

“He Who Believes in the Devil Already Belongs to Him”: Rescuing Women from Afghanistan to Iraq

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During the war in Afghanistan, images of women in burqas filled the front pages of North American and British newspapers. Cherie Blair argued: “Nothing more symbolises the oppression of women than the burqa, which is a very visible sign of the role of women in Afghanistan” (Dejevsky). The veil these women wore became, in the media, a highly visual marker of all the injustices perpetrated on them. Further, Laura Bush, not opposed to the US administration’s mandate that American military women don the head to toe *abaya* and refrain from driving when off the bases in Saudi Arabia as a sign of “cultural tolerance,” suddenly emerged as the unlikely and benevolent champion of the veiled Afghan woman, and the “war on terror” became inextricably but illogically bound up with her oppression and fought in her name. In the First Lady’s public radio broadcast from the White house, she insisted: “The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women” (Bush). When the Taliban were overthrown in November 2001, British and North American newspapers and TV stations were there ready to catch the moment when Afghani women showing their faces accompanied by celebratory headlines announcing their new freedom from oppressive rule, in actual fact post-Taliban Kabul continues to be dominated by women in burqas. Moreover, Laura Bush sunnily concluded in her talk that the West had rescued the veiled woman: “Because of our recent military gains 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.” Three years after the Taliban’s fall, however, as attention and money have turned to Iraq, the situation for women in Afghanistan has in some areas worsened under the rule of the Northern Alliance and overall has seen little improvement.

Described in the headlines as “ghostly” and “silent” figures, veiled women were spoken for, fought over, but rarely consulted. Dr. Lynn Amowitz reported in her eighteen-month study of Afghanistan for

Physicians for Human Rights that “90 percent of the women who *don't* live under Taliban control still choose to wear the burqa” (Brown). The photo galleries at the website of *The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan* also suggest that the veil is not the focus of women’s struggles. This organization - which is pro democracy, anti-fundamentalist, active in educating girls and women, but opposed to the war - posts distressing photos of public hangings, of the burning of schools, of the mutilation of men and women, of land mine victims on their site. However, there is no obsessive focus on the burqa: “since their seizure of power, the fundamentalists have had to employ a fig leaf of irrelevant and artificial issues such as the ‘Islamic veil,’ put forward as vital priorities (RAWA). To enforce veiling or to force unveiling is an insult against women who would chose to do one or the other - this “choice,” as with any clothing, is partially determined by such diverse factors as culture, the weather, patriarchy, religion, economics, availability, comfort, practicality, and tradition. Veiling and unveiling means different things at different times and in different places and is never, as much as the mainstream Western media tried to make it during this war, singular in meaning. So the issue of the veil, despite its highly charged symbolism in the West and amongst fundamentalists, is as RAWA suggests, mostly “irrelevant.”

The desire to “save” the Eastern woman from her own culture, a gesture that inevitably involves unveiling her, has a long history in the West, a history that has little to do with women’s freedom. Leila Ahmed, discussing nineteenth-century colonialism in Egypt, writes: “Veiling – to Western eyes, the most visible marker of the differentness and inferiority of Islamic societies – became the symbol now of both the oppression of women (or, in the language of the day, Islam’s degradation of women) and the backwardness of Islam, and it became the open target of colonial attack and the spearhead of the assault on Muslim societies” (152). She argues that a concern for women’s rights was used by colonialists to decry the barbarism of the native culture, while at the same time women’s rights were actively discouraged on the home front and colonialist policies were detrimental for Muslim women. She points to Lord Cromer, the consul-general of Egypt, as an example. Adopting a “feminist” rhetoric, he condemned the “Oriental” for his treatment of women – particularly, veiling and segregation – but he also restricted access to education for girls in Egypt, was opposed to the tradition of female doctors in Muslim cultures, and was the founder of the anti-suffragist league in England.

Frantz Fanon also noted how the veil in Algeria became one of the major symbols for colonialists to rally around: “This enabled the colonial

administration to 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 and in the houses where the men keep them out of sight'.... The dominant administration solemnly undertook to defend this woman, pictured ad humiliated, sequestered, cloistered... It described the immense possibilities of woman, unfortunately transformed by the Algerian man into an inert, demonized, indeed dehumanized object" (38). Naively assuming that beneath the veil was a silent, absent, helpless woman, the French occupiers remained mystified by the Algerian's woman resistance to being "saved." Fanon notes that she veiled, unveiled, and re-veiled as the situation at borders demanded it, smuggling both arms and money across checkpoints, as she joined the struggle for independence. This very particular moment that Fanon identifies of female agency within the nation is, however, more often usurped by the tendency to use women as symbols to secure the nation. In response to these colonialist interventions, veiling, which had been a marker of such things as class, education, urbanity, in turn was taken up as a "fig leaf," in the name of anti-imperialism. The remnants of this impulse are still obvious in fundamentalist, "anti-Western" movements that enforce veiling.

