction to be understood more thoroughly as it offers an explanatory framework that can place many of these previously mentioned concepts in a more encompassing structure. In relation to Gray and Frank’s critique, Mayblin and Turner (2020), recently identified a critical oversight in migration studies: a substantial proportion of key migration studies fail to consider the influence of the legacies of colonialism on the social issues they analyze. According to Mayblin and Turner (2020), disregarding coloniality is problematic in a number of respects; it allows for the production of inadequate theories, it can render dehumanizing language ‘objective’, and it can perpetuate the denial of (the influence of) colonialism. Gray and Franck (2019), among the few scholars to adopt a postcolonial perspective on this issue, found that asylum seekers are portrayed in gendered and racialized ways in British media. Refugee men are portrayed more *as* risk, while refugee women are more often portrayed with an emphasis on them being *at* risk. According to Gray and Franck (2019), these portrayals could both be traced back to colonial narratives, such as the notion that ‘brown women had to be saved from brown men and their oppressive cultures (by white men)’ (p. 279), which was used to justify the colonial project. Elements of cultural superiority, othering and white saviorism,rooted in coloniality, appeared to play a role in this (Gray & Franck, 2019).

Drawing on Mayblin and Turner's 'Migration Studies and Colonialism' (2020) and Sanz Sabido's work (2019), among others, this study departs from the assumption that contemporary Dutch asylum discourse cannot be comprehensively understood enough without acknowledging and incorporating how postcolonialism has shaped contemporary hierarchies, institutions, social dynamics and understandings, and as such produces social inequalities (Mayblin & Turner, 2020). I aim to respond to the imperative set forth by Mayblin and Turner to incorporate postcolonial perspectives into migration studies. Specifically, I intend to aid in narrowing the sizable research gap identified and addressed by Aavramidou (2020), which involves the seldom integration of imperialist and colonial influences into migration issues and media coverage. Additionally, I aim to contribute to increasing awareness of, and challenging, the Eurocentric understanding of migration issues such as these, which Aavramidou (2020) consider to be of great importance.

The diverse constructions of asylum-seeking people have real-life negative effects on the position of asylum-seeking people, such as a reduced willingness to take collective action. In addition, they reinforce their oppressed position. It is therefore important to thoroughly examine the frames to which people who seek asylum are subject and to identify their key elements, which requires a postcolonial perspective. The primary aim of this study is to identify the presence and the role of postcolonial legacies more directly in the differential portrayals of people who seek asylum in Dutch newspapers. Therefore, this study seeks to answer the question*: How, if at all, do postcolonial legacies shape the differential portrayal of people who seek asylum in Dutch newspaper articles?*

As will be further explained in the theoretical framework below, in this study I specifically look at the role of cultural superiority and dehumanization in the postcolonial production of "the other". The aforementioned research question will therefore be answered by addressing the following sub-questions *'How are notions of dehumanization reflected in*

*the differential portrayal of people who seek asylum in Dutch newspapers?'* and '*How are notions of cultural superiority/inferiority reflected in the differential portrayal of people who seek asylum in Dutch newspapers?'*.

## Theoretical framework

In this section I will first define and describe the core concepts of this research, namely media framing, postcolonial legacies, modernity, dehumanization and cultural superiority. This is necessary to clarify the perspective through which I will examine the construction of asylum-seeking people in Dutch newspaper articles.

### Media framing

The media, Lynn and Lea (2003) argue, holds a pivotal role for defining and governing discourse due to it being one of the leading social institutions that determines the production of knowledge and ways of thinking. In doing so, it is an institution with an extensive reach, whose produced knowledge is consumed by citizens on a daily basis (Lynn & Lea, 2003). In addition, the media functions as an intermediary agent through which the host society comes into contact with asylum seeking people and refugees (Sutkutė, 2024) and learns information about them (Verleyen & Beckers, 2023). The way the media conveys social groups to the Dutch public is critical in sustaining the discourses that in turn uphold power dynamics that cause unequal positions between social groups (Fowler, 1991, in Lynn & Lea, 2003). Through particular imagery and language, it is able to shape Dutch citizens' perceptions of asylum-seeking people, and since this predominantly takes place in negative manners (Huysmans, 2000; Bos et al., 2016), this fosters a problematic representation of asylum-seeking people (Sutkutė, 2024). This has a wide range of implications that uphold or even further complicate the oppressed position of people who seek asylum within Dutch society.

For instance, research suggests that media coverage and framing, among other things, can determine the level of perception of the problematization of immigration, and direct where people think the responsibility for a solution lies - at the national level or the European level (Vestergaard, 2020).

***The threat and victim frame***

Recent studies acknowledge the dominance of threat or risk frames and victim- or victimization frames in contemporary European media in portraying undocumented migrants, asylum-seeking people, and refugees (Bos et al., 2016). Aradau (2004) was the first to detail the *threat/victim* frame, using the case of human trafficking. She argues that female victims of trafficking are construed as a humanitarian problem on the one hand, and as a security threat on the other. The humanitarian frame translates into governmental terms through what Aradau refers to as *'politics of pity,'* where emotion is used and emphasis is placed on trafficked women's suffering bodies in order to evoke political responses. In contrast, the '*politics of risk*' focuses on trafficking as a problem for the state, which requires governmental action focused on the calculability of risk and its management. Based on the clinical psychological argument that trauma or abuse (a common experience among trafficking victims) positively correlates with future risk behavior (anxiety, suicidal ideas but also perpetration of violence), the politics of risk is also able to appropriate and transform humanitarian discourse. As such, groups of migrants are placed in a 'continuum of danger' within a discourse of securitization (Aradau, 2004).

In the threat frame, people who seek asylum are commonly depicted as criminals, by for example emphasizing the alleged illegal acts that people who seek asylum have had to perform (often out of necessity, though this is often ignored), such as making an "illegal crossing", or staying in a country where they have received a rejection on their asylum

application (Horsti, 2013). The frame also highlights asylum seeking people as a threat in the form of exploitation of common goods of the host society such as social shelter structures and the asylum system (Horsti, 2013). Finally, a significant component of this frame is that people who seek asylum are often portrayed and perceived as a threat to the culture and values of (European) Western host societies. People who seek asylum are often discursively portrayed as being intrinsically different from "the Dutch citizen" (Blankvoort et al., 2021). In many countries, including the Netherlands, the Islam is often perceived as such a threat to 'Western values' (Bos et al., 2016). Also, mainly after events such as 9/11 and other terrorist attacks in European cities, fear arose that (Islamic) terrorists would mobilize across Europe by hiding in migrant populations, presenting asylum seeking people as a threat to national security to be part of this frame as well (Smets et al., 2019). The victimization frame emphasizes how asylum-seeking people are victimized by a number of agents. For example, people who take advantage of forced migration situations, such as human traffickers, or a host country's poor asylum policies, or their own culture (Horsti, 2013). The latter most often applies with respect to the depiction of the Islamic other. For instance, there is an assumption that the oppression of women, in the form of amongst others gender-specific and religious dress codes, is inherent to Muslim identity (Blankvoort et al., 2021). As such, Muslim women are portrayed as victims of their own 'oppressive' culture within the victim frame. Previous research indicates that this victimhood discourse is often expressed by describing or depicting asylum seeking people as bored, desperate, or unhygienic-looking, or by emphasizing their surroundings as either sterile or filthy, and enclosed (Martikainen & Sakki, 2021). These types of depictions often present asylum-seeking people as possessing little to no agency, which, according to Martikainen and Sakki (2021), serves to infantilize or passivize the Other.

**Postcolonial legacies**

It is important to first establish which understanding of the term ‘postcoloniality’ is adopted in this study. According to Sabido (2019), there is little disagreement amongst scholars on the temporal aspect of the term postcolonialism. Namely, it refers to the era which begins where colonialism formally ended, marked by the independence acquired by former colonies. However, there is disagreement among scholars with regards to (denying or recognizing) the existence of an ideological aspect of the term, which posits that postcoloniality is a continuation of colonialism in terms of domination, but that the modes of domination have taken a different, evolved form. Sabido (2019) therefore argues that we can view colonialism and postcolonialism as two contiguous periods, but where each is characterized by specific, different features that both reproduce domination and inequality. Recognizing this ideological aspect, I interpret postcoloniality in this study as the continuation of colonial modes of domination, albeit in an evolved form, in the period following colonialism.

