

The Veil (De)contextualized and Nations “Democratized”: Unsettling War, Visibilities, and U.S. Hegemony

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The implication of the “war on difference,” is that the burden of proof is on the “outsiders,” the “foreigners,” “to prove” they are one of us. If liberal societies find it necessary to impose such requirements on outsiders, then they should articulate these limits explicitly instead of camouflaging them under the rubric of public safety or terrorism. Otherwise, let us come to terms with our fallacious assumptions about radically heterogeneous cultures, and deal with our self-righteous insecurities as such, rather than punishing others who do not conform to rules that remain unstated.

—Falguni Sheth

In this article, I deal with the way certain meanings and visibilities currently associated with Muslim women’s veiling are constructed by existing hegemonic discourses. I explain that the veil in itself does not hold such significances but has been misconstrued to represent negative images of Islam and Muslims in hegemonic and colonial times. I also analyze how hegemonic discourses have appropriated the veil and manipulated it to serve various U.S. interests domestically and internationally. In an example of hegemonic practices, I examine the process of “reconstruction” and “liberation” in Afghanistan and the double standards it entails. Finally, I discuss the possibility of establishing a democracy in the Middle East and Central Asia in current times.

In this age of imperialism and mental and cultural colonization, hegemonic discourses tend to erase contexts and histories to create misunderstandings of certain demonized cultures, especially in representations of Muslim cultures, the Middle East, and Central Asia. Hegemonic discourses also promote viewing Arabs and Muslims not only as different from the mainstream but also as constituting a “despised difference” that contributes to the divisive binary of “us” and “them.”

I argue that it is hegemony that determines the politics of visibility, that is, the politics of “seeing and being seen,” a term rhetoric and cultural politics specialist Bradford Vivian uses in his examination of

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"the visible" in this postcolonial era (115). The image of the veil is consumed and reproduced by the typical, and sometimes highly educated, public viewer through the politics of visibility that structures "proper" ways of seeing the veil and making it seen. The control hegemony has over the image of the veil can be understood through British cultural theorist Raymond Williams's explanation of hegemony. Building on Antonio Gramsci's conception, Williams defines hegemony as "a whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole of living; our senses and assignments of energy, our shaping perceptions of ourselves and our world. It is a lived system of meanings and values" (110). According to this definition, hegemony manifests itself in every aspect of life; in other words, it is a way of living, perceiving ourselves, and shapes our perception of the world around us. It is a system of meanings and values by which we live and our lives take shape. Through this lived system, we are constantly bombarded with negative meanings of the veil and misrepresentations of Muslims. Prior to 9/11, Muslims living in the U.S. were more or less invisible and were not so much perceived as an extreme threat to American society as they had melted in and assimilated to the American culture.

With the dramatic rise of Islamophobia and racial profiling of Arabs and Muslims in America since 9/11, the importance of asserting Arab-American presence and voice has also increased since they have been mostly denied a political space from which they can speak and articulate their own concerns. Their silencing and invisibility within the public sphere has prevented productive communication and engagement with the mainstream. Perhaps this political positioning has created a sense of urgency for Arab-Americans to reclaim both their Arabness and a position in society as American citizens of Arab ancestry. Joanna Kadi, an Arab-American and editor of the feminist anthology *Food for Our Grandmothers*, coins a phrase to describe her Arab-American community as "The Most Invisible of the Invisibles" (xix). Kadi believes that Arab-Americans are not only made invisible by white Americans but also by people of color (xx). Invisibility and absence have characterized many Arab-American and Muslim women in the West before and after 9/11. Therese Saliba, an Arab-American scholar, discusses the Western representation of Arab women as "captive or absent" subjects in her 1994 article "Military Presences and Absences: Arab Women and the Persian Gulf War" (125). Saliba asserts that by the "absent" Arab woman she means two major forms of absence:

The first, a literal absence, when the Arab woman is not present or is entirely missing from the scene; the second, a symbolic absence, when she is present but only for the purpose of representing her invisibility or silence in order to serve as a subordinate to the Western subject of the scene. She is also granted moments of presence when her actions and speech are manipulated and exploited to serve the interests of her Western interpreters. In all these instances, the *absent* Arab woman is objectified and contrasted to the "liberated" Western woman, who often serves as a representative for Arab women. The white

woman is granted agency to speak for Arab women, usually on behalf of their liberation. (126)

This continuous state of absence and invisibility within dominant political spheres and women's movements, and the constant attack on Arabs and Muslims after 9/11 have generated the need to locate and create a space from which Arab-American feminists can speak. In resistance to invisibility and silence, many Arab-Americans and Arab/Islamic feminists have forged their own space from which they have become their own definers and transmitted their own experiences. The space they now belong to is an in-between space outside both the dominant American domains and traditional Arab ones because they were not given active roles within American or Arab feminist movements.

