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## **The Feminist Dressing for War: America's 2001 Intervention in Afghanistan**

This essay exams the case of America's justification of its invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, when America's military objectives were dressed in words of feminism.

The case is examined through Foucault's Power/Knowledge theory, which highlights America's reductionist views of women in

Afghanistan (limited knowledge) as a justification of military motives (exercise of power).

After the four separate but coordinated terrorist attacks on United States by al-Qaeda on 11 September 2001 in which more than 3000 people were killed (Borgen 2001), USA, under President G W Bush, intervened in Afghanistan to fight terrorism. The USA intervention was based on their national security interest, not particularly for women rights violation in Afghanistan, as Obama concurred on 17 August 2009: "this is not a war only worth fighting. This is fundamental to the defense of our people". However, "the War on Terror" was justified in Afghanistan as also liberating and saving Afghan women (Abu-Lughod 2002). Lead chiefly by statements by the then First Lady Laura Bush, the Bush Administration used gender narratives to accompany its interventions in Afghanistan. According to the Mrs. Bush, "Because of our recent military gain in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes. They can listen to music and teach their daughters without fear of punishment. The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women" (Abu-Lughod 2002). It did not need to dress its cause in pretend feminism, but in doing so it assisted to make the invasion acceptable. There was, and remains a fundamental lack of understanding about the situation of women in Afghanistan. Women remain disenfranchised after the ousting of the Taliban and occupation of the country by American led NATO

forces. Liberation of women by taking their nation's freedom, is fundamentally contradictory.

In the author's view of being an Afghan who grew up largely in Afghanistan, it is true that women had a terrible situation during the Taliban (a branch of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan) regime in Afghanistan. Women were not allowed to go to school, public places, they had to wear burqa, and they were not allowed to wear nail polish. If they did not follow these rules, they were punished. However, these were not the only problems women had and have in their life in Afghanistan. Economic development and women's empowerment has a bi-causal relationship (Kabeer 2016). The severe economic situation is also affecting the empowerment of women and gender equality. The American statements about liberating women, were generalist in nature, and showcased a lack of understanding of the variety of women's situations.

The type of burqa women wear in Afghanistan is not the same in all parts of Afghanistan. For example in Herat, women wear chador, not burqa. It is also different from rural areas to urban areas. Afghanistan is an Islamic country with 99.9% Muslim population, with a small number of Hindu (Worldometer 2018), but the Muslim population is not from the same sect. There are Sunni, Shia, Ismaeli, and each follows different interpretations of Islam, and consequently has different emphasis on the Hijab. The purpose of wearing burqa varies from place to place, depending on the sect and religion. Hindu women in Afghanistan also cover their head. It is not possible to tell whether a woman is Muslim or Hindu because they wear and cover themselves, like other women. If they are in Kabul they cover their head like in Kabul, if they are in Jalalabad or Badakhshan they wear the same as others in that area. It is the same everywhere. For example, I am from Badakhshan province, in Badakhshan women mostly wear Chadri (an enveloping garment by which women cover their body from head to feet, with a net on their eyes, usually blue), My mother and sisters also wear Chadri in Badakhshan, but when they travel to Kabul, they cover their head with a loose scarf because it is the custom in Kabul. They are not wearing Chadri because of religious reasons or fashion, nor do they like it. They wear it in order to access their rights, like education, work, and participating in politics and other social activities (Papanek 1982). When US reduce all Afghan women's problems to the wearing of a burqa, it induces people to react against them to protect their culture. Usually, people in Afghanistan consider US their cultural enemy. It has driven some Afghan youth to join the Taliban with the intention to protect their culture and religion.

Foucault describes power/knowledge as a form of social control through societal institutions. He believed that it is not just scholars who produce knowledge, individuals also can produce knowledge, but power controls the circulation of knowledge in the society. Foucault's theory holds that knowledge produces power

and again power engenders knowledge. As such, circulating certain types of knowledge shapes “the regime of truth” in a society. From Foucault’s perspective, when we think we have got the truth about ourselves, it is the moment power is exercised over us (Foucault 1972).