In the limited number of studies that have applied a postcolonial perspective on (media) framings of people who seek asylum, several ways in which migrants are constructed to be the ‘Other’ come forward. The concept of Othering was originally introduced by Edward Said in his foundational work *Orientalism* (1978), in which he analyzed and described the discursive practices through which distinct articulations of ‘the Orient’ and ‘the West’, and relations between them are created (Velho & Thomas-Olalde, 2016). Velho and Thomas-Olalde (2016) define Othering as “a process in which, through discursive practices, different subjects are formed, hegemonic subjects - that is, subjects in powerful positions as well as those subjugated to these powerful conditions” (p. 27). In other words, Othering involves constructing a fundamental distinction between what and/or who is considered ‘the West’ and ‘the non-West’, based on social and cultural constructions of both, which creates a constructed hierarchy between the ‘Western Us’ or ‘-self’ and the ‘Ethnic Other’ (Ghorashi, 2021). The Other is perceived as entirely different in values and culture in a negative way,

and therefore considered inferior to the Western Self (Ghorashi, 2021). Acts of othering can thus be understood as actions that create, sustain, or enlarge the constructed ontological distance between the Western self and the Other.

A concept central to the dichotomous division of Us and the Other, is modernity. Modernity concerns the understanding of how some societies came to ‘be’ as "modern" societies and others as "traditional" societies (Mayblin & Turner, 2020). It includes the idea that some parts of the world (largely the parts we now refer to as "Western") have become developed through historical revolutions, such as, the Renaissance, the period of Enlightenment and the Industrial revolution, through which the West acquired liberal democratic norms such as capitalism, democracy and human rights, while other parts of the world have lagged ‘behind’ in these developments (Mayblin & Turner, 2020). According to postcolonial scholars, modernity developed in parallel with colonial expansion, more specifically with the production of knowledge and the quest for European self-understanding during it (Mayblin & Turner, 2020). Throughout this period, European researchers were intrigued in understanding the ‘others’ that they came in contact with, which generated the production of a large body of (constructed) knowledge mainly concerning the Other (Mayblin & Turner, 2020; Velho & Thomas-Olalde, 2016). At the same time, Europeans, viewing themselves as modern and rational compared to the ‘savage’ or pre-modern indigenous societies, legitimized imposing their systems of knowledge and subordinating indigenous ways of life (Mayblin & Turner, 2020). One such example is subjecting indigenous children to "cultural reprogramming" schools (Lugones 2007, in Mayblin & Turner, 2020).

These hierarchies of knowledge stemming from colonialism, in which Western knowledge structures dominate over non-Western knowledge structures are embedded in numerous facets of societies, including media. As such, in this study, 'postcolonial legacies' are considered power dynamics that originate in postcolonial hierarchies of knowledge, and

which result in othering in present-day Dutch society. The postcolonial legacies which seem most relevant to this study, are the sense of cultural superiority and tactics of dehumanization.

### *Cultural superiority*

Many scholars argue that a sense of cultural superiority exists in the Global North, and that this functions as the dominant modern form of racism. This is also theorized as cultural racism: the belief that some cultures are ‘simply’ much better than others, and that there is thus in essence a hierarchy of cultures (Bratt, 2022). Recent survey research showed that this belief is prevalent among Europeans; it was endorsed by 44% of Europeans and 43% of the Dutch sample (Bratt, 2022). The hostile migrant discourse in European media and politics, widely recognized by several studies (Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017), focuses particularly on Muslim migrants because of assumptions about their "inferior" religion and culture (Siebers & Dennissen, 2014). Saeed (2007) argues that the media is strongly inclined to frame the West and Islam as opposites and sees clear ideological parallels with imperialism and the constructed divide between the 'West' and 'East' in these Western media representations of Muslims. Postcolonial patterns can also be recognized in how the perception of an unbridgeable cultural distance between host societies and migrants legitimizes these hostile attitudes toward migrants (Siebers & Dennissen, 2014); throughout colonialism, the exploitation of indigenous people and their property was also "legitimized" with the argument that Muslim "Others" in particular were barbaric, uncultured and thus inferior (Saeed, 2007). Thus, the idea that the West possesses cultural superiority enables the West to treat and exploit the Other inhumanely.

Previous research has also shown that these binary opposite narratives are used in the media to express cultural superiority over Muslims to the "inferior other" are, for example, modern Christianity versus uncivilized Islam (which is additionally regularly associated with

Jihad and terrorism), and free democracy versus oppression and progressiveness versus sexism (Saeed, 2007).

### *Dehumanization*

Esses et al. (2013) describe how refugees are othered through dehumanization in an extreme way, by even denying them access to humanity at all. Dehumanization can be defined as "the denial of full humanness to others, and their exclusion from the human species" (Esses et al., 2008, p. 522). But its understanding can also encompass the "denying others' rights, entitlements, humanity and dignity" (Kuschminder & Dubow, 2022, p. 1062). Dehumanization was used by colonial conquerors in the first stages of colonialism to communicate the difference between them and those who were subjected to the colonialist regime, describing them as 'barbarians' and later 'primitives' (Mignolo, 2011a, cited in Mayblin & Turner, 2020). The term barbarian was used to describe a "a non-civilized, violent type dangerous to those who are civilized (cultured)" and was used during colonialism to depict "a savage who was an unsophisticated being inclined to violence, aggression, sex, and criminality" (Motal, 2015, p. 184).

Dehumanization can take several forms. A common type of dehumanization is to describe the Other as animal or animalistic; this implies both that the Other is not developed beyond his or her primitive origins, but it also functions as a way of denying their experience of emotion (Motal, 2015). Said (1978) describes that dehumanization in texts also occurs by reducing and describing the Other in terms of statistics or as "trending". The distance created by dehumanization between the Western human self and non-human or less-human, non-Western Other, is used to legitimize the inhumane treatment of those who are deemed 'Other'. In addition, research shows that dehumanizing refugees in the media creates contempt and negative emotions toward this group (Esses et al., 2008).

## Method

Answering the question: *How are postcolonial legacies reflected in the differential portrayal of people who seek asylum in Dutch newspapers?* requires a qualitative approach because, according to Creswell and Creswell (2019), qualitative research intends to achieve a deeper understanding of a complex phenomenon, rather than exploring a relationship between (measurable) variables. Given my focus on the role of postcolonialism in media framings, a qualitative approach is most suitable. In this section I will further outline how the research questions will be addressed by doing a critical discourse analysis of Dutch newspaper articles.

### Data collection

The data(set) that was used consists of Dutch newspaper articles which report on asylum-seeking people and on the asylum procedure. I consider the Netherlands to present an interesting case due to its paradoxical relationship with its colonial past, as articulated by Gloria Wekker (2016). While the Netherlands once embodied a significant imperial power during colonialism, this legacy is scarcely reflected in its current self-representation. As Wekker asserts, “it is the best-kept secret that the Netherlands has been a formidable imperial nation” (2016, p. 13). Therefore, considering the frequent neglect of postcolonial perspectives in migration studies, it is crucial to elucidate how postcolonial elements permeate Dutch society.

Newspaper articles are particularly useful for exploring depictions of asylum-seeking people, as they reflect contemporary social, political, and institutional beliefs and exert significant persuasive influence (Lynn & Lea, 2003). D’Haenens and De Lange (2001) note that news articles align well with discourse research by mirroring perspectives of the majority group governmental perspectives, which is particularly relevant for evaluating postcolonial

power relations. In addition, newspapers frequently report in-depth and influence other media (Vestergaard, 2020). Lastly, newspaper articles are accessible and have a large readership: some 2.4 million people in the Netherlands read national newspapers daily (Grimm, 2023). Most studies comparable to this study focused on media coverage in relation to the European "migration crisis" of 2015. Considering significant recent geopolitical developments and the ever increasing political and public attention for asylum, I argue that we need to establish a more recent picture of public discourses. Therefore, I selected newspaper articles published between the years 2020 and 2024. However, considering the ongoing war between Ukraine and Russia happening within this time frame, which has led to frequent coverage of Ukrainian refugees seeking asylum in the EU and the Netherlands, it is important to recognize the observed double standard in media reporting on this issue when analyzing media framing of asylum-seeking people during this period. This entails a response to Ukrainian refugees characterized by European self-recognition and welcoming, as opposed to the response to Syrians seeking asylum characterized by problematization and threat (i.e. in Sales, 2023).

