

Liberation at Gunpoint: Deconstructing Politicized Representations of Afghan Women

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Introduction

Following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the United States waged its longest-running war on Afghanistan. Military intervention was justified through representations of oppressed Afghan women to frame the 'War on Terror' as a war for women. Through careful consideration of the Bush administration and the Feminist Majority Foundation's Taliban-centered rhetoric, this thesis offers a critical analysis of the ahistorical and imperialist backdrop in which representations of Afghan women are embedded. Emphasizing the underlying geopolitical and economic motives of US military intervention in Afghanistan, I argue that the Feminist Majority Foundation is shaped by the discourse of modern US imperialism and appropriates a feminism-as-humanitarianism framework, which contradicts their mission. These contradictions reinforce the East versus West binary and are best articulated through images of the ubiquitous blue burqa.

The Feminist-Humanitarian Complex

- Since the 1990s, US human rights advocacy largely shifted its focus from domestic issues and policies to global atrocities suffered by Third world women.
- The phrase, "women's rights are human rights" has since been echoed across feminist advocacy and political campaigns. At its center, is a claim to universal values.
- A universal moral discourse, shaped by human rights language and largely fixated on women's rights, serves as the measure of humanity which favors Western nations as moral authorities obligated to rescue Third World women.

A Geopolitical History of Afghanistan

- Afghanistan is defined as a "rentier state," meaning it has been critically dependent on the military and financial support by its ever-shifting allies.
- During the Cold War, Afghanistan served as a critical buffer state receiving aid from Russia, with United States funding the rebels group called the "Mujaheddin."
- The Mujaheddin's reign led to a brutal civil war, resulting in the complete collapse of Afghan state institutions and unprecedented levels of ethnic violence and violence against women. This gave rise to the Taliban.
- The US launched Operation Enduring Freedom. They allied with fundamentalist and warlord armies collectively known as the "Northern Alliance" to overthrow the Taliban.

Research Questions

1. How have representations of Afghan women functioned within 21st century political projects?
2. How do representations compare across global, national, and local capacities?
3. What are the implications of framing war through universal appeals to feminist solidarity?

Methods

My research draws from written and visual discourses across global, national, and local capacities.

- **Global:** The Feminist Majority Foundation's (FMF) campaign to "Stop Gender Apartheid"; the Feminist Daily Newswire
- **National:** The Bush administration, the Office of Global Women's Issues, and the U.S.-Afghan Women's Council.
- **Local:** The Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan
- **Popular:** Time magazine

Trends

Gendered Nationalism

- American nationalism and idealized citizenship defined in relation to rescuing Afghan women from the Taliban

The Freedom to Consume

- Western consumer products and markers of femininity are compared to Afghan's women lack thereof

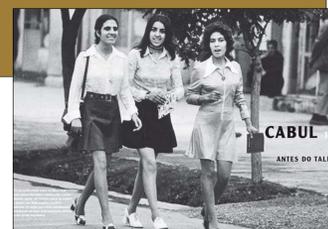
The Overnight Enemy

- Taliban constructed as the sole reason for women's current suffering and their rise as an overnight phenomenon

Afghanistan's "Golden Age:" The Miniskirt Phenomenon

- Frequent references to pre-Taliban Afghanistan as a period of women's freedom

A widely-circulated image showing the miniskirts of the past, a drastic difference from the floor-length burqas of today



Findings



FMF and the Bush administration's rhetoric do not always match, however FMF's advocacy is embedded in US imperialism and militarism. Representations collapse women's oppression into the Taliban and the burqa and conflate liberation with consumerism and Western feminism. Combined, these factors work together to obscure US complicities in the current situation of women in Afghanistan and contradict the FMF's own feminist politics.

The "Clash of Civilizations"

The "clash of civilizations" refers to the notion that the West is perpetually in conflict. This binary is reproduced throughout discourse and imagery on Afghan women. Symbolic dramatization claiming women are rejoicing at their liberation shifts attention from the historical and political to the cultural, from critical analysis to moral outrage. Histories of struggles, geopolitical motives and cultural abstracts are neatly condensed into one visual frame. Moral outrage framed through a universal, feminism-as-humanitarianism framework assumes Western superiority, benevolence, and reproduces the "clash of civilizations" binary.

Conclusion

Once representations are interpolated into the international feminist arena, they are coincidentally entangled in a web of global power systems, foreign policies, and imperial agendas. Thus, transnational feminist representations of Afghan women must be critiqued as a potential extension of state interests within the context of the real motives and consequences of the "War on Terror." Debates on the status of Afghan women should be re-centered by asking broader questions which highlight structural and holistic issues facing Afghanistan. My findings insist that feminist solidarity should be based on cultural and geography-specific histories of struggle and understood through the ways by which Afghan women navigate and engage these struggles daily.

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