



"Saving" Muslim Women: Feminism, U.S Policy and the War on Terror

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Western discourses surrounding Islam, fundamentalism and Muslim women have been interwoven since the onset of European colonial enterprises. A closer academic analysis of Islam in the Middle East increased in prevalence and fervor during the Cold War and, later, with the emergence of American involvement in the internal, regional, and social politics of the area. Deemed an invaluable critical region by both superpowers, the competition for regional influence deeply affected all aspects of the political formation and national identities of newly independent Middle Eastern states. In the wake of the Cold War, the emergence of the United States as the hegemonic global economic and military power coincided with a powerful backlash within the Middle East, exemplified by widespread social unrest and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. In addition to the specter of terrorism, the ideological rallying cry of "saving" the women of the Middle East has been a powerful tool in justifying U.S military intervention in the region. Now, with the startlingly swift rise of a particularly brutal, transnational terrorist group self-titled the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Western fascination with the "oppressed Muslim woman" has once again flared up in media and policy debates. The complex discourses surrounding women in the Islamic world have a long and deeply political history, and this narrative has been renewed and re-utilized numerous times to garner widespread public support for Western military intervention in the Middle East. Yet when examined critically, it becomes apparent that U.S foreign policy and military intervention in the Middle East has both worsened the status of women's rights in the region, and subsequently used the discourse of women's rights as a justification for the "war on terror." American policy in Afghanistan for the past thirty years provides a cogent example by which we can examine the ways in which an agenda of women's rights becomes co-opted and politicized to morally justify violent intervention.

Geostrategically, Afghanistan is located at a pivotal point between the Middle East and Central Asia. A vast multitude of peoples, tribes, and dynasties have inhabited for centuries this important location along the ancient Silk Road. It has seen many military campaigns, including those of Alexander the Great, Arab Muslims, and Genghis Khan. The modern state of Afghanistan was founded in 1747, when Ahman Shah Durrani unified the Pashtun tribes in the area. It became a protectorate of the British and served as a buffer between the British and Russian empires until gaining independence in 1919 at the end of the third Anglo-Afghan War. The following years saw the rise and fall of a number of monarchs, and a consistent tension between modernization and tribal tradition. While the Anglo-Afghan wars had given rise to some nationalist sentiment, particularly among urban elites, Afghan monarchs often found themselves competing with the religious elite for power and influence (Zeiger 2008). King Mohammed Zahir Shah ruled Afghanistan from 1933 until 1973 when his Prime Minister, Daoud Khan, staged a nonviolent coup and became Afghanistan's first President. This experiment with democracy did not last long, however. It ended in a 1978 communist counter-coup by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). Daoud Khan and his family were assassinated, and the state devolved into civil war between the communist troops and the avidly anti-communist guerilla mujahedin fighters (Saikal 2006).

While Afghanistan had remained non-aligned during the Cold War, and in fact had successfully played the U.S and the Soviet union off of each other to receive increasing financial and infrastructural aid from both parties, the Soviets saw a chance to permanently compound their regional influence. In 1979 they overthrew the leader of the deeply divided PDPA, installed a new communist leader, and poured eighty thousand Soviet troops in to contain the rebellion. The U.S, horrified by what it perceived to be communism creeping into the Middle East and strategically aware of the severe financial blow that a protracted military engagement with guerilla fighters could be to the U.S.S.R, decided to indirectly engage.

In a decision that was to create one of the most significant examples of “blowback” in modern foreign policy, the U.S under Carter (and later, Reagan) worked closely with allied Pakistani dictator Zia ul-Haqq in arming, training, and funding the mujahedin. When the Soviets initially invaded there were a variety of nationalist and religious anti-communist parties and militias that were widely viewed as moderate. Yet over seventy-five percent of U.S aid was channeled to the most extremist groups, particularly Hezb-i-Islami, headed by the ruthless Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. As a result, moderate voices in the conflict were marginalized or silenced. When questioned about U.S support through Pakistan of extremist groups such as Hezb-i-Islami, a CIA official in Pakistan explained that, “Fanatics fight better” (Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002).