Based on the largest readership, I selected the newspapers the Algemeen Dagblad (AD), de Telegraaf, de Volkskrant, and the NRC (*Nieuw Rotterdamsche Courant*). These four newspapers are believed to represent a diverse range of ideological and political views. For instance, the Volkskrant is described as left-leaning, and the NRC as liberal. Of the aforementioned newspapers, the Volkskrant and the NRC are classified as quality newspapers, and the Telegraaf and the AD as popular newspapers (Bakker & Scholten, 2014). A report by the SCP (Van Noije & Wennekers, 2019, p.51) concluded that readers of quality newspapers were primarily associated with a profile marked by civil liberty. For readers of popular newspapers, this was more likely to be a profile marked by traditions and symbolism.

With access provided by Erasmus University Rotterdam, I have used the digital newspaper archive Nexis Uni (part of Lexis Nexis) to gather the newspaper articles that comprised the dataset. I have used the '*OR*' and '*atleast[n]*' search-functions, to arrive at a feasible number of suitable articles, which contain the most frequent mentions on asylum seeking people and refugees, to ensure/establish a suitable 'quality' of articles as much as possible. I increased the '*atleastn*' factor until about 15 articles per newspaper remained. Using the search sequence: "*News; Dutch; NRC; De Telegraaf; de Volkskrant; AD - atleast12(asielzoekers) OR atleast12(asielzoeker) OR atleast12(vluchtelingen)*", (and subsequently 'atleast17, -18, and -19) I ultimately collected a total of 60 articles published between April 24, 2020 and April 24, 2024, evenly distributed among the four newspapers. An overview of this can be found in Appendix A. Even though these articles only cover one specific part of a broader group of marginalized migrants, I expect threat/victim frames for other migration-related groups, such as second and third generation people with a migration background to function differently. This is why for this study, and following the work of Gray and Franck (2019), I chose to limit the scope to asylum seeking people only.

**Analysis**

For the purposes of this study, I selected critical discourse analysis (CDA) as the most fitting form of analysis. Based on the work of Fairclough and Wodak, Sabido (2019, p.19) defines the task of CDA to deconstruct 'discursive strategies to uncover the ways in which power is reproduced in media discourse' since it is devoted to analyzing the dynamics between language (in a broad, ideological, historical and political sense) and power (Waring, 2017). Blankvoort et al., (2021) emphasize that the act of doing discourse analysis is to render visible assumptions and conceptions that have become normalized, and in critical discourse analysis in particular to critically comprehend these assumptions, and to examine how these assumptions are able to (re)construct social groups. In the context of this study, the media is

viewed as the discursive arena that (re)produces the unequal power position between the population of people seeking asylum in the Netherlands vis-à-vis Dutch citizens (Wodak, 2014). Critical discourse analysis will therefore be used to assess the use of language in the news articles, and how it is used to accomplish actions, negotiate identities, and construct ideologies. Sabido (2019), who sets out a theoretical and methodological framework which integrates Postcolonial Theory and CDA (Postcolonial Critical Discourse Analysis), argues that CDA lends itself particularly well to a more in-depth examination of postcolonial power relations and -structures, since CDA and postcolonial theory have similar aims: both theories focus on the notion of power and, using their distinct approaches, aim to uncover oppression and disparities in power. Where a postcolonial lens focuses on the postcolonial origin/origins of these disparities, CDA enables one to examine and reveal how they are reproduced in media (Sabido, 2019, p.29).

As a tool to facilitate the analysis, I coded the articles using qualitative coding software Atlas.ti. I conducted a first round of detailed, open initial coding, which yielded many codes. Subsequently, I grouped these codes, which resulted in some 30 codes. Finally, a process of selective coding reduced the number to three overarching themes. Here 'asylum-seeking people as victim' and 'asylum-seeking people as threat' were taken as core categories, as many codes appeared to relate to these in different ways. Throughout the coding process, I kept notes of striking things and aspects of articles that could not be coded properly, such as images, quote choices, (bold) headings, titles and aspects of layout.

**Positionality and limitations**

The 'main component' of discourse analysis is language. Language can be experienced and interpreted differently by each individual. Because critical discourse analysis requires my own (though guided by scholarly literature) interpretation of the texts, it is important to

recognize that my individual position plays a role in the way the texts in this study will be interpreted. My position as a white Dutch woman, makes me part of the group described in this study as the dominant Dutch group, or host society, who is exposed on a daily basis to the migration media-frames previously outlined. This will inevitably influence my analysis of the texts. For transparency, I should note that I have only recently become aware of the dehumanizing effects of terms like ‘waves’ when discussing groups of migrants, for instance. Therefore, I strive to read widely in the literature, especially from the perspectives of non-white, non-European scholars, in order to broaden my interpretations as much as possible.

In addition, as a researcher whose goal is to advocate for the importance of decolonizing sociology, it is important that I am informed about language that perpetuates postcolonial legacies and strive to avoid reproducing it in my study reporting. A key example is the term ‘asylum seeker’, which in Dutch (*asielzoeker*) has acquired a charged and often negative connotation in interpersonal conversation and public discourse, even though in theory the term is meant to refer to a person who is in an asylum application procedure. Accordingly, in the present study I made the choice to refer to this group with the terms 'people who seek asylum' or ‘asylum-seeking people’. Another example of this kind of choice is how Versteyen & Becker (2023) use 'the European migration crisis' instead of the media's widely used (and criticized) 'refugee crisis'. However, terms like ‘asylum seeker’ that may potentially be stigmatizing will sometimes inevitably be used in quotations and reporting the methods and results, as they are most likely fit search terms in the database for finding the articles. To make this consideration clear to the reader, a footnote at the beginning of the study clarifies these choices. A notable limitation is that when inspecting newspapers, it can be challenging to recognize and evaluate information that has been omitted or excluded by the author or editor. Omissions are relevant as well, as the ‘hidden elements’ in media framing can offer additional perspectives on discourse. Although I will strive to identify what

is being left out, the potential for failing to recognize certain omitted elements should be taken into consideration.

## Results

Based on my analysis below, I argue that portrayals of people who seek asylum in Dutch media are significantly reflective of hegemonic hierarchies and power relations that fit with postcolonial patterns. Three primary patterns arose, namely that of asylum-seeking people as a collective problem, as a physical and symbolic threat, and as victims. I will detail each of these below.

### Asylum-seeking people as a problem

In the overall coverage of asylum-seeking people, a recurring and prominent theme is their persistent depiction as a problem. This is evident in the frequent explicit labeling of their large-scale migration towards Europe as 'the refugee problem' (*'het vluchtelingenprobleem')* which European societies are described as being saddled up with. Articles that referred to the more urgent denomination of 'crisis' also, as expected, used the terms 'asylum crisis' (*asielcrisis*) or 'refugee crisis' ('*vluchtelingencrisis*) significantly more often than the term 'reception crisis'. Other accounts of 'crisis' described instances such as refugees climbing over the fences of an overcrowded reception center, deployments of emergency services, accounts of general 'chaos' (text T6), and asylum seekers' centers being at risk of 'succumbing' (texts N1, V7) or 'capsizing' (text V7) due to the 'sudden' (*plotseling*, text N2) arrival of large numbers of asylum-seekers (text N2). According to Sachseder et al. (2022), labeling migration as a crisis is deeply connected to the (post)colonial history of Europe. Racialized and gendered postcolonial representations of the Self and Other are integral to this process, as is the portrayal of migrants as not only threatening but also untrustworthy, erratic, and

unknown, which functions as legitimization for (post)colonial modes like surveillance and categorization (Sachseder et al., 2022).

A significant number of articles were concerned with Dutch or European policies on addressing this 'problem,' in which asylum-seeking people, as a collective entity, were repeatedly portrayed as a plague or a burden on the receiving country. This was expressed by sentences such as that 'heavily burdened asylum countries' (*zwaarbelaste asiellanden,* text V5) should be 'relieved' (*ontlast*, text V5), and that the reception of large numbers of asylum-seeking people, however, is ‘not something you can expect from the host state' (‘*niet iets is wat je van de gaststaat kunt verlangen*, text V5), since other European countries 'are not keen on them either' (*evenmin op ze zitten te wachten*, text N2) and would 'prefer to get rid of their refugees as well' (*ook liever kwijt zijn*, text N2). This linguistic framing conveys a solidarity among European states while reinforcing an 'Us vs. the problem' narrative that contributes to the practice of othering and furthers distance between the Western Self and the Other. Moreover, discussions in articles on ‘remedies’ or ‘solutions’ to the (constructed) ‘problem’ such as strategies of 'distributing' (*verdelen*), 'redistributing' (*herverdelen*), 'relocating' (*hervestigen*) or 'take over' (overnemen) refugees were mentioned, imply a self-evident assumption that the Dutch state can unilaterally dictate the fate of asylum-seeking people, simultaneously portraying them as lacking agency and suggesting an automaticity in how this control is exercised.