The Western desire to save "helpless" women from their culture also inevitably involves the emasculation of native men as is obvious in both the examples that Fanon and Ahmed cite, where the unveiling of women is tied to the denigration of Egyptian and Algerian men. So too in Afghanistan, loudspeakers on top of an American Humvee blast out: "The Taliban are women! They're bitches! If they were real men, they'd stop hiding under their burkas and they'd come out and fight!" (McDonald). The response of "emasculated" men is often then to double their efforts to reclaim and dominate "their" women in the name of "masculinity," so "after" the war in Afghanistan violence against women has been on the rise: "One international NGO worker told Amnesty International: 'During the Taliban era, if a woman went to market and showed an inch of flesh she would have been flogged; now she's raped'" (Rawi).

The eighteenth-century writer, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, provocatively, on her sojourn in the Ottoman Empire, declared veiled women to be "the most free" women in the world (Halsband 329). In her famous description of her trip to the *hammam*, she challenges and reverses the very logic of this desire to "unveil" and "liberate" the veiled woman. Surrounded by named Turkish women in the bath who encourage her to join them, she strips off just enough clothes to reveal her own constricted

body. She writes” “The Lady that seem’d the most considerable amongst them entreated me to sit by her and fain would have undress’d me for the bath. I excus’d my selfe with some difficulty, they being all so earnest in persuading me. I was at last forc’d to open my skirt and shew them my stays, which satisfy’d ‘em very well for I saw they believ’d I was so lock’d up in that machine that it was not in my own power to open it, which contrivance they attributed to my Husband” (Halsband 314). In this description Lady Mary, invokes the tradition of previous travel narratives, such as those by Aaron Hill and Jean Dumont, that delight in imaginative descriptions of the abuse and enslavement of the oriental woman and “lament the miserable confinement of the Turkish Ladys.” But, as Montagu shifts the gaze to her own “imprisoned” body, teasingly opening her shirt and inviting rescue, she forces attention on the English social order. Critical of it as she was for its use of women as property in marriage, she flips the convention, using her own “misinterpreted” clothing to suggest her lack of liberty and complicating the role of the heroic colonialist reader. This gesture interrupts the binary of veiled and unveiled, the slave and the free woman, religion and reason that structures the travel accounts of many of her predecessors. (See Heffernan for a more extensive discussion of the particulars of the rhetoric of veiling and unveiling as they structure the East/West divide in the eighteenth century).

During the war in Afghanistan, however, this rhetoric of unveiling was restored to its uncomplicated binary, so the “free” and “independent” Western woman was contrasted with the abused and vulnerable Eastern one. If the war in Afghanistan was carried out in the name of liberating “helpless” women, the American military was all about heroic, manly men. American military women got little attention in the mainstream media during this war and they were hardly mentioned in the papers, naturalizing men as the savior of the veiled woman. Rather than women in combat, it was Western women who took off their clothes as a sign of support for the “troops” who were applauded. During the first Gulf War, General Norman Schwarzkopf referred to women who participated in “Operation Playmate, “where centerfolds sent autographed photos of themselves and personal letters to the army, as “true patriots.” The “operation” was launched again during this war and media outlets reported that: “The men’s magazine announced... it hopes to boost the morale of the U.S. military by offering a free pen-pal program that lets soldiers communicate with its nude models.” *Playboy’s* founder Hugh Hefner said “he felt compelled to aid the war against terror in Afghanistan” (Associated Press). The title of an article in the *Globe and Mail* read: “They also serve who only strip and write.”