By the time the Soviets withdrew in 1989, hundreds of thousands of Afghans had been killed. Six million refugees had fled into Iran, and another five million into Pakistan. The madrasas within these Pakistani refugee camps introduced jihadist Salafism to the refugees, a fundamentalist strain of Saudi Salafism that was gaining influence throughout the Gulf region. The spread of jihadist Salafism was enabled in large part by the increased funding of Gulf regimes, in particular Saudi Arabia (Denoeux 2011). The combination of this rigidly conservative form of Islam and the dismal, impoverished environment of the refugee camps gave rise to a new, viciously hard-lined group known as the Taliban (the plural of the Pashtun word talib, meaning student). The mujahedin were headed and funded by Osama bin Laden, the rabidly conservative son of a wealthy Saudi businessman outraged by this “direct attack” on Muslims in the heart of the Islamic world. When the U.S withdrew its aid from Hekmatyar’s Hezb-i-Islami, bin Laden began working closely with them. In Afghanistan, the Soviet-backed communist leadership managed to hold on to power until 1996 when the Taliban overthrew then-President Najibullah and took power in Kabul (Saikal 2006). The U.S largely turned its attention away from Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal, until bin Laden’s horrific September 11th terrorist attacks gripped the attention of the world and re-focused U.S foreign and military policy towards the Middle East.

In the days immediately following the 9/11 attacks, the West searched frantically for a simple, singular explanation of this seemingly incomprehensible act of terror, and found it in fundamentalist Islam. While it was clear to the majority of analysts at the time that the U.S would go to war, it was unclear as to who or what was to be the target. International law has yet to fully catch up with the dramatic shift from strictly interstate relations to non-state international actors, particularly in regard to just declarations of war (Bederman 2001). From this obscurity and legal “gray area” arose the “War on Terror” with Afghanistan as the first and primary target. While the Bush administration’s declaration of war initially had widespread bipartisan political support, it was necessary to garner public and international support through an argument not only of al-Qaeda’s pernicious global presence (the core of which could arguably be traced more accurately to U.S “ally” Pakistan), but also to demonstrate the Taliban’s cruelty as a justification of war in line with the “responsibility to protect” paradigm. To do this required a media strategy centered around the assumptions and anxieties surrounding fundamentalist Islam, with a particularly intense focus on its presumed effects on women in the Islamic world.

Western media and activists, along with feminist organizations such as the Feminist Majority, were to play an integral role in the production of widespread support for the war on terror. Coincidentally, the preexisting and deeply ingrained fears surrounding representations of Islamic fundamentalism made simplistic, black-and-white explanations of the source of the problems of Afghan women particularly easy to sell. Since the dawn of the European colonialism the image of the veiled woman has been used to symbolize and prove Islam’s unique oppression of women, and ultimately to justify colonialist enterprises. In her examination of the colonial roots of discourses surrounding Muslim women and the veil, Leila Ahmed summarizes:

It was here and in the combining of the languages of colonialism and feminism that the fusion between the issues of women and culture was created. More exactly, what was created was the fusion between the issues of women, their oppression, and the cultures of Other men. The idea that Other men, men in colonized societies or societies beyond the borders of the civilized West, oppressed women was to be used, in the rhetoric of colonialism, to render morally

justifiable its project of undermining or eradicating the cultures of colonized peoples (Ahmed 1992).

The powerful media portrayal of the oppressed Muslim woman, as signified by her veiled body and her refusal or presumed inability to speak for herself, has long been a tool by which violence is justified in the name of her salvation. This frenzied, highly politicized discourse has grown continually more prevalent with the coexistent rises of Islamic extremism and the ever-increasing U.S military presence in the Middle East. With regard to the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, "The twin figures of the Islamic fundamentalist and his female victim helped consolidate and popularize the view that such hardship and sacrifice were for Af in an effort to bring attention to the plight of Afghan women. During this time Mavis and Jay Leno hosted a celebrity gala and fundraiser for the Feminist Majority's campaign to end the Taliban's brutal treatment of Afghan women. It was an undoubtedly well-intentioned event, featuring celebrities with tears in their eyes as testimonials of Afghan women were read. The Lenos alone contributed one hundred thousand dollars for a public awareness campaign; Mavis Leno herself spoke to Unocal shareholders and presented before the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee to dissuade them from investing in Afghanistan. Similarly the Feminist Majority, founded by Eleanor Smeal (former president of the National Organization for Women), claims it was their efforts that persuaded Bill Clinton that, "for Afghanistan's own good....the burqa-clad body of the Afghan woman became a visible sign of an invisible enemy that threatens not only.....citizens of the West, but our entire civilization" (Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002).