Azizah Al-Hibri, an Arab-American intellectual and writer, is also critical of the Arab-American woman's situation within a Western feminist movement. Al-Hibri illustrates in her 1994 article "Tear Off your Western Veil!" the Arab-American woman's invisibility in public forums by quoting from a speech she gave at the National Women's Studies Association. She observes that:

To be an Arab-American in the women's movement is to be an inferior "Other." The notion did not originate from within the movement, but it certainly does permeate the movement. It manifests itself in a variety of ways, not the least of which is the fact that the suffering of Arab women, somehow, does not seem worthy of your attention. "What do you mean?" you object. "The women's movement has dedicated a substantial amount of energy discussing issues like 'the veil' and 'clitoridectomy'." But that is precisely the point. The white middle-class women's movement has bestowed upon itself the right to tell us Arab and Arab-American women what are the most serious issues for us—over our own objections. (162-163)

Clearly, Al-Hibri is upset with the fact that the Arab-American woman holds the position of an "inferior other" in the women's movement. She believes that the movement has no interest in the suffering of Arab women. Al-Hibri's dialogue with women from the movement reveals the discrepancy in their understanding of the way Arab women's issues are handled. White middle-class women believe they have made serious efforts to address issues like the veil and clitoridectomy, which they think are important as sources of oppression. Al-Hibri, however, feels that these efforts have denied Arab-American women agency because they have no say about their own concerns, such as economic injustice and U.S. supported dictatorships and political repression in the Middle East. Furthermore, for those issues such as "the veil" and "clitoridectomy" that are emphasized by Western Feminists, the parameters of discussion nearly always exclude historical and political contexts.

The veil and its interpretations, which are predominantly negative within hegemonic discourses, have become highly politicized and decontextualized in Western society. It has been stripped of its vari-

ous multifaceted significances and reduced to a piece of cloth the West manipulates to justify its inhumane behavior in foreign countries and cultures. The changes in the meanings the veil has undergone can be analyzed as historical shifts in hegemonic meanings and formations. Williams states that "[Hegemony] does not just passively exist as a form of dominance. It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own" (112). Hegemony in this sense recreates discourses to preserve itself and ensure its continuation. In today's hegemony, it is vital to promote Islamophobia to justify the "war on terror," the occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, American protection of Israel, and the establishment of military bases throughout the whole Middle Eastern region. At the core of this hegemonic formation is the attack on one of the most significant symbols of Islam, the veil, an attack that seeks to recreate the image of the veil in Western discourse and to defend the new image to enforce Western domination and to preserve the divide between East and West, and "them" and "us," the colonizer and the colonized. The perpetuation of this divide is crucial to ensure the continuation of the call for the liberation of Muslim women, the "war on terror" and the spread of democracy, which are in reality no more than powerful tools through which imperialism operates and maintains cultural colonization of oil-producing nations in the Middle East.

Alison Donnell, a prominent critic of typical positions espoused by Western feminists, rightly claims that the previously "over-determined" and "over-simplified" representation of the veil in Western discourses has been completely shunned post-9/11 and is now being replaced with a new set of meanings that bear political significance. Donnell emphasizes that:

The familiar and much-analyzed Orientalist gaze through which the veil is viewed as an object of mystique, exoticism and eroticism and the veiled woman as an object of fantasy, excitement and desire is now replaced by the xenophobic, more specifically Islamophobic, gaze through which the veil, or headscarf, is seen as a highly visible sign of a despised difference. (123)

The veil has come to symbolize a difference whose rejection and condemnation have been highly encouraged. As part of an Islamophobic discourse, the veil has been made to signify entirely negative traits and meanings among other ideologically loaded signifiers—such as "violence-breeding terrorists," "suicide bombers," "Muslim female entrapment," and "an anti-modernization" that supposedly promotes a medieval narrow-mindedness opposing democracy—all traits that are deemed the worst enemies to American values.

The veil's negative interpretations have been developed through a politics of visibility that determine what needs to be made visible to the public and what does not—a politics that actually changes with the alteration and renewal of hegemonic goals. Vivian explores the concept of visibility through Gilles Deleuze's analysis:

Visibilities are not to be confused with elements that are visible or more generally perceptible, such as qualities, things, objects, compounds of objects . . . Visibilities are not forms of objects, nor even forms that would show up under light, but rather forms of luminosity which are created by the light itself and allow a thing or object to exist only as a flash, sparkle, or shimmer. (qtd. in Vivian 119)

Vivian explains that the visible is not really a visible object. "Rather, something is rendered visible through a particular way of seeing, a particular form of luminosity that creates the 'self-evident' or the 'natural'" (119). Through this conception of the visible, one can say that the veil is not an image in itself but rather a constructed and misconstrued one that has been given luminosity by hegemonic discourses and imperialist forces that only allow the veil to be glimpsed through a particular way of seeing. This particular way of seeing, which is filtered through hegemonic discourses, dictates that the veil be viewed in mostly negative terms, as emblematic of the Muslim woman's oppression, submissiveness, and sexual suppression. It has been manipulated to function as a reminder of terrorism, the 9/11 attacks, a fanatic religion whose followers seek to wipe out non-Muslims, and who are entirely hostile to Israel and the West. These discourses do not allow it to be seen within frameworks outside the colonial agenda.

Images of the veil and Muslim women have been, more often than not, prevented from being associated with positive values of Islam, such as peace, solidarity, justice, equality, and tolerance. Hegemonic discourses flatten histories and make Islamic civilizations and their contributions to science, advancement, and peace invisible to the public. For instance, it is not well-known that "Albanian Muslims took in fleeing Jews during World War II, saving thousands of lives," an event recently discussed in the 2009 article, "Holocaust's Untold Heroes," in the *Houston Chronicle* by Shahzada Irfan. Irfan states that:

When no other European country dared to withstand the wrath of Nazi Germany, it was the Muslims of Albania who saved a large number of Jewish people from extermination. Albania, a Muslim majority country in Europe, opened its borders during World War II and took in thousands of Jews fleeing from different countries. They were treated like honored guests, and many were given fake names and even passports.