During this war, it seemed it was Western women's patriotic duty to assert their liberty by stripping, by unveiling their bodies to motivate men to fight. In my spam email, I received advertisements for "Exclusive Quality Lingerie - Look So... Sexy!" and with every order I was promised "a free link to blast bin Laden." I also got invitations to look at the nude picture of a nursing student who "enjoys taking care of people and making friends" and then she added "Hey Osama!! There is a picture of my nice butt on my page. You can only wish that you would be allowed to kiss it!! I want to see your butt... in JAIL!!" Another woman offering up pictures of herself "who always smells good" and "has a warm soft voice" and "can't help being a pervert," announced in her email: "for all you darling soldiers out there keeping us safe I want to give you my very best" and then she invites men in the military to download desktop sized signed pictures of herself in various states of undress, adding "Please, I only have a small computer with limited bandwidth so if you are not in the military let the soldier boys get the pictures ok? Be patriotic." The Western woman strips off her clothes with bravado, flaunting her sexuality as a mark of her freedom. Unveiled, body offered up and on display, she challenges and threatens the enemy and is admired and lauded for her patriotism. In contrast to the women in the burqas who are represented as bodiless and voiceless, these women are all body and voice, but like the women in the burqas who "choose" to veil, this "choice" to unveil is not an uncomplicated assertion of freedom but also part of such varied factors as culture, economics, patriarchy.

In these examples, women's bodies are unveiled in order to be further veiled as ornaments. This version of "female independence" ties into the current marketing of "girl power," which unlike previous versions of feminism, makes money, sells products, threatens no existing order, and is embraced by advertisers, Hollywood, and mainstream media alike. It is an updated version of Freud's narcissistic woman, repacked and sold as female sexual clout. The woman, donning make-up and lingerie, seeks compliments and adoration; she offsets her genital lack by investing narcissistically in her body and putting it on display. This "self-containment" of the woman then compensates for the "social restrictions that are imposed upon [her]" ("Narcissism" 14: 88). This woman's need does not manifest itself in living but in being loved. She does not desire a love-object or fight for one as does the man but turns herself into a love-object of the successful man, an object that inspires and rewards his heroic feats. Thus, according to Freud, the "normal" woman accepts her subordinate position, her "castration," and transforms herself

into an object in order to attract, in this case the armed man, and vicariously gain access to phallic power. This enforcing of the relentless hetero-normative model - American military men “saving” veiled women from “emasculated” Afghani men, while unveiled Western women strip for these men as a reward - is carried out in the name of the nation and patriotism just as women veiling often is performed as a duty to the *umma*.

Rescuing the “veiled woman,” as the very logic for the war, however, did not have any validity in Iraq, where literacy rates amongst women were the highest in Middle East and where they represented almost half the workforce prior to the UN sanctions imposed on Iraq in the 1990s. After initially responding with disbelief to a Palestinian lawyer’s 1991 description of Saddam Hussein as both a “ruthless tyrant” and as someone who had “done more for women’s rights than any leader in the Arab world,” Elizabeth Fernea travelled to Iraq and wrote: “I had come to the conclusion that she was right: Saddam Hussein, despite his horrendous reputation in the West, had the best record on women’s rights in the Arab world.” In the post-sanction economically depressed “emasculated” Iraq, women began to lose the rights they had fought hard for. The liberation of “Iraqi” women, although trotted out half-heartedly at the start of the war, couldn’t be mobilized effectively given this history and petered out quickly as Western intervention had made the lives of Eastern women demonstrably worse.

Like Helen and Troy, however, war has always been somewhere in the mix about using women’s bodies as alibis - fighting for control of them, saving them, raping them, veiling them, unveiling them. Rather than women draped in burqas, photos of militarized Iraqi women were more likely to be featured on the front pages of the mainstream media: pictures of veiled, vocal, angry women brandishing guns, carrying children, and shouting anti-American slogans; women with bombs strapped to their bodies arriving at military checkpoints, determined to fight occupying American and British forces and ready to die doing it. Against this militant Eastern woman, Western women were no longer stripping off as sign of their liberation, toughness, and independence. I got no spam email during this war inviting me to buy lingerie and “blast” the enemy or watch women strip off in the name of patriotism. “Operation Playmate” started up again but this time it was vocal about the fact that only head shots or photos of clothed “bunnies” were being sent to the troops in Iraq. The photos sent to Afghanistan were also apparently of clothed women but this was not advertised by Playboy and at the time most of the media coverage (see above) suggested just the opposite - that the women sent nude shots. This

time a spokesman for *Playboy* announced that: “The decision not to send out any nudes into a region populated mostly by conservative Muslim nations was also due to the fact that there are *far more women in the US armed forces* than ever before,” He added: “Not that we’re trying to be PC [politically correct], far from it, but the object of ‘Operation Playmate’ is to boost morale so we certainly wouldn’t want to offend anyone within the services” (emphasis mine, Agence France-Presse). Instead the American porn spam turned its attention to Arab women and turned hardcore promising videos and pictures of American military men “unveiling” and “gang banging” Iraqi women as if in punishment for their assertiveness and independence.