Asylum-seeking people were also frequently portrayed as problematic through certain labels. For example, a commonly used label was ‘disturbance-causers’ (*overlastgevers),* which was used to describe younger asylum-seeking men who disrupted public order. This label used together with ‘originating from safe countries of origin’ (*veiligelanders*) and/or ‘rejected asylum-seekers’ which refer to those deemed to originate from regions considered safe enough and thus having little to no chance of receiving a residence permit. A

considerable number of articles discussing asylum in the broad sense mainly highlighted the behavior of disturbance-causers, explicitly mentioning their origins such as Syria, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Turkey. This portrayal may generalize the behaviors of so-called ‘disturbance-causers’ to all asylum-seeking individuals, particularly those from the mentioned nationalities, in readers' perceptions.

However, a more prevalent way in which people who seek asylum were problematized was through a pronounced focus on their numbers; nearly every article contained, often multiple, quantitative descriptions. This was articulated in part through the frequent use of the metaphor ‘*stroom*’ (which means so much as flow, or stream; ‘mass influx’ (*massale toestroom*, text N1, N2, N5), ‘huge influx/flood of refugees‘ (*enorme vluchtelingenstroom*, text V7), ‘the flow of refugees (*de stroom vluchtelingen*, texts V3, V6, A5, A6), ‘hoge instroom’ (texts N15, A11, T7), ‘overwhelmed by a flood of’ (*overvallen door een stroom van*, text V3), and ‘flooded’ (*overspoeld*, texts A3, A11) are some examples of references to asylum-seeking people as a natural disaster. In addition, asylum-seeking people are very frequently described in numerical terms, through often large specific numbers, but also by terms such as ‘tens of thousands' (texts N5, N15), ‘several millions’(text T5), ‘astronomical numbers (text V7), ‘hundreds of thousands’(text V6), and in the form of trend descriptions such as ‘the highest number since’ (text A9), ‘increasing numbers’ (text V2), ‘the flow of asylum is growing rapidly’(text T6), ‘another ten percent increase in asylum seekers’ (text T6), and 'Thousands of people enter the Netherlands every month’ (text T7). In some articles, trend-like descriptions were accompanied by pie charts or tables. The rising number of asylum-seeking people is also the sole subject of a number of articles, including one from the Algemeen Dagblad, in which was written:

> More and more asylum seekers are being allowed to stay in the Netherlands. The influx of new asylum seekers in 2022 was the highest in years. So was the percentage of

asylum seekers allowed to stay. And the number of rejected asylum seekers leaving the Netherlands decreased.[2]

The repeated and varied numerical descriptions function as an indication of the extent of 'the problem' but also communicates urgency and threat, signaling to the reader that this issue warrants their concern.

All of these constructions; as problem, crisis, burden, wave, number or trend share a common feature: they represent asylum-seeking people as a non-human entity. Motal (2015), who views the concept of dehumanization as a colonial practice, states that a fundamental aspect of dehumanization is the depersonalization of the outgroup, in this case, asylum-seeking people, by stripping them of their authentic individuality and portraying them as a homogenous entity. In the abstract constructions of asylum-seeking people where the notion of individuality is absent, I observe parallels with the general colonial practice of depicting indigenous colonized subjects as an 'amorphous collectivity' (Yancy, 2008, p.7). Yancy describes how throughout colonialist times, the colonial gaze of settlers rendered indigenous people as 'things', and therefore not capable of possessing reason, emotion, and humanity, which was presented as natural fact. This served to rationalize the colonizer's actions and legitimized harsh measures. Therefore, I contend that this postcolonial legacy is evident in the current data. This depersonalization and dehumanization cultivates a widely accepted indifference toward the outgroup, which in turn facilitates the justification of acts of violence by powerful actors such as the Dutch state. Furthermore, it serves to reinforce the boundaries between the ingroup and outgroup (Esses et al., 2008), distinguishing 'the real Dutch' from the asylum seeking.

[2] Rosman, C. (2023, February). Uitzetten afgewezen asielzoekers blijft moeizaam. *https://www.ad.nl*. text A9.

Framing asylum-seeking people as either threat or victim both represent forms of problematization. The key distinction lies in the specific meanings and associations attributed to each frame, which instantaneously determine how Europe, as the actor who delineates the 'problem', should address or act upon this. Following this, I will demonstrate how the frames of threat and victimization represent distinct forms of problematization and elucidate what these frames imply for the self-construction of being European.

**Asylum-seeking people as threat**

In line with the threat/victim-framing literature, depicting people who seek asylum as a threat has emerged as one of the dominant patterns in this analysis. I identified four primary ways in which asylum-seeking individuals are portrayed as posing a danger to Dutch (or other European) society in a significant proportion of the articles reviewed: as criminals, as a risk for violent behavior due to mental illness, as a threat to Dutch culture and values, and as a threat to scarce common resources.

A primary method of depicting asylum-seeking individuals as threatening, was by frequently describing violent or other behavior punishable by law, thereby portraying them as criminals. This was commonly done by extensively reporting on individual cases of violent or criminal actions by asylum-seeking individuals, detailing where, when, how and who exactly - often explicitly stating their country of origin - committed these acts. Criminal behaviors such as physical violence, theft, vandalism, and sexual assault were predominantly described. For example, incidents like the 'New Year's Eve in Cologne,' where asylum-seeking men were reported to have assaulted and raped women, or cases of rape by male residents in asylum centers, were highlighted. The narrative was clearly gendered, as it always portrayed asylum-seeking men as perpetrators and female victims. This gendered criminalization aligns with Wekker's (2016) identification of the depiction of the racialised male other as being

‘excessively sexually endowed’ (p. 74), which Wekker describes as the result of combining blackness, sexuality, and inferiority. This originates from colonialism, where constructed binaries of gender and sexuality were used to signify racial hierarchies of superiority and inferiority (Mayblin & Turner, 2020). Colonizers viewed indigenous people as ‘savage’ and thus inferior, because their sexual and social behaviors were deemed ‘sexually barbaric’, in stark contrast to Christian intimacy norms (Mayblin & Turner, 2020). The criminalization of the other in the media is also exemplified by the constructions of Turkish stereotypes by the Dutch Colonial regime. Newspapers in the former colony of the Dutch Indies at the end of the 19th century depicted Turks as violent, morally corrupt, and suspicious (Deliana, n.d.). According to Deliana (n.d.) these depictions were used to block external influences and safeguard Dutch dominance.

Reports of violent asylum-seeking individuals also included detailed accounts of violent (near) fatal incidents involving mentally ill asylum-seeking individuals as perpetrators. The authors of such articles include and describe the poor mental health conditions of some asylum-seeking individuals with a compassionate tone as mitigating factors for their violent actions. While this approach may appear empathetic and humanizing, these descriptions of individual cases of asylum-seeking people with critically poor mental health states were ultimately used as a way to ‘showcase’ the most dangerous and violent behaviors. A pull quote in one such article even starkly contradicts this seemingly empathetic tone, displayed in large red letters: ‘He would be biting our throats’ (‘*Hij zou ons de strot doorbijten*’, text T3), which rather exemplifies animalistic dehumanization. Repeatedly emphasizing such cases severely harms the public's perception of asylum-seeking people. Research shows that when the public is exposed to individual instances of violent or threatening behavior through media, it often results in the generalization of these perceptions to the entire outgroup, especially when it comes to threat-perceptions (Meeussen et al., 2013).