The United States has produced knowledge according to its values and interest, and has its own regime of truth. They have tried to impose their regime of truth on other societies, without paying attention to that society’s values, history, experience and narratives. In the Afghanistan case, George Bush used gender discourse to justify US intervention in Afghanistan. When we analyze Laura Bush’s speech about saving and liberating Afghan women, it is unclear whether they are her own words. Perhaps, this was constructed for her to say in order to support her husband’s unpopular military objectives; this in turn could be considered an exercise of power over her, because she may think that is the truth. Knowledge is circulated through institutions owned or funded by States and other powerful actors, and people accept that as a truth in the absence of an alternative. It is not just United States doing this, it is the nature of power, who ever or which ever State acquires it, wants to enforce its own regime of truth. Media also has a significant role in circulating knowledge and there are few truly independent media outlets.

The Bush Administration use of gender discourse in this case, is also a resurfacing of imperialism. In our today’s world imperialism has utilized technology, human rights and women’s empowerment to justify their invasion of other lands, such as Cromer in British Egypt, the French in Algeria, and the Americans in Afghanistan (Abu-Lughod 2002). Mrs. Bush’s statement is an example of orientalist justifications for imperialist intentions. That the women needed liberation, because their culture was so oppressive “there”. It has been seventeen years since the United States intervention in Afghanistan, the situation is getting worse again, particularly for women. All the achievements for women in Afghanistan are fragile and unstable because they are based on a false understanding of the situation of women and their major and fundamental problems. Imperialism does not recognize the difference between women in different cultures. They consider themselves superior. They think their culture, values and rules and regulations are better than others. Imperialism has the power to control the production of knowledge, by controlling media and manipulating the news, from where all national and regional news networks get their news and spread and put in circulation the narratives and discourses they want people to believe. In this context power/knowledge decides what will be known, rather than assuming that individuals can produce knowledge (Foucault 1972: 70).

“Thus where there is an imbalance of power relation between groups of people or between institutions/states, there will be production of knowledge” (Foucault 1980:

69). There is no balance between Afghanistan and the United States from any perspective, which facilitates the ability to control the flow of information and circulation of knowledge in Afghanistan, as well as the ability to project the kind of image from Afghanistan to the world, which suits their purpose. There has been an interest for United States to control the flow of information and knowledge in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Said (1993) confirms the, “process of knowledge reflects certain interests”.

Assuming that Afghan women want the same freedom as western women, might cause false understandings of the situation and unrealistic expectations for women’s empowerment projects, which are mostly funded, by UN agencies and other donors. Freedom, justice and equality are social concepts, they have different interpretations according to different cultures and contexts. It is the nature of social concepts that we cannot define and give an absolute definition of them. We have to accept that women in different countries have different priorities in their lives. We cannot assume that western women are totally free and are entirely governed by their own choices. For example, their clothes choices are often based of fashion and advertisements. How a westerner woman should dress, look and behave, is decided by power, which can be multi-national companies or film industry, which are making profit out of it.

The American use of gender discourse to accompany or cloak its interventions in Afghanistan is not the first to have been used in Afghanistan. As early as 1919 King Amanullah Khan inspired during a visit to Turkey and some other European countries began to implement Mustafa Kamal Ataturk’s model of Islam in Afghanistan. He started his reformation by banning women from wearing a headscarf. The headscarf, for King Amanullah, was a sign of backwardness that he wished to eradicate. Today, Afghan people believe that this was one of the main reasons people stood against his regime and finally over threw it. In 1979 after Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, their protégé regime forced women employed by the government to wear skirts and stockings. And in 2001 United State announced the War on Terrorism to save and liberate Afghan women from their culture. These gender narratives and their implementation have made Afghanistan, politically and socially fragile. Furthermore, they have confused and over-powered genuine gender narratives that are based on the voices, concerns and priorities of Afghan women, in their full diversity. As such, Afghanistan has been laboratory of ideologies. With every decade bringing a new revolution, coup or collapse of State. Accepting differences between women in different countries and societies is necessary for a better solution to promote women’s rights. Refusal of differences inevitably causes separation between women (Abu-Lughod 2002). Moreover, until these understandings are well informed by voices of the persons concerned,

continued abuse of power based on factually incorrect knowledge is likely to resurface.

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