Positive Muslim-Christian and Muslim-Jewish relations are often overlooked by the media and imperialist discourses. Perhaps it is worth noting that a prominent Jewish organization in Australia, the New South Wales Jewish Board of Deputies, states that Muslims worked with Jews and trusted them in previous centuries and have recently developed a number of successful and ongoing interfaith and intercultural programs that bring Muslims, Jews, and Christians together in the 21st century. One example illustrating the status of Jews under Muslim rulers is the fact that "Jews were often trusted advisers and military leaders for the Islamic rulers" from the eighth to

the eleventh centuries in Spain. In addition, in the fifteenth century, “after the expulsion of Jews from Christian Spain, it was Islamic Turkey which offered refuge and a place of honour for those who left” (NSWJ). This positive image of Muslims unsettles hegemonic discourses and representations of them as terrorists and a violent people, and so it is not given “luminosity” or any visibility during the current political turmoil in the Middle East.

It is crucial within these circumstances that the veil be seen only through a colonialist lens, hegemony’s particular way of seeing, that perceives it as oppressive and restrictive because that is the rationale used to make the goal of liberating and democratizing Muslim countries viable. This particular way of seeing portrays Muslims and Arabs as terrorists and fanatics whose mission is to launch attacks on America’s freedom. This dominant rhetoric and image of Arabs and Muslims as an extremely dangerous threat to America does not make room for any other and imposes on the public what the Arab-American writer Steven Salaita calls an “imperative patriotism” (154). Salaita explains:

Imperative patriotism assumes (or demands) that dissent in matters of governance and foreign affairs is unpatriotic and therefore unsavory. It is drawn from a longstanding sensibility that nonconformity to whatever at the time is considered to be “the national interest” is unpatriotic. (154)

Clearly, when George W. Bush presents the war on Iraq and Afghanistan as a “war of civilization” and makes statements such as “either you are with us or against us” and “God is on America’s side,” any voices of dissent will be viewed as “unpatriotic” and “un-American.” People in this situation cannot but reproduce negative images of the veil because holding such views of it is agreeable to authority, and translates into what Bush et al. perceive as loyalty, patriotism, and true Americanness. The political theorist Falguni Sheth stresses that as the veil becomes the representative of the “foreignness” of a different culture, the focus on this particular Muslim practice in combination with what it is thought to “(mis)represent and other practices with which it is (mis)associated, raises its status to the level of extreme threat” (457). It is perceived as posing a threat to the larger regime, a threat that needs to be “managed, and tamed, or ousted from the polity” (457). In reality this threat (mis)associated with the veil only becomes a visible one through the hegemonic and imperialist gaze because other religious symbols—like the Christian cross and nun’s garment (which resembles some veils worn by Muslim women), the Sikh’s turban, and the Jew’s yarmulke—have not been loaded with negative connotations by that very same discourse that condemns certain religious symbols but not others. Hegemonic and imperialist discourses have made these symbols acceptable for public consumption, and the world has been granted permission to allow and accept them, but the same permission has not been granted to Muslim symbols for political reasons. Ironically, certain Western feminists, and also colonial feminists,¹ such as Fatima

Mernissi and Qasim Amin,² whose mission is to uplift women's situation and fight for their justice, have circulated distorted images of the veil and allowed it to be seen only through this colonialist and imperialist gaze.

Muslim/Arab-American women not only have been victimized by the reductive and oppressive images of them in U.S. popular culture and the media but have also been marginalized by many Western feminists whose analysis is structured by imperialist meanings and colonial discourse. Indeed, it is ironic that these feminists have oppressed Muslim and Arab women through their discourse of freedom. Leila Ahmed explains in her book *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* how certain strands of feminism were historically used against other cultures in the service of colonialism. Ahmed points out that within colonial discourse, Islam was viewed as "innately and immutably oppressive to women, [and] that the veil and segregation epitomized that oppression, and that these customs were the fundamental reasons for the general and comprehensive backwardness of Islamic societies" (152). Veiling became the symbol of the oppression of women to Western eyes, and it became the target of colonial attack on Muslim societies (152). The veil and false claim of the Muslim women's oppression were used in the past and continue to be used in the present to justify the colonization of Muslim nations and the women's need for liberation by their present American and past European colonizers.

The issue of the Muslim woman's veil received great attention by some Western feminists and theorists because in their eyes it only signified extreme oppression and submission. There are many feminist commentaries that portray the practice of veiling or the hijab as practices that systematically control women's sexuality or violate human rights. The activist for women's rights, Fran Hosken writes, "Rape, forced prostitution, polygamy, genital mutilation, pornography, the beating of girls and women, purdah (segregation of women) are all violations of basic human rights" (15). It is outrageous how purdah is being equated with rape, prostitution, and beating of women and considered a violation of human rights. This false equivalence can be successfully formulated only when the purdah is decontextualized and dehistoricized as it has been within today's hegemonic discourses.³