Additionally, these case-depictions function as gateways to initiate discussions on enhancing securitization measures, such as biometric registration or limiting privacy rights. For example, in one of the articles, the consideration to mandate the screening of asylum seeking for mental health issues (which currently only occurs on a voluntary basis) is being discussed:

> "You do this not only to protect and help the foreigner but also to protect society," says Collard. "If we as a society open our doors to take in these people, then it is reasonable for the country to ask something in return. This may be an infringement on privacy, but if it can prevent a lot of suffering, then it is worth it."[3]

By suggesting that both society and the asylum-seeking individual need protection from the asylum-seeking individual, it implies that the asylum-seeking individual simultaneously embodies a victim and, predominantly, a threat. This exemplifies what some migration scholars refer to as 'humanitarian securitization', which involves a threat being simultaneously framed as representing vulnerable humanity and which 'operates through a contradictory discourse that is supposed to humanize and care for those it also regards as its 'others'' (Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017, p. 614). Additionally, the second sentence introduces a recurring element of conditionality in the data. It implies that further restrictions on refugees' privacy and integrity, justified by overall safety concerns, are deemed *reasonable*. This notion suggests that a sacrifice at the expense of the Other is warranted in comparison to the paramount importance of Western security. According to Moffette (2016), this is the strategic aim of securitization: to convince an audience that deployment of certain policies, which they would usually not tolerate, are justified due to the perceived severity of the threat. However, Moffette and Vadasaria (2016) argue that securitization often lacks consideration for the role of colonialism and race, which are deeply ingrained within this discursive process.

[3] Triest, V. (2021, February 6). Veilig in Nederland? Niet altijd. *https://www.telegraaf.nl*. Text T3.

The parallels between the aforementioned framing of mental health issues and the framing and governance of leprosy in the former Dutch colony of Suriname do demonstrate the significance of colonial and racial patterns. During the 18th century, leprosy primarily affected enslaved individuals and was perceived by the colonial government as threatening due to its high risk of contagion to both Europeans and other enslaved people, given the implications for the slavery economy and its profits (Snelders et al., 2019). Godfried Wilhelm Schilling, a prominent physician, framed leprosy in a racialized manner. He presented self-control and civilization as protective attributes against leprosy, qualities he believed were lacking among enslaved people (Snelders et al., 2019). Much like how mental health issues were utilized to portray violent behavior as an inherent trait of asylum-seeking people to justify more controlling policies, deficiencies in self-control and civility were used in Suriname to legitimize compulsory segregation. This segregation involved relocating enslaved individuals suffering with leprosy to isolated ‘leprosy asylums’, to separate them from Europeans and thus maintain the colonial hierarchical distance, physically and socially (Snelders et al., 2019).

The narrative that asylum-seeking people pose a threat to Dutch norms, values, and culture was prevalent in the data as well. 'Otherness' was occasionally highlighted through statements such as that 'different cultural norms cause friction' (text T3), and 'the bleakness surrounding migration is related to geographical and cultural distance, habit, and distrust' (text V6), although these discussions of 'cultural distance' occurred only occasionally.

However, another consistently significant yet obscured pattern of cultural superiority emerged, expressed by the repetitive emphasis placed on the importance of integration. This was evident, for example, from the concerned tone when integration was reported to be struggling (text, N1, N4, T13). In addition, a significant proportion of articles addressed the 24-week rule in Dutch asylum policy, which restricts asylum-seeking people to a maximum

of 24 weeks of work per year. Consequently, asylum seeking people in the Netherlands have very limited access to the labor market. Articles critical of this policy, which advocated for its adjustment, consistently displayed the argument that allowing asylum-seeking people to work more would not only benefit the Dutch economy, but more importantly, is ‘the best way for integration’ (texts N5, V8, T8, T15). It was often emphasized that integration is of ‘great importance to society‘ (texts N5, T11, T15) and that it needs to ‘progress as rapidly as possible’ (text V8, T11, T15, N15) as ‘this promotes a pleasant way of living together’ (text T11) and ‘leads to greater acceptance by the Dutch population’ (N15).

Huysmans (2000) points out that stressing the necessity for immigrants to assimilate implies that, prior to their arrival, the domestic society sought to or experienced cultural homogeneity. In an effort to preserve this cultural uniformity and perceiving immigrants as culturally alien, inferior and therefore threatening to this ideal, the emphasis on integration is utilized to manage this perceived 'threat' to the supposed Dutch cultural homogeneity. Despite the Dutch’ self-proclaimed identity as a tolerant and just nation, free of racism (Weiner, 2014; Wekker, 2016), it has a lengthy history of immigration, racialization and exclusion of groups. Weiner (2014) explains how the Dutch state has historically persecuted and demonized certain groups it regarded as distinctly different, such as Jewish people in the early 15th century, Catholics in the late 16th century, and Roma in the 18th and 19th centuries. This pattern, fortified by Dutch colonialism and exploitation - as these practices institutionalized racialized dynamics between White Dutch and those under colonial rule - establishes the basis for contemporary cultural racism, characterized by the internal subordination of people regarded as insufficiently Dutch (Weiner, 2014). That this has been embedded in public discourse since colonial times is evident from the fact that during the Dutch 'Golden' era, African subjects were featured in numerous literary and artistic works,

where they were predominantly portrayed as negative, primitive, and uncivilized. Such depictions implied their unsuitability for incorporation into Dutch society (Weiner, 2014).

Finally, there was a recurring pattern of asylum seeking people posing a threat to access Dutch common goods and social services. Notably, articles included indignant concerns about asylum seeking people exacerbating the already tight housing market: "With the influx of too many asylum seekers, the housing shortage will only increase, and healthcare costs will rise" (text T15), “It would also mean more status holders and thus more pressure on the housing market” (text T6), “We don’t see any actual tensions yet, but what happens if more refugees arrive? If they also need housing, while the housing market is already under pressure? Just like with mental healthcare, where there are also waiting lists” (text A5). These formulations are striking because they are not presented as current observations but rather as forward-looking perspectives, anticipating future problems. This 'what if' type of rhetoric actively evokes a sense of fear or threat in the reader.

***Ukrainian refugees***

Although Ukrainian refugees are not officially classified as asylum-seeking people due to exceptional rules and Ukraine’s status as part of the EU (allowing free travel), they essentially represent the same ‘threat’: a large number of people seeking a place and appealing to Dutch society. However, media coverage does not reflect this sense of threat. This underscores how race influences/ media portrayals of migrants. The distinction between Ukranian refugees and others is often highlighted through sentences like “Schotland chartered two ships from Tallink, for the accommodation of Ukrainians and asylum seekers" (text A12) and “The asylum reception is in addition to the support for 72,000 Ukrainian refugees” (A10). Ukrainian refugees were never mentioned by nationality as perpetrators of violence or other crimes (unlike, Middle Eastern or North African asylum seeking people,

whose nationalities were often explicitly mentioned). Articles discussing the observed solidarity with Ukrainian refugees showed that they are not viewed as infringing on scarce communal resources—in fact, the opposite is true.

Finally, a number of articles explicitly addressed the unequal treatment of Ukrainian refugees compared to other asylum-seeking people. However, the overall tone of these was mildly critical, merely noting (or sometimes rationalizing) the disparity rather than urging action to address it.

**Asylum-seeking people as victims**

In line with the literature discussed in the theoretical framework, the data showed a strong pattern of portraying asylum-seeking people as victims. Victimhood was most prominently depicted through illustrative depictions of misery and despair. Among these were descriptions of literal victimization of asylum-seeking people which involved physical violence, sexual violence (often taking place within camps or reception centers, perpetrated by other refugees) and human trafficking. These depictions of despair commonly originated from journalists who reported on their observations of conditions in asylum centers or in refugee camps outside of the Netherlands, such as the Greek Moria refugee camp. Some examples of sentences or terms used to depict this were ‘they were at the end of their tether’(N1), ‘the most miserable refugees’ (V3), ‘pure misery’ (N3), ‘inhuman conditions’ (V9), ‘the hygiene was appalling’ (A6) en ‘hopelessness’ (A11). To describe the bodily state of individuals, many dramatic adjectives were used, such as ‘shivering’, ‘desperate’, ‘panicked’, ‘malnourished’, and ‘neglected’. Additionally, emphasis was placed on dire medical situations and having almost no possessions, such as by saying: “Some didn’t even have shoes on” (text N1) or descriptions of how children were playing with an imaginary soccer ball (text V1). Various descriptions of poverty, hunger, and homelessness were also included.

