

Responding to Orientalist Feminism: Women's Rights and the War on Terror

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'When George Bush mouths feminist slogans, it is feminism which loses its power'
(Viner 2002).

Among many other legacies, the September 11 terrorist attacks will be remembered by some for catapulting women's rights to the centre stage of global politics. As the US launched the War on Terror in Afghanistan and then Iraq, the liberation of women from barbaric regimes became a powerful rationale for intervention. Meanwhile, in post-9/11 Australia, protecting 'Aussie' women from sexual assault, and Muslim women from 'oppression' have become battlecries against the 'barbarism' of Arab and Muslim cultures. In many other Western nations too, concern for women's rights has become politically mainstream.

As Hester Eisenstein shows in her paper, the sudden concern for women has come from neo-conservatives like George W. Bush, who are not known for their support for feminism. Yet feminism is 'essential' to the War on Terror, Eisenstein writes, enabling Islamic societies to be condemned as 'uniquely oppressive to women' (2010, **page 16 in the original paper**). This paper analyses this approach as *Orientalist feminism*, a feminism that is ultimately about constructing a binary opposition between a civilised West and an uncivilised East. My main goal is to explore how feminists can respond to this discourse.

What is Orientalist feminism?

Under the Bush Administration, the War on Terror and the fight for women's rights became almost synonymous. In her now famous radio address, Laura Bush conflated the two most explicitly, saying, 'the fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women' (Bush 2001). Protecting the rights of women became the most politically powerful rationale for invading Afghanistan. In the process, as Eisenstein notes (2010, 17), fighting for women's rights in the Middle East was discursively equated with promoting democracy, defeating fundamentalism and ushering in civilised modernity.

In Australia, a similar discursive strategy was used by the Howard Government and Australian conservatives, who came to the defence of gender equality and women's rights, which they alleged, were being threatened by misogynist attitudes among Australian Muslims. A series of moral panics about 'ethnic gang rapes', sexual harassment of women at the beach, inflammatory comments about women as 'uncovered meat' by Sheikh Taj El-din al-Hilaly, and ongoing debates about banning the hijab, all put women's rights at the centre of discussions about cultural diversity and community relations in Australia. In 2006, Howard named gender equality as an Australian value, calling on migrants to reject cultural traditions that treat women 'in an inferior fashion' (cited in Kerbaj 2006). (For more detailed discussion, see Ho 2007, Dreher and Ho 2009).

This rhetoric continues a long tradition of what Ahmed calls 'colonial feminism', or the feminism 'used against other cultures in the service of colonialism' (1992, 151). Colonial campaigns against veiling, sati, and other 'uncivilised' practices used a form of feminism to depict colonised societies as backward and oppressive, and colonised women as victims in need of Western salvation. The recent revival of this form of feminism again deploys powerful Orientalist tropes to justify war and aggressive nationalism. Orientalist feminism, as I shall call it, is a discursive strategy that adroitly appropriates feminist concepts, but now is able to draw upon a much more sophisticated feminist conceptual toolkit, compared to its colonial era counterparts. So how have feminists responded to this discourse?

Critical Responses to Orientalist Feminism

Bush rhetoric on women's rights gained the approval of some US feminists. The Feminist Majority Foundation praised the administration for finally addressing the plight of Afghan women (Ferguson 2005, 11). Barbara Ehrenreich (2003, 220) more critically argued that 'women's rights might play no part in the United States foreign policy, but we should perhaps be grateful that they have at least been important enough to deploy in the media mobilization for war'. For some feminists, any concern about women's rights is better than silence, even if it is based on Orientalist assumptions. It is difficult to weigh up whether the enormous publicity given to the abuse of women's rights has been worth the misrepresentation and symbolic violence done to Muslim women and societies.