That is not to say, however, that the rise of the terrorist group al-Qaeda, or of terrorism more generally, propelled feminist/military interest in Afghanistan's social and political situation. In 1999 the fires were already burning to condemn the Taliban regime. As Mahmood elucidates, "Even skeptics who are normally leery of Western feminists' paternalistic desire to 'save third world women' were sympathetic to the Feminist Majority's campaign. This was in part because the restrictions that the Taliban had imposed on women in Afghanistan seemed atrocious by any standard" (Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002). At the time, it seemed indubitable that the daunting political, militaristic and economic might of the U.S could alleviate these problems and bring gender justice to Afghanistan. In fact, the issue proved an interesting point of collusion for both sides of the political spectrum, from liberal activists to neoconservative warhawks, and proved to be an example of the fusion between the language of feminism and the language of colonialism (Ahmed 1992). Whether the U.S invasion of Afghanistan was a neo-colonialist action is a debate outside of the scope of this analysis. However, it is important to note that on the eve of the 2001 invasion, feminists such as Smeal were sharing their ambitions and hopes about Operation Enduring Freedom with the generals in charge of its planning and execution (Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002).

In essence, veiling became an ideological issue as much as political or military one. The Afghan woman came to represent a visual manifestation of a society deemed to be the antithesis of everything Western culture holds dear, with a particularly intense and almost fetishistic focus on the burqa/chadri, the full body veil worn by the majority of women in Afghan cities. Even prior to the declaration of the War on Terror, the veil had become to signify tyranny, and conversely, unveiling had become a symbol of freedom and democracy. The history of Western fascination with the veil is complex and deeply rooted in nineteenth-century European travel accounts of the Muslim world, which espoused a racist yet highly sexualized fascination with the "exotic Orient" (Ahmed 1992). Veiled women were mysterious, removed from political and public spaces, and thus beyond the immediate sphere of control of European colonizers. They were symbolic of the Orient, construed as a paradoxical place of simultaneously indulgent, degenerate sexuality and deeply religious repression. In the contemporary atmosphere of Islamophobia in the West, veiled woman's "hidden faces frustrate expectations; they cannot or will not communicate-yet we claim they convey volumes about the condition of women, the repressive nature of traditional religious practices and the backward nations in which they live" (Zeiger 2008). Within this construction of Muslim women as passive victims, there is no room for a critical examination of the vast variety of reasons and motives for veiling. In addition to the compulsory wearing of the chadri, which the Taliban violently enforced, especially on urban populations, women throughout the Islamic world veil for reasons including (but not limited to) political statements of resistance against Western colonialism, the desire for privacy, and the ability to move comfortably in public spaces, a sense of liberation from the gaze of men, and expression of religious piety (Zeiger 2008).

Through an oversimplification and misrepresentation of facts, the Feminist Majority's attempt to draw a neat line of blame between the Taliban regime and the horrific situation of Afghan women blatantly ignores

causal factors. They are a grassroots constituency based on combating “the Taliban regime’s atrocities against women and girls” (Feminist Majority Foundation 2013). Afghanistan has seen decades of war, both tribal/regional and international, that marred the lives of women even before the Taliban, who themselves arose as a direct consequence of the U.S/Soviet proxy war that played out upon Afghan soil. The economy was devastated by these wars causing rampant corruption and slow job creation. Currently there is a 35% unemployment rate, and only 28% of the population over the age of 15 can read and write, a mere 12% of them women. (Central Intelligence Agency 2014). The concept of national identity is weak outside of the small circle of urban elites, and that existence of nationalism is a result of a backlash against British colonial efforts in the nineteenth century. Tribal allegiance remains an integral aspect of society, and the uniting force among the majority of these diverse tribes is Islam, which is practiced as a blend of Shari’a and Pashtunwali, the tribal code of the Pashtuns, 42% of the population. Afghanistan has the ninth highest fertility rate of any state in the world, with an average of 5.43 children born per woman. Humanitarian aid was largely removed due to harsh U.N sanctions beginning in 1999, leaving millions impoverished, starving and without adequate medical aid. In fact, U.N. Security Council Resolution 1267, which authorized and delineated the terms of the sanctions, lists one of the mitigating factors justifying the sanctions as “continuing violations of international humanitarian law and of human rights, particularly discrimination against women and girls...” (UN Security Council 1999). In their internationally enforced urgency to help “women and girls”, the nationwide starvation and the effects it might have on these women and girls were apparently not considered. Hard economic conditions, such as dried up foreign investment in Afghanistan, the egregious violence and U.S-backed militarization of the region has left non-militants at the mercy of militias and warlords armed to the teeth with American weaponry. These forms of complex structural violence have greatly harmed and impoverished the lives of Afghan women, yet they are systematically and categorically ignored by mainstream Western media narratives and the Feminist Majority campaign. Rather, an idyllic and benign past is imagined in which Afghan women had equal rights, until the Taliban inexplicably seized control as a monolith, precipitated and driven by nothing more than devotion to fundamentalist Islam and hatred for Western freedom.