Despite the ostensibly compassionate tone of these articles, asylum-seeking people and refugees were often portrayed passively, mainly from the journalists' perspective, and were predominantly spoken about, rather than given a voice themselves. In contrast, attention was frequently given to the emotional difficulties that journalists and aid organization staff experienced when confronted with the profound suffering of asylum-seeking people, or to reflecting on their own 'noble' efforts, as is illustrated by the following article from the perspective of a journalist:

> On the night when the rescuers pick up hundreds of panicked migrants from a leaking rubber boat twice in pitch darkness, I can't possibly stay at a distance to take notes in my little notebook. Once on board the rescue ship Aquarius, the women throw themselves crying into my arms and let me help them remove their clothes, which smell of gasoline and urine. I comfort them, saying 'you are safe now', and assist with distributing dry clothes and meals.[4]

Describing the leaking boat, in the darkness of night, amidst prevailing panic, and that the migrants are unable to remove their own clothing, portrays the migrants as truly helpless, lacking agency, and entirely incapable of assisting themselves. The author implies that she 'can't possibly' not act, which reflects a perceived moral obligation to rescue. The author further characterizes herself as a noble rescuer, by describing herself taking action to provide migrants with clean clothing, food, and comfort. This western journalist taking action to rescue people of color who lack the ability to help themselves, is a typical example of a white savior narrative (Milazzo, 2019). Teju Cole (2012) articulates the contemporary expression of white saviorism as the White-Savior Industrial Complex. He contends that such white saviorist efforts and narratives primarily cater to the sentimental and emotional needs, egos, and heroism fantasies of white individuals, thus reinforcing their privilege. Another key

[4] Vos, C. (2020, August 29). Die hulp komt heus wel, zei ik naïef. *https://www.volkskrant.nl/*. Text V1.

component of white savior narratives is that they portray white people as the sole agent(s) of progress, as leaders that are in charge of 'civilizing' people of the Global South up to Global North's standards, who passively receive this (Bandyopadhyay, 2019; Milazzo, 2019). The White Savior complex is thus intricately linked to modernity and perpetuates colonial representations of the Self and the Other. White saviorism is also embedded in the Dutch colonial tradition: in 1901, the Dutch state adopted the Ethical policy (*Ethische politiek*), which emerged from a growing belief among Dutch people in their moral obligation towards their colonized populations, particularly in the Dutch Indies and which aimed to 'develop' their traditional societies (Posada et al., 2020). In certain regions, this was particularly concerning for the Dutch state due to the growing influence of the Islam. A common strategy employed was the introduction of European education led by Catholic missionaries, which aimed to establish Christianity as the dominant belief system (Posada et al., 2020). Similar Dutch saviorist efforts were executed in South Dutch New Guinea, aimed at 'saving' the indigenous Marind-anim population from their own traditional practices, which colonial missionaries viewed as the cause of problematic population decline (Derksen, 2019). One such effort involved implementing the nuclear family model, to 'liberate' Marind-anim from their cultural and sexual customs.

The sense of superiority was further validated by presenting attributes of the Dutch in a positive light, often evident in articles about 'cases of successful integration'. These articles often suggest that successful integration is largely attributed to the goodwill and commendable efforts of local civilians and municipal executives. Many of these articles took the form of interviews with such individuals. Successfully integrated asylum-seeking individuals are occasionally given a voice, sometimes to express criticism of the Dutch asylum system but primarily to show gratitude for the support received from Dutch people or to highlight a positive attribute of the Netherlands, such as: ""They have helped me so well

here," he says about the support from the Refugee Team. They assisted me with my enrollment in my studies. They helped me find housing. They even helped me with study projects" (text T8), or "A huge number of people have been taken in by this small country" (text T7). Such formulations also normalize and reinforce the image of the Dutch as benevolent helpers. Asylum-seeking people in these articles were approached with a condescending tone, considered to be on the right track, but still needing to be 'taught', for example, that they are expected to work, because "Everyone should contribute their part to the Netherlands" (text T15).

## Conclusion

In this study, I aimed to investigate whether and in which manners postcolonial legacies are present in Dutch newspaper articles about asylum-seeking people. This was done in response to requests for greater reflection on (post)colonial influences within migration studies. Using this postcolonial lens, the principal aim was to enhance comprehension of the varying portrayals of asylum-seeking people in Dutch written media, beyond the insights provided by previously applied frameworks such as securitization.

Regarding the first subquestion central to this study, '*How are notions of dehumanization reflected in the differential portrayal of people who seek asylum in Dutch newspapers?'* The findings suggest that dehumanization is consistently and diversely represented in Dutch newspaper articles. Asylum-seeking people are described through terms such as numbers, trends, waves, crises and problems, effectively constructing them as an anonymous non-human entity that poses a burdensome problem in Europe. These depictions, by denying the individuality and personal dimensions of asylum-seeking people, contribute to the colonial practice of othering and foster a normalized indifference among the Dutch public towards them. This, in turn, rationalizes excessive and unjustified displays of power towards asylum-

seeking people. Addressing the second subquestion, '*How are notions of cultural superiority/inferiority reflected in the differential portrayal of people who seek asylum in Dutch newspapers?'* the findings reveal that depicting asylum-seeking people as both threat and victim functions as discursive means to reinforce the cultural superiority of the Dutch self, as well as the inferiority of asylum-seeking people. Within the threat frame, depictions of asylum-seeking men as criminals and mentally ill individuals with a lower threshold for violence than 'us' conveyed notions of their inferiority. Such behavior, described as 'uncivilized', and seemingly indicative of an inability for self-restraint - regardless of whether mental health issues are considered - reinforces their perceived inferiority and legitimizes the right to oppressive and controlling measures. Additionally, asylum-seeking people were portrayed as a threat to Dutch cultural homogeneity due to their assumed cultural differences, which was expressed in articles by stressing the necessity for them to fully integrate, or more accurately, to assimilate. The victim frame primarily served to express the superiority of the Dutch self by portraying Dutch citizens and public figures in a self-serving manner as (white) saviors of powerless refugees, who were depicted as being in desperate and hopeless situations. Regarding the main question: *How are postcolonial legacies reflected in the differential portrayal of people who seek asylum in Dutch newspapers?* I conclude that both dehumanization and cultural superiority, along with general notions of modernity, are reflected in Dutch newspaper articles. Dehumanization is predominantly prevalent in the terms used to describe people who seek asylum. This aspect, although seeming more 'superficial', may have a particularly normalizing impact on readers. While the notion of 'unbridgeable cultural distances' was not explicitly represented in the articles, many patterns and tropes in the portrayals of asylum-seeking people reflected the belief that in this case Dutch culture, is simple 'better' than others. For instance, this belief underlies the strong emphasis on integration.

Examining media portrayals of asylum-seeking people in Dutch newspapers through a postcolonial lens has confirmed the threat/victim. However, it has also demonstrated that this frame is not a 'recent' development but rather shows significant parallels with historical patterns of belief systems, worldviews and power structures. In this thesis I have effectively demonstrated that incorporating postcolonial perspectives - specifically engaging with worldviews and power structures shaped by colonialism - provides a clearer understanding of the contemporary discursive operations of these power relations than securitization. Securitization, as a framework, is capable of partially (representations of migrants as a threat) understanding the representation of migrants and directly relates these representations to politics and the legitimization of hostile measures employed against asylum-seeking people by Western states. However, the applied postcolonial perspective has illuminated a crucial element that securitization fails to address, namely, the way in which portrayals of asylum-seeking contribute to the construction and reinforcement of the Dutch self-construction. Specifically, portraying the other as a victim, or a threat facilitates the Dutch self-construction as a superior savior for the victim, and as a legitimate protector of Dutch citizens against external threats. Both portrayals function to maintain a distance between the Other and the Western Self, and to safeguard 'what it means to be Dutch'. To reiterate, central to colonialism, and particularly to the construction of the social world during colonialism, are the binary oppositions that distinguish the Western 'self' from the non-Western 'other'. Binary relationships inherently imply that what one actor signifies for the other group is contrasted with what it signifies for the self. By examining the parallels between colonial practices and the binaries they then represented, and by demonstrating how these same binaries are now represented in more subtle and evolved forms in the media, the European and Dutch self-representations become clearer. In addition, this study also underscores the

extent to which colonialism is far from being a thing of the past, rather, postcoloniality is deeply woven into Dutch society and plays an active role in shaping contemporary dynamics between Dutch people and people who seek asylum in the Netherlands. A deeper understanding of how the hegemonic presents itself provides greater insight in how power is exercised by Dutch institutions and explains why, despite ongoing violations of asylum seekers' rights by the Dutch state, widespread indifference among the Dutch populace allows these issues to remain unaddressed.