The more common feminist response to this official discourse has been more suspicious. Viner (2002) calls it a 'theft of feminist rhetoric' and 'an abuse of feminism'. Flanders (2004) characterises Bush's rhetoric as 'feigning feminism' while 'fueling backlash'. There are four key reasons for this opposition to Orientalist feminism:

1. Denial of women's agency: Orientalist feminism sees women only as passive victims in need of salvation, rather than as active political agents. As Hawkesworth (2006, 16) notes, post- 9/11 media coverage rarely included Muslim women acting on their own behalf, despite the fact that well-established women's groups like the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), Women Against Fundamentalism, and Women Living Under Muslim Laws have been active in speaking out against oppressive laws in Muslim countries and against Western policies that damage women's livelihoods and communities.

There is no denying that Afghan women were victims of tyranny under the Taliban, or that many Muslim women are oppressed in both Muslim and non-Muslim majority countries. The problem with the Orientalist feminist analysis

is the implication that the solution to women's problems must come from outside. The next point explains why this approach is dangerous.

2. External readings of women's concerns can miss what is actually important. The Western preoccupation with the burqa in Afghanistan did not reflect what Afghan women considered to be the most pressing issues. As Hussein (2007, 6) explains, 'Afghan women tended to accord much less symbolic weight to the burqa than did the international campaign that sought to liberate them. They were far more preoccupied with immediate issues of survival amid war and deprivation'. Following 9/11, RAWA news reports on women's lives in Afghanistan focused on topics such as the effects of US air strikes, the rape of women by warlords, the plight of refugees, and famine. The burqa hardly rated a mention (see RAWA 2009).
3. Culturalisation of inequality: Orientalist feminism assumes that women's ill-treatment is first and foremost grounded in an essentialised, monolithic Islamic culture. This approach fails to recognise the plurality of gender regimes that co-exist with Islamic culture, and the broader social and political factors shaping gender arrangements in Muslim societies, for example, the role of poverty and war in restricting women's opportunities and access to resources. Culturalisation also provokes a backlash against women's rights in the Middle East. In Afghanistan, conservatives have interpreted Western rhetoric about liberating women as an attack on their religion and culture (Hunt 2006, 51), leading to violent crackdowns against women and progressive voices. The Taliban's murder of women's rights campaigner Sitara Achakzai in April 2009 is a recent example (Khan 2009). Thus, as Hunt puts it (2006, 65), 'the war on terror has created an environment in which those who oppose women's rights are strengthened'.
4. Orientalist feminism fuels a backlash against feminism in the West, which is represented as no longer relevant. After all, compared to the plight of women in the Middle East, what could Western women possibly complain about? Because Orientalist feminism depicts the plight of Muslim women as ultimately about the oppressiveness of Islamic culture and the tyranny of

Middle Eastern dictatorships, there is nothing that Western women appear to have in common with their Muslim counterparts, despite the fact that women's vulnerability to gendered violence and inferior access to resources shape their lives the world over.

These are all powerful reasons for opposing Orientalist feminism. However, in strategic terms, it is difficult to achieve political goals on the basis of critique alone. While in her paper, Hester Eisenstein argues that feminism has been 'seduced' by hegemonic forces, there are also possibilities for feminists to redeploy official rhetoric in strategic ways.

Strategic Redeployment of Official Discourse

Ferguson suggests that rather than just either accepting or opposing official rhetoric on women's rights, feminists can strategically build on it, redeploying it for other purposes (2005, 33). For instance, feminists can build on the official rhetoric about women's rights being instrumentally valuable for national security, and reframe their demands in terms of security.¹

Feminist international relations gives us some good tools to do this, expanding the concept of security to include not just national security, but also human or personal security for women – including security from war, from domestic violence, and from rape (Blanchard 2003; Tickner 1997, 2001). Ferguson explains, 'To demonstrate that many women in the United States lack this personal security is to undermine the Bush logic that women at home no longer have anything to complain about, for it reveals the continuity between our grievances and those of the women of Afghanistan and Iraq' (2005, 33).