This type of “studied silence” (Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002) on the part of the U.S and Western feminist organizations about the enormous role the U.S played in creating the difficult situation Afghan women face is extremely troubling. A prescient example of this is the Feminist Majority’s explanation of Afghanistan’s opium problem as solely caused by the Taliban. Poppies are a staple crop of Afghanistan, and today accounts for a large percentage of Afghanistan’s agricultural output. During the 1979 war mujahideen-controlled areas produced opium to fund the resistance efforts and, under the auspices of the CIA and the Pakistani security forces, heroin factories were opened along the Afghan-Pakistani border. By 1981, regardless of Nancy Reagan’s best efforts, 60% of the U.S demand for heroin came from Afghanistan. The Feminist Majority erroneously claimed that under the Taliban, Afghanistan became the world’s largest heroin producer (Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002). Yet the Taliban did not rise to power until 1995, by which time Afghanistan had already earned this distinction. According to the U.N, by 1997 (within Taliban-controlled regions) heroin production was all but eliminated, yet still flourished within Northern Alliance-controlled areas. Since the Northern Alliance’s rise to power as the internationally recognized government of Afghanistan, heroin production has resumed as a major cash crop in many of the regions in which the Taliban had eliminated it.

Similarly, Western media and feminist organizations presented the experiences of Afghan women under the Taliban as singular, unified experiences of victimhood and oppression. While it is undeniable that the Taliban brutally restricted the lives of urban women through compulsory veiling, public floggings and executions, and the criminalization of women’s education, medical care and public appearance, the lives of rural women went largely unchanged. As the New Yorker reported, “The Taliban has scarcely altered the lives of uneducated women, except to make them almost entirely safe from rape” (Anderson 2001). This type of nuanced examination of the situation was, and still is, highly unpopular and uncommon, “...as if any attempt to broaden the discussion beyond the admittedly brutal practices of the Taliban was doomed to be labeled as antithetical to women’s interests” (Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002). In addition to the genuine lack of factual basis for the assumptions of the “universal victimhood” of all Afghan women, this type of representation has disturbing political implications: if Afghan women are helpless victims at the hands of their violently oppressive men, the only logical option that exists to save them is military intervention.

The Feminist Majority’s website describes a desire for “the permanent restoration of women’s rights in

Afghanistan” (Feminist Majority Foundation 2013). This restoration is at surface a nice idea, yet it underscores the lack of understanding, whether intentional or not, of the reality of women’s situations before the Taliban’s rule. There have been homegrown women’s emancipation movements, notably in the 1920’s, 50’s, and 80’s, which clashed sharply with the rigid social and moral structures entrenched in Afghan society. Each time Afghan feminist movements begin to gain momentum the backlash was swift and harsh, rooted in tradition, tribal loyalties, and the suspicion of women’s rights movements as Western-influenced meddling. One of the most prominent feminist organizations active today is the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), a self-described “political/social organization of Afghan women struggling for peace, freedom, democracy and women’s rights,” founded in 1977 (Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan 2014). They openly criticize and denounce religious fundamentalism, U.S occupation, and the U.S-backed Northern Alliance as equally detrimental to women’s advancement and equality. RAWA largely consists of urban, university-educated women who have suffered immensely under the Taliban and the years of systematic warfare and structural violence. However, the image of these women, who resist classification as passive victims and openly criticize Western prerogatives and societies alongside Islamic fundamentalism, do not fit into the narrative espoused by the Feminist Majority. To put it simply, it is not convenient to attempt to save a woman who is telling you that your organization and your country of origin are doing more harm than help. Therefore, Western feminist organizations first co-opted RAWA, then largely ignored it. There is a disturbing lack of knowledge among Western feminist activists of the rich history of women’s rights activists and trends of intellectual thought throughout the Muslim world, an ignorance which further compounds the notion that “saving Muslim women” from their backwards culture is the moral duty of the enlightened West.