Many feminists do not realize that the veil has taken on such a negative meaning mostly by Westerners and some local dictators during periods of colonization and Western imperialism but held an entirely different significance in many native cultures prior to their colonization. For instance, British colonizers, during the era of imperialism in the nineteenth century, disrupted the Egyptians' world and deepened colonial influence in the consciousness of the people to ensure its domination over them. This was done by questioning the status of women in Islam and the practice of veiling, claiming that it was one of the obstacles standing in the way of development and establishing a modern Egypt. Leila Ahmed is critical of the rationale and inaccurate claims made by the British imperialist Lord Cromer to justify British interference in the Muslim society and the colonial discourse used against Muslim men and women in Egypt. Cromer states that:

It was essential that Egyptians "be persuaded or forced into imbibing the true spirit of Western civilization" and to achieve this, it was essential to change the position of women in Islam, for it was Islam's degradation of women, expressed in the practices of veiling and seclusion, that was "the fatal obstacle" to the Egyptian's "attainment of that elevation of thought and character which should accompany the introduction of Western civilization;" only by abandoning those practices might they attain "the mental and moral development" which he [Cromer] desired for them. (qtd. in Ahmed 153)

This need for Egypt's transformation, which has been reductively made to depend on the Muslim woman's veil, stems from the colonialists' reliance on an ideology of the "civilizing mission" in which they assigned for themselves the roles of protectors and world leaders. In reality, they only maintained such a status by looting and destroying weaker nations that were rich in resources and poor in arms. It is arguable that the Egyptian reformer Qasim Amin's emphasis on the condition of women when he argues that "To make Muslim society abandon its backward ways and follow the Western path to success and civilization required changing the women" comes from the hegemonic and imperialist discourses he has adopted and embraced and not from a genuine concern for women (qtd. in Ahmed 156).

In a recently published poem relevant to this discussion, the prominent contemporary Arab-American feminist writer, Mohja Kahf, responds to colonial feminists and individuals who hold views similar to Amin's that the path to freedom is through shedding the Muslim veil. Kahf deconstructs the homogenized identity of a Muslim/Arab-American woman through representing an empowered Muslim female speaker who asserts her identity and speaks out to be heard by hegemonic discourse. In rejection of contemporary discussions of the Muslim veil by colonial feminists, hegemonic imperialists, Western and strict Muslim patriarchal figures, and their reductive approach to Muslim women's affairs around the world, Kahf states in her poem "My Body is Not Your Battleground" that:

My body is not your battleground
 My hair is neither sacred nor cheap,
 Neither the cause of your disarray
 Nor the path to your liberation
 My hair will not bring progress and clean water
 If it flies unbraided in the breeze
 It will not save us from our attackers
 If it is wrapped and shielded from the sun (58).

She refuses to listen to those oppressive voices that objectify the Muslim woman's body. These lines support sociologist Jazmin Zine's claim that in either case, forced veiling or unveiling, Muslim women's bodies, whether in the Middle East or the West, continue to be "disciplined and regulated" (Zine 175). Kahf mocks those who believe liberation can be brought about by shedding the veil and

those who think wearing it will save them from their attackers. The speaker finds both parties irrational and neither one leading to true freedom or progress.

The Veil in History

A better understanding of Kahf's response can be gained by examining in greater depth the veil in history. As I have mentioned, the image of the veil and veiled Muslim women within colonialist and hegemonic discourses has undergone striking transformations throughout history. While veiled women were perceived as "exotic" and "mysterious" during European imperialism, they became emblematic of the revolutionary process during the French colonization of Algeria, and have since been transformed to signify the Muslim woman's oppression and submissiveness during America's war on Iraq and Afghanistan and post-9/11.

The veil in the eighteenth century European discourse took on an entirely different meaning from what it represents in today's prevailing hegemonic discourse and the post-9/11 period. According to Felicity Nussbaum, a British and postcolonial literature specialist, the veil represented "the ancient, the mysterious, and romance itself" (123). During these times, the veil was perceived through erotic ways of seeing provided by the colonialist discourse. The sexualized quality of the veil is reflected in colonial travel writer J. F. Fraser's account of his numerous travels throughout Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco:

From the low and heavy wooden doors emerge Arab women. All are in white. The white veil, spanning just over the nose, falls and hides the lower part of the face. Only the eyes can you see—large, lustrous, languorous . . . A woman draped in white, veiled, with a pair of black, limpid, love-soaked eyes, peering at you—well, you know why the amorous young Arabian, lolling in the calm of a velvety night, sings with a plaintive heart to mysterious eyes which electrify the warm blood in his veins. (qtd. in Vivian 122)

This erotic vision of the veil constructed by the imperialist discourse presents women as sexualized objects, a state that Islam has challenged and contested to uplift the status of women in society and help them gain the respect they deserve. Vivian explains that this desire (mis)associated with the veil became fused with the motivations of imperial expansion. To conquer Muslim and Arab lands combined with unveiling Muslim women became primary goals of European colonization (122).

In the counter-hegemonic narrative Arab-American/Islamic feminists have been creating, they unravel the significations the veil took on in history in resistance to hegemonic discourses and interpretations of it. Allison Donnell, for example, explains how the veil can convey a political message or be utilized to achieve certain political purposes. Donnell asserts that "Veiling can also be a conscious drawing attention to oneself—not as a beautiful or sexual being—but

as a political one" (132). In "Algeria Unveiled," Frantz Fanon documents how in relation to Algeria's struggle for independence the veil has been "manipulated, transformed into a technique of camouflage, into a means of struggle" (83). Not only is Fanon referring to the practical value of a garment that conceals arms and grants anonymity, but also to the struggle for ideological identification in which the veil represents a determination for the abolition of Western values (132). In the horrific conditions of war and occupation, the need to hold on to the veil and Islamic practices becomes more urgent because the entire nation's identity and culture is under attack. The veil, in these situations, comes to symbolize resistance to the West and all the ideologies it brings with it to Muslim societies. Many women who may not regularly be very active in society in times of peace become aggressive activists in times of war.