The Netherlands has made efforts in recent years to integrate its colonial past as a colonial aggressor into the national awareness as evidenced by the National Commemoration of the Slavery History (*Nationale Herdenking Slavernijverleden*) and other initiatives. However, such efforts often take the form of ‘remembrance’. I do not wish to imply that these efforts are not a commendable first step towards a full and transparent acknowledgement of the Netherlands colonial presence. Nevertheless, ‘remembering’ past acts als an imperial force may give the public the impression that these events belong to a distant past, and that our only remaining task is to properly acknowledge this history. This study demonstrates how postcolonial notions of Western superiority and non-Western inferiority continue to be communicated in contemporary Dutch public discourse. Therefore, it is crucial to take active steps, in addition to remembrance, to decolonize institutions such as the media. Through its examination of Dutch language use, this research has illuminated how such language use perpetuates postcolonial dynamics, thus reinforcing the marginalized position of asylum-seeking people, and aims to provide the public with a framework to remain vigilant and critical. This is especially relevant for media exercising victim tropes. Articles that frame people who seek asylum as victims often present an empathetic tone, and may be written with well-intentioned efforts to acknowledge and address their suffering, injustice and social inequality. This may make it more challenging for people to recognize the harm of such

content, even though they may certainly communicate elements of benevolent superiority and post/neo-colonial tendencies.

A potential limitation of this study is that, in some newspapers, multiple articles were authored by the same writer. For example, at the *Algemeen Dagblad*, author Cyril Rosman contributed to 10 out of the 15 articles. This could mean that the results sometimes reflect more individual viewpoints rather than broader public opinion in the Netherlands. Future research could benefit from including a more diverse range of authors in their sample. Additionally, as I previously mentioned, it is important that I use language in my reporting that minimizes the perpetuation of postcolonial legacies. However, it is possible that I may have unintentionally used some of such language despite my efforts to avoid it.

This study has revealed the presence of postcolonial patterns in the reporting on asylum-seeking people and how Western self-constructions of superiority are reflected. Given the existing substantial focus on portrayals of migrants, yet the significance of Western self-constructions, future research could, for instance, explore the role of whiteness. Additionally, future research could investigate journalists' awareness of postcolonial media frames, in an effort to develop strategies for decolonizing the media.

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# Appendix A

**Table 1**

*Dataset Information of News Articles*

| Label | Title of article | Author(s) | Date of publication |
|---|---|---|---|
| A1 | We Gaan Ze Halen weet vooraf dat het met lege handen terugkomt | Cyril Rosman | October 7, 2020 |
| A2 | Nieuwe opvangcrisis komt niet echt als een verrassing | Cyril Rosman | September 28, 2021 |
| A3 | Overvol aanmeldcentrum Ter Apel snakt naar hulp | Hanneke Keultjes | October 21, 2021 |
| A4 | Crisis aan de grens van de Europese Unie | Mark van Assen | November 10, 2021 |
| A5 | Vluchtelingenstroom kan rust na corona doorbreken | Carla van der Wal | April 23, 2022 |
| A6 | Niet alleen Nederland kampt met asielcrisis | Mark van Assen | August 4, 2022 |
| A7 | Maar we vangen toch al Oekraïners op? | Sanne Meijer and Cyril Rosman | September 30, 2022 |
| A8 | Asielopvang in Ter Apel, een ramp in slow motion | Hanneke Keultjes and Cyril Rosman | December 17, 2022 |
| A9 | Uitzetten afgewezen asielzoekers blijft moeizaam | Cyril Rosman | February 7, 2023 |
| A10 | Spreidingswet te laat voor opvang deze zomer | Hanneke Keultjes and Cyril Rosman | March 25, 2023 |
| A11 | Het grasveld is leeg, maar overlast blijft in Ter Apel | Hanneke Keultjes | Augustus 8, 2023 |
| A12 | Peperdure asielschepen als hete aardappels doorgeschoven | Inge Janse and Cyril Rosman | September 26, 2023 |
| A13 | Elvis mag nu het hele jaar eend inpakken | Cyril Rosman | November 30, 2023 |
| A14 | De asielcrisis, wat kun je daar eigenlijk echt aan doen? | Cyril Rosman | December 7, 2023 |
| A15 | Rechter dwingt COA om Ter Apel nu echt te ontzien | Hanneke Keultjes and Cyril Rosman | January 24, 2024 |
| N1 | Migratiecrisis? In het Duitse Goslar ging het goed | Juurd Eijsvoogel | August 22, 2020 |
| N2 | De onvermijdelijke val van Moria | Toon Beemster-boer | September 19, 2020 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | en Maral Noshad Sharifi | |
| N3 | De jongens die nergens welkom zijn | Martin Kuiper and Romy van der Poel | November 21, 2020 |
| N4 | De Bosniërs kwamen voor even – en ze bleven | Yaël Vinckx and Lidija Zeloviç | March 29, 2022 |
| N5 | Waarom de Oekraïner direct mag werken terwijl de Syriër moet wachten | Juliet Boogaard and Mandy Fit | April 5, 2022 |
| N6 | Honderd miljoen vluchtelingen, een ongewild record | Derk Walters | May 28, 2022 |
| N7 | Deze crisis zag het COA al jaren aankomen | Romy van der Poel and Martin Kuiper | July 30, 2022 |
| N8 | Ook geboortezorg voor asielzoekers schiet vaak tekort | Lucas Brouwers | August 26, 2022 |
| N9 | Koen Schuiling weet niet meer wat ons tot een beschaafd land maakt | Mark Middel | December 24, 2022 |
| N10 | Asielzoekers willen echt aan het werk, niet slechts 24 weken | Wafa al Ali | June 10, 2023 |
| N11 | En weer staat de burgemeester van Ter Apel er alleen voor | Hugo Logtenberg and Romy van der Poel | July 22, 2023 |
| N12 | Werkbeperking asielzoekers weg | Sezen Moeliker | November 30, 2023 |
| N13 | Krijgt elke gemeente nu een azc? | Mark Lievisse Adriaanse and Romy van der Poel | January 18, 2024 |
| N14 | Yesilgöz voerde via schaduwteam omstreden asielaanpak door | Andreas Kouwenhoven, Martin Kuiper and Romy van der Poel | February 10, 2024 |
| N15 | Werken asielzoeker levert miljarden op | Sezen Moeliker | March 22, 2024 |
| T1 | Geen flexibele opvangplek voor asielzoekers | Maarten Ritman | July 9, 2020 |
| T2 | ’Minderjarig’ maar wel grijs' - (Drie keer zo vaak twijfel over leeftijd | Valentijn Bartels and Vincent Triest | October 5, 2020 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | asielzoekers die claimen dat ze jonger dan achttien jaar zijn) | | |
| T3 | Veilig in Nederland? Niet altijd Hulpverlening | Vincent Triest | February 6, 2021 |
| T4 | Verdeelsleutel of ’t mes op de keel | Valentijn Bartels and Niels Rigter | July 6, 2022 |
| T5 | ’Syriërs moeten weer terug naar hun land’ | Maarten van Aalteren | July 23, 2022 |
| T6 | Weer tien procent meer asielzoekers | Inge Lengton and Niels Rigter | August 11, 2022 |
| T7 | Moet er uiteindelijk een asielstop komen? | Malkis Jajan and Frank Candel | August 20, 2022 |
| T8 | Van azc naar huis en baan | Niels Rigter | January 11, 2023 |
| T9 | ’Jaar vergooid met wachten’ | Niels Rigter | March 17, 2023 |
| T10 | Raddraaiers apart gezet (Isoleren van overlastgevende asielzoekers in barak lijkt vruchten af te werpen) | Niels Rigter | May 20, 2023 |
| T11 | Doetinchem slaat 2 vliegen in 1 klap | Edwin Rensen | May 31, 2023 |
| T12 | Londen wil airtags voor asielzoekers | Joost van Mierlo | August 29, 2023 |
| T13 | Vast in vangnet | Niels Rigter | September 22, 2023 |
| T14 | ’Ik wil geen geld voor nietsdoen’ | Emile Kossen | November 30, 2023 |
| T15 | ’Werk goed voor integratie’ (Respondenten: migrant moet steentje kunnen bijdragen) | Mariska Moerland | December 1, 2023 |
| V1 | Die hulp komt heus wel, zei ik naïef | Carlijne Vos | August 29, 2020 |
| V2 | Tröglitz heeft zich neergelegd bij een handjevol migranten | Sterre Lindhout | August 29, 2020 |
| V3 | Hoe de vluchtelingen van Moria bekneld raakten tussen internationale belangen | Carlijne Vos | September 10, 2020 |
| V4 | Met alleen ‘veerkracht’ zijn vluchtelingen niet geholpen | Nora Stel and Rosanne Antholt | March 31, 2021 |
| V5 | Het Westen moet verantwoordelijkheid nemen voor Afghaanse vluchtelingen.En niet de | Marjoleine Zieck | August 10, 2021 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | ellende op het bordje laten liggen van de (arme) buurlanden. | | |
| V6 | De grenzen gaan open – want ‘vluchtelingen die op ons lijken, zijn echte vluchtelingen’ | Iñaki Oñorbe Genovesi | March 2, 2022 |
| V7 | Hoe Polen wankelt onder de druk van bijna twee miljoen vluchtelingen | Arnout le Clercq | March 19, 2022 |
| V8 | Ook niet-Oekraïense vluchteling wil graag aan de slag, dus verlaag die arbeidsdrempels | Jaco Dagevos | May 13, 2022 |
| V9 | Waarom Rwanda asielzoekers overneemt van de Britten | Mark Schenkel | June 15, 2022 |
| V10 | Twee bolletjes kaas, meer heb ik niet te bieden | Jeroen van Bergeijk | September 3, 2022 |
| V11 | ‘We hebben met Oekraïense vluchtelingen gezien hoe het ook kan’ | Carlijne Vos | October 13, 2022 |
| V12 | ‘Welkom, wanneer vertrek je weer?’: hoe Denemarken asiel ontmoedigt | Jeroen Visser | May 3, 2023 |
| V13 | Zoutkamp zocht het zelf maar uit | Rik Kuiper and Loes Reijmer | June 10, 2023 |
| V14 | Flinke toename verwacht van aantal minderjarige asielzoekers | Charlotte Huisman | April 8, 2024 |
| V15 | Zet klein azc in een hoogopgeleide wijk | Maartje Bakker | September 24, 2022 |