In contrast to the popular liberal the standpoint, feminism is not always a platform for higher justice. The interplay between Western feminist causes and U.S foreign intervention is fascinating in that it serves as an example of feminist thought being used as a justification for violence. Through the manipulation and simplification of the facts, and the purposeful omission of the deep U.S culpability in the creation of the social and economic situation of Afghan women, Western media and organizations such as the Feminist Majority paved the way for the justification of military force in Afghanistan. The causal factors of the violently oppressive situations many Afghan women face are immensely complicated, yet the effort to justify and legitimize the War on Terror demanded a simplistic cause, followed by a neoconservative solution. It is in this mindset that “saving Muslim women” became the rallying cry of the just. A neat, causal line between Islamic fundamentalism and women’s subjugation was drawn, irrespective of any potential Western culpability in the creation of either fundamentalist Islam or the myriad problems facing Afghan women. Removed from all potential responsibility, the U.S was free to declare a war on terror that would be played out on the bodies of Afghan women, continuing the cycle of violent intervention in the name of their salvation

While I have used Afghanistan as my primary example of the troubling military implications of the discourses surrounding Muslim women, this is by no means a contained or corrected phenomenon. The 2003 U.S-led invasion of Iraq was a dismal failure, and the Frankenstein-esque specter of Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) arose with chilling swiftness from the destruction wreaked on the region. ISIL gained its potency and its legitimacy from a complex combination of U.S involvement in Iraq, the internationally fueled sectarian disaster in Syria, and numerous past and ongoing military and political interventions by Western powers that have destabilized the region irreparably. And once more, in the inevitable media hysteria surrounding the ongoing regional chaos, Muslim women have become trapped in the middle of a discourse that purports to work for their “salvation”, yet only serves to further marginalize them. Muslim women in the West as well as abroad, particularly those who choose to veil, are placed in an impossible position; if they defend their faith or claim to have chosen it from a position of autonomy and independent choice, they are accused of apologetics, or are paternalistically charged as victims of “false consciousness” or of their “repressive culture.” No amount of denouncing or vilifying ISIL or other Islamist terrorist organizations is ever enough; in the twisted, bizarrely simplistic rhetoric currently surrounding Islam in Western media, it has been deemed impossible to both identify as a Muslim and as a proponent of peace and equality.

ISIL’s deranged ideology has exceptionally terrifying ramifications for women, yet our own role in the creation of ISIL, as well as the way Western intervention and military policy continues to independently disadvantage, marginalize and harm Middle Eastern women is utterly ignored. ISIL, and other like-minded extremist groups, are discursively positioned through our media (as well as their own) as the exact

opposite of the U.S and of Western values. As such, it has been taken for granted that, "anything they are, we are not". They are the ultimate evil, so We are the ultimate good. They harm women, so We bring only gender justice. This is a false dichotomy that operates on many levels, wherein we not only assume absolute difference from our enemies, but also absolute difference from the "oppressed women" we purport to be saving. We are feminists, therefore anything They do must be antithetical to feminism. Yet, as Shabana Mir argues, "feminism is local, and has many colors, and isn't always called 'feminism' because 'feminism' is owned and run by White women who bring White men in fighter planes" (Mir 2009). The geopolitics of the region is reaching a crisis point, a culmination of decades of colonial oppression, Western intervention, economic stagnation, militarization and sectarian strife. Women have long been marginalized by these issues, with their bodies and their stories utilized to justify violence. In the current atmosphere of hysteria and politicized propaganda, all hope for a nuanced or alternative discussion has been lost. Until we create space to genuinely examine these false binaries that have become so foundational to the discourses surrounding Muslim women, and until we examine our own troubling role in creating and sustaining the situations that marginalize women in the Middle East, we will only see a continuation of our own self-fulfilling prophecy.

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