Other women, on the other hand, take on the veil, apart from believing in it, to prove they are independent, empowered women not because they have followed the West or been liberated by it, but because they have a strong desire to revive Islamic principles of female empowerment and activism that were passed down by the Muslim prophet and many Muslim female figures significant in history. Historically, it seems only common for nations suffering from war or political turmoil to resort to their cultural or national heritage, or whatever may unite people.

Egyptian anthropologist Fadwa El Guindi explains that when the Islamic East, for instance, felt the force of foreign dominance in the Gulf War, it was a lesson perhaps for "keeping feminism, democracy, and nationalism embedded" in the larger Islamic movement so that women and men both are empowered as their nations are liberated" (161). During these harsh times when Middle Eastern nations and people's existence were under attack, they turned into themselves for solidarity and internal power and rejected foreign versions of feminism and democracy. Some women chose to adopt Islamic feminism or a nationalist stance because they thought the veil would be an appropriate regional symbol to reflect such sentiments.

History shows how it is Western colonization of Muslim lands that led to the transformation of the Muslim veil from being a sign of faith and peace to a weapon used in the struggle for survival. History also demonstrates the way the veil was considered by the West, as an enemy, that had to be attacked to enforce Western domination and fragment any forms of national solidarity. Again, as Fanon argues in "Algeria Unveiled," in the political atmosphere in Algeria in the 1930s the veil was used to fracture national and resistance movements. Fanon argues that the French administration was determined to bring about the dissolution of "forms of existence likely to evoke a national reality directly or indirectly" and concentrate its efforts on the wearing of the veil, which was viewed as a "symbol of the status of the Algerian woman" (74). Fanon remarks that there existed significant and vital women-led resistance that united Algerian society but that remained hidden behind the visible patriarchy, and thus, it became pivotal for the French to control the women. This realization helped the French colonizer define a precise political doctrine:

If we want to destroy the structure of Algerian society, its capacity for resistance, we must first of all conquer the women; we must go and find them behind the veil where they hide themselves. (Fanon 74)

In the colonialist program, Algerian women and their veiling were targeted in order to weaken the political resolve of Algerian men. Women were manipulated to function as symbols in the political “destructuring” of Algerian resistance. It was thought that converting the woman and winning her over to the foreign values also constituted achieving power over the man (Fanon 75). In the French colonizer’s eyes every veil abandoned by Algerian women is a sign of society’s willingness to attend “the master’s school” and submit to the occupier’s civilizing mission (Fanon 76). Fanon believes that the colonizer is frustrated by the veiled woman who sees without being seen; that is, there is no reciprocity. It upsets the colonizer who considers himself superior that this woman, whose veil is read as inferior, does not give herself, does not offer herself to the powerful and superior colonizer. Because the European would like to see behind the veil, he reacts with hostility against the colonized before this limitation of his perception (77). Within this Algerian context, “it was [veiled] women above all else who were emblematic of the revolutionary process . . . through carrying weapons and grenades” (qtd. in Vivian 127). The veil, in this case, communicated resistance to France’s colonialist ways of seeing Muslim and veiled women, its attempt to unveil them, and its domination of Algeria.

The Veil in the Post-9/11 Era

If we were to examine the various ways through which the Muslim veil is constructed in current times, we would come to strikingly similar conclusions about its complex meanings in battles over hegemony. To say the least, it is remarkable how the veil has been marketed and handled domestically vs. internationally by hegemonic discourses in the United States. While it is marketed internationally as a sign of the Muslim woman’s oppression and suppression in need of liberation, justifying the war on Afghanistan, it is dealt with on the U.S. domestic front as a threat to liberal and secular American culture. It poses a threat to the “American way of life” as it represents an undesired radical heterogeneity. It unsettles the dominant perception of cultural unity in America, which assumes there is a single homogenous culture, in what is actually an extremely diverse America. This contradictory representation of the veil insinuates a quality of power and strength inherent in the practice of veiling that is threatening to Western society yet signifies the weakness and silencing of Muslim women when situated in a Middle Eastern context.

U.S. hegemonic discourses present its public with two contradictory ways of seeing the veil domestically and internationally as a sign of a powerful threat yet that of oppression and victimization at the same time. This is an example of how hegemony is compelled to continually resolve contradictions, as it adapts and renews itself to maintain its dominance and ensure its continuity. Again, as Raymond

Williams states, “[Hegemony] does not just passively exist as a form of dominance. It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own” (112). Hegemony in this sense recreates discourses to preserve the powers-that-be and ensure their continuation.