Redeploying the language of security can be very effective in challenging taken for granted assumptions about *who is being protected* in the War on Terror. As RAWA

¹ Similarly, Zillah Eisenstein (2002: 95) recommends using the language of terrorism, allowing feminists to highlight acts of terrorism against women, for example, war rape, acid burnings, honour killings, sex trafficking, and prostitution.

and other women's organisations have argued, Afghan and Iraqi women's security has not been achieved by the War on Terror and in fact, often the opposite has occurred. For example, violence against women and women's self-harm in many areas of Afghanistan is more prevalent now than it was under the Taliban (Shakib 2009). Women's rights cannot be won in an environment characterised by the chronic insecurity that accompanies war.

Nor has the War on Terror protected the security of Muslim communities in the West. Rather than feeling protected by national security policies, Muslim communities often see them as sources of their insecurity (Ho 2004). The increased emphasis on national security post-9/11 has led to Muslim communities becoming victims of intense surveillance and police raids, as well as verbal and physical assaults in public spaces, from fellow citizens who now see Muslims as potential 'security threats' (HREOC 2004).

Strategically redeploying the concept of security has been a key part of the work of Australian organisations like the Australian Muslim Civil Rights Advocacy Network (AMCRAN 2009) and researchers (e.g. Burke 2007; Chong 2006; McCulloch 2002; Pickering, McCulloch and Wright-Neville 2007) who have highlighted how the ascendancy of national security politics in Australia has intensified Muslim Australians' sense of insecurity. This work has applied the concept of human security (which includes human rights and safety from persecution) in new areas, to show how the security of people at a human level can be seriously undermined by national security policies.

Feminists can add another important layer by showing how practices of (in)security are highly gendered. HREOC (1991, 2004) has repeatedly documented that the tearing off of women's hijabs is one of the most commonly reported acts of hostility against Muslims in Australia. Hage has incisively theorised that the 'hand that tears off the scarf' performs a critical role in the 'execution of nationalist practices' (2000, 27), of the public policing of the symbolic borders of the nation. As the most visible representatives of Muslim communities in public spaces, women wearing the veil

involuntarily find their bodies functioning as prime symbols of the otherness and insecurity within the nation.

Meanwhile, Muslim men, increasingly demonised as violent criminals, whether as members of ethnic gangs, potential rapists, or trainee terrorists (Chafic 2008), are seen as the *practical* sources of insecurity and threat. Muslim men have generally been the subjects of official surveillance and prosecution, often based on assumptions of a barbaric and violent Muslim/Arab masculinity (see Ho 2007). Thus questions of security, insecurity, protection and safety are profoundly gendered in post-9/11 Australia and elsewhere.

National security politics in Australia are not what they were under the Howard Government. The political culture under Rudd is less susceptible to fear-mongering 'dog whistle politics'. Perhaps post-Howard Australia – and the US post-Bush – are more open to a reframing of the politics of security of the sort envisaged above. Rather than a preoccupation with Islam as the biggest threat to women's rights, such a reframing could focus attention on the requirements for human security, which women and men share across the globe.

Conclusion

The rise of Barack Obama and Kevin Rudd mark a new era in the global politics of gender and the War on Terror. However, pro-women gestures coexist with an ongoing commitment to Western military occupation in the Middle East, ensuring the continued salience of the critique of Orientalist feminism. The challenge for feminists is to strategically deploy such critiques in the new climate, while also taking advantage of opportunities to reframe concepts such as women's rights and security. A major part of this critique will be to hold governments to account for their promises on women's rights, not only overseas, but at home, and for women everywhere. Even if women's rights rhetoric is a cynical electoral strategy on the part of our political leaders, feminists need to engage seriously with their words, in order to gain leverage for the ongoing grassroots struggle for women's rights.

At the same time, feminists need to challenge the assumption that Third World women's salvation will come via Western intervention. The critique of Orientalist feminist discourse goes hand in hand with a commitment to a politics of solidarity with non-Western women, and a rejection of the role of Western 'liberator'. Recent feminist theory and debates therefore not only show us how we may strategically redeploy official rhetoric around security and rights, but also point towards how we may forge more respectful and productive relations across cultural difference in order to successfully respond to Orientalist feminism.

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