*Note. The letter in the label indicates the respective newspaper: A = Algemeen Dagblad, N = NRC, T = De Telegraaf, V = De Volkskrant.*

# Appendix B

## Ethics and privacy form

**Ref** ERASMUS UNIVERSITEIT ROTTERDAM

**CHECKLIST ETHICAL AND PRIVACY ASPECTS OF RESEARCH**

**INSTRUCTION**

This checklist should be completed for every research study that is conducted at the Department of Public Administration and Sociology (DPAS). This checklist should be completed *before* commencing with data collection or approaching participants. Students can complete this checklist with help of their supervisor.

This checklist is a mandatory part of the empirical master's thesis and has to be uploaded along with the research proposal.

The guideline for ethical aspects of research of the Dutch Sociological Association (NSV) can be found on their website (http://www.nsv-sociologie.nl/?page_id=17). If you have doubts about ethical or privacy aspects of your research study, discuss and resolve the matter with your EUR supervisor. If needed and if advised to do so by your supervisor, you can also consult Dr. Bonnie French, coordinator of the Sociology Master's Thesis program.

**PART I: GENERAL INFORMATION**

Project title: The differential portrayal of people who seek asylum along notions of postcolonial legacy: a critical discourse analysis of dutch newspapers.

Name, email of student: Nadya Speek, 696852ns@eur.nl

Name, email of supervisor: Laura Cleton, cleton@essb.eur.nl

Start date and duration: february 1 - june 23 (2024)

Is the research study conducted within DPAS
**YES** - ~~NO~~

If 'NO': at or for what institute or organization will the study be conducted?
(e.g. internship organization)

**PART II: HUMAN SUBJECTS**

1. Does your research involve human participants. ~~YES~~ - NO

*If 'NO': skip to part V.*

If 'YES': does the study involve medical or physical research? YES - NO

*Research that falls under the Medical Research Involving Human Subjects Act (WMO) must first be submitted to an accredited medical research ethics committee or the Central Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects (CCMO).*

2. Does your research involve field observations without manipulations

that will not involve identification of participants. YES - NO

*If 'YES': skip to part IV.*

3. Research involving completely anonymous data files (secondary data that has been anonymized by someone else). YES - NO

*If 'YES': skip to part IV.*

**PART III: PARTICIPANTS**

1. Will information about the nature of the study and about what participants can expect during the study be withheld from them?
YES - NO

2. Will any of the participants not be asked for verbal or written 'informed consent,' whereby they agree to participate in the study?
YES - NO

3. Will information about the possibility to discontinue the participation at any time be withheld from participants?
YES - NO

4. Will the study involve actively deceiving the participants?
YES - NO
*Note: almost all research studies involve some kind of deception of participants. Try to think about what types of deception are ethical or non-ethical (e.g. purpose of the study is not told, coercion is exerted on participants, giving participants the feeling that they harm other people by making certain decisions, etc.).*

5. Does the study involve the risk of causing psychological stress or negative emotions beyond those normally encountered by participants?
YES - NO

6. Will information be collected about special categories of data, as defined by the GDPR (e.g. racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, trade union membership, genetic data, biometric data for the purpose of uniquely identifying a person, data concerning mental or physical health, data concerning a person's sex life or sexual orientation)?
YES - NO

7. Will the study involve the participation of minors (<18 years old) or other groups that cannot give consent?
YES - NO

8. Is the health and/or safety of participants at risk during the study?
YES - NO

9. Can participants be identified by the study results or can the confidentiality of the participants' identity not be ensured?
YES - NO

10. Are there any other possible ethical issues with regard to this study? YES - NO

If you have answered 'YES' to any of the previous questions, please indicate below why this issue is unavoidable in this study.

_____
_____
_____
_____

What safeguards are taken to relieve possible adverse consequences of these issues (e.g., informing participants about the study afterwards, extra safety regulations, etc.).

_____
_____
_____
_____

Are there any unintended circumstances in the study that can cause harm or have negative (emotional) consequences to the participants? Indicate what possible circumstances this could be.

_____
_____
_____
_____

*Please attach your informed consent form in Appendix I, if applicable.*

*Continue to part IV.*

**PART IV: SAMPLE**

Where will you collect or obtain your data?

_____
_____

*Note: indicate for separate data sources.*

What is the (anticipated) size of your sample?

_____
_____

*Note: indicate for separate data sources.*

What is the size of the population from which you will sample?

_____
_____

*Note: indicate for separate data sources.*

*Continue to part V.*

**Part V: Data storage and backup**

Where and when will you store your data in the short term, after acquisition?

All newspaper articles will be collected from the database in Lexis Nexis (Nexis Uni), downloaded and stores in the local files of the researchers (Nadya Speek) personal laptop, as well as in a personal google drive. Copies will be made and saved on a USB every 2 weeks.

_____
_____

*Note: indicate for separate data sources, for instance for paper-and pencil test data, and for digital data files.*

Who is responsible for the immediate day-to-day management, storage and backup of the data arising from your research?

The researcher, Nadya Speek

_____
_____

How (frequently) will you back-up your research data for short-term data security?

I will work in Google Drive on a daily basis, but continuously secure versions on my personal laptop's local drive. Additionally, once every two weeks I will make an additional backup on a USB.

_____

In case of collecting personal data how will you anonymize the data?

Not applicable, since the data consists of publicly accessible and previously published newspaper articles and therefore does not require anonymization._____

_____

*Note: It is advisable to keep directly identifying personal details separated from the rest of the data. Personal details are then replaced by a key/ code. Only the code is part of the database with data and the list of respondents/research subjects is kept separate*.

**PART VI: SIGNATURE**

Please note that it is your responsibility to follow the ethical guidelines in the conduct of your study. This includes providing information to participants about the study and ensuring confidentiality in storage and use of personal data. Treat participants respectfully, be on time at appointments, call participants when they have signed up for your study and fulfil promises made to participants.

Furthermore, it is your responsibility that data are authentic, of high quality and properly stored. The principle is always that the supervisor (or strictly speaking the Erasmus University Rotterdam) remains owner of the data, and that the student should therefore hand over all data to the supervisor.

Hereby I declare that the study will be conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Department of Public Administration and Sociology at Erasmus University Rotterdam. I have answered the questions truthfully.

**Name student: Nadya Speek**

**Date: 22/03/2024**

**Name (EUR) supervisor: Laura Cleton**

**Date: 22/03/2024**

**APPENDIX I: Informed Consent Form (if applicable)**

(Not applicable).