Sheth unpacks the meaning of the veil and what it has been made to signify post-9/11 and during the “war on terror.” Sheth is critical of the government’s stated and rather simplistic goal that “it seeks to prevent or eliminate threats to the (physical) safety of Americans” (455). He questions such a goal in light of the detention of two Muslim female teenagers from New York in 2005 on suspicion of being potential “suicide bombers.” Both were pious Muslim women who wore the veil. He thinks that this example of the Muslim women only suggests that Western society has a rather more urgent, unacknowledged goal than the protection of Americans’ safety. The unstated goal that seems more appropriate is “coping with the danger of radical cultural heterogeneity; that is, the threat to the safety of cultural homogeneity” (455). Clearly, these women were not detained because of crimes they had committed but because of their violation of a prevailing cultural and political norm that seems to ignore the existing multiculturalism and the many subcultures within the American culture as if it were in reality a single monolithic and homogeneous culture. The practice of veiling and the sign of the veil, as Sheth notes, are “unruly” because of their conspicuous heterogeneity. Sheth powerfully states that:

Significant cultural difference—understood as a profound and defiant challenge to a certain kind of cultural homogeneity—is threatening. This latter heterogeneity, as embodied by Muslims today, represents a challenge to the values of a Western liberal-secular political order and to “reasonable” and law-abiding members of the polity. (456)

These fears of a threatening heterogeneity symbolized by the veil have been generated by hegemonic discourses because the veil and Islam do not necessarily challenge the values of Western liberal culture or its secular political order. They were made to be seen as such and developed such an interpretation usually in times of war and constant attacks on Islam. This interpretation of the veil as a threat to liberal society has taken shape especially post-9/11 and during the war on Afghanistan and Iraq. But it is worth noting that American liberal and secular culture was arguably being challenged, not by heterogeneity, but by former president George W. Bush, who referred to America as a Christian nation that God stands by and supports. Is this not a challenge to Western liberalism and an attempt to break up the division between church and state under conservative presidential rule?

Sheth notes that although the veil might be a “political expression of defiance” and a challenge to a supposedly homogeneous secular political worldview, such a challenge does not signify potential ter-

rorism. Sheth argues that the “war on terror” as “a defense of Western liberal-secular culture and the threats against it” is the more accurate assessment of the situation (462).

Hegemony's Way of “Liberating” Afghanistan

Media scholar Dana Cloud, a professor of Communication Studies at the University of Texas-Austin, takes a close look at the history of U.S. relations with Afghanistan revealing the reasons for the war in her article “‘To Veil the Threat of Terror’: Afghan Women and the Clash of Civilizations in the Imagery of the U.S. War on Terrorism.” Through an examination of several mainstream publications in the U.S. before and after 9/11, Cloud uncovers political changes in Afghanistan that had significant geopolitical implications. Before the 9/11 attacks, the balance of power in Afghanistan had shifted, “away from ‘moderates’ in the Taliban, who favored open relations with the United States and the United Nations, toward more nationalist and fundamentalist forces” (298). This new regime, as Cloud states, “was much less open to the idea of allowing the United States to run an oil pipeline through Afghanistan from the Caspian Sea, which was a major component of U.S. plans to control the world oil supply” (298). She further explains that before this point, the situation and oppression of women in Afghanistan and the practices of Islamic dictators had not been major concerns to the United States (298).

After 9/11 and the U.S. war on Afghanistan, however, former president George W. Bush expressed concern for Afghani women, and noted the positive impact of U.S. intervention in Afghanistan in his 2004 State of the Union Address:

As of this month, that country has a new constitution, guaranteeing free elections and full participation by women. Businesses are opening, health care centers are being established, and the boys and girls of Afghanistan are back to school. With help from the new Afghan Army, our coalition is leading aggressive raids against surviving members of the Taliban and al-Qaida. The men and women of Afghanistan are building a nation that is free, and proud, and fighting terror—and America is honored to be their friend.

While the former president and many Western-based governments report to the world that much progress has been made in terms of the reconstruction of Afghanistan, specifically in terms of women's education, realities on the ground raise great skepticism about the truth of such claims. Hayat Alvi-Aziz, a researcher with the National Security Decision-Making Department of the U.S. Naval War College, explains that there are major impediments to women's education in Afghanistan that have not been addressed since the war began such as the economic reality of poverty that has led to “the selling of children, both girls and boys, to pay off debts; pulling children from school to help with household income; and severe lack of funding to rebuild the Afghan school system” (176). Clearly, under these circumstances, security and survival are major concerns for the women

of Afghanistan that supersede any other ones whether these are education, equality, or free elections. It is also obvious that at this point in the history and devastation of their country women are not and *cannot* in reality build a nation that is “free, and proud, and terror[-free],” as former President Bush claims, due to a lack of resources and a stable government.

There is much contradiction in these claims and the actual “re-building” of Afghanistan that is currently taking place in the post-Taliban era. Alvi-Aziz reveals the fact that the Bush administration made a deal with the Northern Alliance (NA) to form a coalition that consists of many warlords in a “power-sharing” arrangement in the post-Taliban government under Karzai. “This alliance was created in order to use the NA as proxies in the successful effort to overthrow the Taliban, only to result in the replacement of the Taliban by equally atrocious villains, some of whom have committed war crimes” (175). Contemporary Afghanistan is being run by warlords and a corrupt government that can in no way build a free and proud Afghanistan. Barnett Rubin, a U.S. expert on Afghanistan, states that Afghanistan’s major needs include road building, investment in water projects, and the development of infrastructure. The overlooked reality on the ground is the fact that government ministers are building huge mansions with swimming pools while locals are suffering from abject poverty. Typically, it is the wealthy and their foreign allies who eventually benefit from conditions of corrupt militarization—just as in so many other wars. Apparently, the U.S. succeeded in empowering a corrupt, but more importantly, a compliant government that has replaced the Taliban.

The “war on terror” has in fact proven valuable to American capitalist and corporate interests. For example, as the Afghan people suffered from the lack of clean water, food, and security, the cosmetics industry made inroads in the country. Alvi-Aziz indicates that:

Immediately after the fall of the Taliban regime, the priority in “reconstruction” efforts was makeup, hair salons, and beauty, supplied by top Western cosmetic multinational corporations like Revlon, L’Oreal, Clairol, and Vogue in an effort to implant free market capitalism in post-Taliban Afghanistan. . . They have . . . introduced Western hyper- capitalism and consumption into impoverished Afghan society. (171-172)

Examples like this make one wonder if the process of “reconstruction,” the spread of “democracy,” and women’s “liberation” in Afghanistan are just part of a myth of democratization created by hegemonic discourses. That is, can these goals of democratization be achieved through a corrupt government and new dictator, beauty parlors, huge mansions, and swimming pools? Further, one is skeptical about whether the U.S. is advancing a true democracy and thus genuinely assisting Afghanistan in carrying out fair elections, achieving freedom of speech, equality, and economic independence. The U.S. cannot afford to back up its rhetoric of democracy in Central Asia or the Middle East with action because such a transformation is not without problems for the U.S. In an exploration of what a dem-

ocratic Middle East would mean for U.S. interests, for example, Chris Zambelis finds that “American support for Muslim democracies would require the free expression of dissonant voices; otherwise they would be labeled illegitimate,” but allowing such freedom and democratic behavior does not guarantee the continuation of U.S. strong ties with its allies in the region (89). Zambelis raises an important question here: “Will Washington stand for democratically elected governments that are Islamists, nationalists, or openly hostile to the United States and its allies?” (89). One of the major risks that Washington is bound to face if it actually follows through on its promise for building a democratic Middle East is the control of a fairly elected government that is perhaps anti-American or that is more interested in forging closer ties to Russia, Europe, and China rather than the United States (94). Zambelis explains that:

The United States has traditionally been reluctant to press its Arab and Muslim allies on the issues of human rights and political reform based on the assumption that any democratic opening would threaten their pro-U.S. orientation or lead to their replacement by something far worse. (94)

The United States obviously overlooks the violations of human rights and the injustices that take place in the Middle East, and supports its undemocratic practices, because it is these conditions that actually protect American interests in the region. In fact, it does not matter if Arab or Muslim countries in the region are democracies or dictatorships as long as they meet Washington’s economic and capitalist interests. In other words, the so-called “clash of civilizations” has nothing to do with the Islamic faith or Muslims’ disapproval of America’s “way of life” but has everything to do with the Western-Eastern conflict of political and economic interests. Nonetheless, the United States projects itself as the ideal democratic nation whose “way of life” is always under attack by Muslim extremists. However, in protection of U.S. capitalist interests in the region, and its access to oil, it is important that the U.S. government continue its deployment of the rhetoric of “clash of civilizations,” “democracy,” and “war on terror” to justify its continued presence in the Middle East.⁴

America continues to call for democracy in the Middle East as it simultaneously suppresses any potential for such a transformation to take place because it cannot afford to have a true democracy in the region, as I previously explained. Given the context of a possible threatening Muslim democracy and nationalism that may jeopardize U.S. economic interests, Washington’s rhetoric of “us” and “them” becomes an imperative to justify its war on Afghanistan. Former President Bush relentlessly reinforced the division between “us” and “them” by demonizing the enemy. One of the more infamous examples was in his address to a joint session of Congress in 2001:

On September 11th, enemies of freedom committed an act of war against our country . . . Americans are asking, why do they hate us? They hate what we see right here in this chamber—a democratically elected government.

Their leaders are self-appointed. They hate our freedoms—our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other . . . Every nation . . . now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.

In this speech, the Middle East is constructed as the “enemies of freedom” who are against democracy, freedom of speech, freedom of worship, and democratically elected governments. When labeled and constructed as such, the Middle East in this context becomes the enemy who is antagonistic to everything America stands for. Once the U.S. establishes its enemies of freedom, it takes on the role of protector of civil liberties.

During the U.S. war on Afghanistan, the U.S. has taken on the false role of savior that reflects the colonial discourse through which, in Gayatri Spivak’s memorable phrase, “white men save brown women from brown men.” The U.S. utilizes such rhetoric in its representations of the Taliban and Afghani women evoking a paternalistic response and a need to rescue Afghani women as they cannot save themselves. This narrative and constructed image of the current war on Afghanistan becomes acceptable and appeals to the public sense of morality, especially when it is portrayed as an act of rescue and as the spread of justice and democracy. It even becomes America’s responsibility, as the most powerful country in the world, to save other nations from themselves. Canadian politician Michael Ignatieff even argued that the people of Afghanistan and Iraq, which he called “havens of chaos and terrorism,” should be dominated “for their own good” (qtd. in Cloud 293). As these nations are represented as such by colonial and imperial discourses, which adopt this paternalistic rhetoric, U.S. military intervention becomes uncritically legitimate and justifiable. This role of the U.S. as a paternalistic savior is constructed through contrasting images of modern civilization and “liberated” American women against depictions of a pre-modern Afghanistan and its women as oppressed and “unenlightened” victims. Although military intervention in Afghanistan was legitimated by “a language of bringing democracy to the people of Afghanistan” and “emancipating Afghan women,” Afghanistan analyst Sari Kouvo found that the women who took three-month literacy courses provided by NGOs did not feel empowered at all (43). Kouvo conducted interviews with Afghan women who asserted that “90% of women are illiterate” there and that they did not need civic education, but *education* (43). They also explained that many of them had never held a pen and so were not interested in gender awareness trainings (43).

Images of Afghan women in burqas desperately needing rescue have been continuously circulated in U.S. media and television all over the world as symbols of oppression but a recent BBC report prepared by British journalist Marcus George reflects the irony of the situation:

Western journalists and aid workers who thought that piles of burqas would be burned in the street as the Taliban (*sic*) made a quick getaway are in shock. They are in-

credulous that what has been perceived as the arch symbol of Taliban rule is worn even when the regime is long gone.

The fact that Afghan women did not burn their burqas reveals that there is a misperception that connects the veil or burqa to the Taliban, the “terrorists,” and its oppression of women and not to a cultural or religious practice exercised by some tribal groups before the Taliban—one that may continue after the war ends. It is also ironic that the Taliban is now viewed as the world’s demon that must be defeated when in the past it was supported by the U.S. Columbia University anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod notes that if al-Qaeda is to be held responsible for the oppression of women in Afghanistan because of its supportive relationship with the Taliban, surely the United States is also partially guilty because of its support of the Taliban during its proposed pipeline deal with Unocal and assistance to the Mujahadeen during the cold war (787). It is clear that during the period in which the U.S. supported the Taliban, Afghan women, their veils, and possible oppression were not issues that mattered to the U.S., nor did they show up in U.S. discourses of democracy. Since the veil was not perceived as a symbol of oppression during those times, it makes sense to draw the conclusion that “Meanings of oppression are certainly not intrinsic to Islamic covering practices but are socially constructed through discourse,” as Kevin Ayotte and Mary Husain point out in their article “Securing Afghan Women: Neocolonialism, Epistemic Violence, and the Rhetoric of the Veil” (117).

The current discourse and rhetoric of the “war on terror” that portrays hopelessness did not start from scratch but has been built over the years and has continuously evolved throughout a long history of misrepresentations of Arabs and Muslims in general. The reality of the Arab world as a mix of Muslims, Christians, and Jews living in harmony, at least in some parts of the Middle East, is an image that is not granted any visibility by hegemonic discourses. In application of the prevailing 21st century politics of visibility, clearly, the image that is made visible to the West and the world at large is only that which represents Muslims in conflict with Christians, Jews, and Western culture.

In this era of oppressive hegemonic rhetoric, there is an increasing need for contextualizing and historicizing cultures and norms because they can be appropriated and manipulated to serve colonial interests as has been the case with the practice of veiling within Muslim and Arab cultures. Through the exploration of the dynamics of the “war on terror” and hegemonic dehistoricization, it is fair to say that oil-producing nations currently need to be liberated not from their cultures or democratic traditions but from being “democratized” by force. More and more scholarly work also needs to be produced to address the politics of visibility and to help alter predominant “ways of seeing” the world in resistance to imperialism and colonization.

Notes

¹ For a definition of “colonial feminism” see Ahmed who writes: “Colonialism’s use of feminism to promote the culture of the colonizers and undermine native culture has . . . imparted to feminism in nonwestern societies the taint of having served as an instrument of colonial domination, rendering it suspect in Arab eyes and vulnerable to the charge of being an ally of colonial interests.” Also see Viner and Mohanty.

² Fatima Mernissi and Qasim Amin are considered colonial feminists because they use feminist rhetoric that actually serves the West’s colonial interests. As they appear to support women’s rights, they have reinforced the colonial agenda by representing a distorted image of Islam and Muslim women, an image that they think could be improved through westernization and an ideologically biased western approach to feminism.

³ To contextualize Purdah in history, refer to Susan P. Arnett’s “Purdah.” Arnett states that “In the lands of India the actual translation of the word purdah is screen or veil. Purdah is the practice that includes the seclusion of women from public observation by wearing concealing clothing from head to toe and by the use of high walls, curtains, and screens erected within the home. Purdah is practiced by Muslims and by various Hindus, especially in India. The limits imposed by this practice vary according to different countries and class levels. Generally, those women in the upper and middle class are more likely to practice all aspects of purdah because they can afford not to work outside the home.” For more information see Bullock and Ahmed.

⁴ For a history of colonial access to oil and imperialism in the Middle East, see Rashid Khalidi, William Cleveland, and David Harvey.

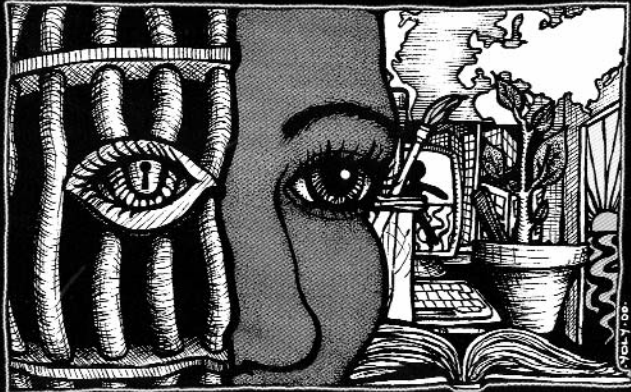
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Schools Not Jails



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CRITICAL RESISTANCE & BARRIOS UNIDOS



SAGE PRODUCTIONS

III.

Battlegrounds and Movements



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