Unlike the war in Afghanistan, where the focus was on American military men, veiled women, and sexually “liberated women,” the focus of the war in Iraq, even in such unlikely venues as *Playboy*, was on American women in the forces. In stark contrast to the Iraqi women fighters portrayed in the papers or on the porn sites, these women were, despite rigorous military training, not presented as young, helpless, virginal, child-like, vulnerable - this time it was Western women, not veiled women, who were in need of rescuing. If in Afghanistan, a narrative with a long history of wanting to save and unveil the oppressed Eastern women was trotted out, in this war the equally pervasive narrative of wanting to save “fair” Western women from the clutches of “lascivious” and “ruthless” Arab men was deployed in the media. Western travel literature, fiction, fashion, painting, advertising, Hollywood films, and pornography about the Orient expose the fascination with a *1001 Arabian Nights*-like fantastical exotic and sensual East that fuels the Western imaginary. Full of the clichés of harem girls, beautiful boys, belly dancers, named bound sex slaves, eunuchs, spices, perfumes, veils, and unbridled sexuality, there is also the ever-present atmosphere of violence with the threat of poisons, strangulations, and drowning. The sultan or sheik, ruler of the harem is, within the convention of this genre, portrayed as having perverse and insatiable sexual appetites - a despot who is constantly looking to capture the always resistant prized white women to add to his collection, abducting her at sea or carrying her off on his horse through the desert. Mozart’s opera *The Abduction from the Seraglio* highlights this convention of Western portrayals of the East, where a lady and her maid are captured by pirates and end up in the palace of the Pasha. He falls in love with the fair lady as his servant falls in love with her maid, but these ruthless men force their love on their victims - the Pasha threatening torture if his love is not reciprocated.

When American military women went missing in Iraq, the mainstream newspapers turned their attention to the whole question of the sexual vulnerability of women in combat serving in an Arab country. No longer was the focus on the equality, rights, strength and independence of Western women as it was in the Afghan war. One columnist described women in the American military as “giddy, apple-cheeked girls” who still sleep with stuffed animals. She went on to suggest that these virginal women-children were in danger of being preyed on sexually. Using only their first names and referring to them as “girls” to further infantilise them, she wrote: “Call me sexist. But I confess I’m troubled by the thoughts of girls like Jessica and single mothers like Shoshana being rounded up by gunpoint by fedayeen and other men who have never heard of the Geneva Conventions,” and she goes on to raise what she calls the “delicate issue of the sexual abuse of female prisoner” (Wente). Another reporter wrote: “nearly every soldier interviewed here, as well as many civilians and military experts, said the first thing they thought of upon seeing Shoshana’s picture was sexual torture” (Wigloren).

Western men, in contrast, were represented as paternal and protective of their “helpless” army mates. A columnist in the *National Review* wrote: “I do not believe American men in the military are capable of pretending that a young woman in their company is exactly the same as a young 18-year-old man... I think we can expect he will act differently in the interest of trying to protect that young woman. I’m fairly certain she wouldn’t mind” (Obeirne). It seems she is right on at least one account - in the military, American men seem not to be able to think of American women as “exactly” the same, but “she” certainly does mind this differential treatment. The recent allegations of rape in the military have been consistently dismissed: “Despite the estimated 150 cases of rape over the past decade, only one male cadet has been court-marshalled on such a charge during that time, and he was acquitted. Even the most flagrant cases usually result only in discharge from the academy. In some cases, attackers have been given such ‘punishments’ as writing a paper” (Martin). Another article reports that: “By April 2004, rapes and assaults of American female soldiers [by American men] were epidemic in the Middle East... more than 83 incidents were reported during a six-month period in Iraq and Kuwait,” but again these reports were consistently ignored (Hackworth). While Arab men are imagined as threatening and violent sexual predators, American men who rape are dismissed with a “boys will be boys” attitude, and women who are raped and protest are dismissed with a “what did they expect” response.

It was in this climate that the Jessica Lynch story emerged as front-page news: it was first reported that this woman had fought and shot her way through an Iraqi ambush; had been shot, stabbed, and beaten herself; deposited and held in an Iraqi hospital where she was abused - and somewhere along the way sodomized. Her dramatic rescue by US special forces was staged and recorded, imitating the conventions of a Hollywood action film, according to a British documentary *War Spin, Saving Private Jessica, Fact or Fiction?*, and packaged and distributed to the media and an American public anxious for a cause, in a war that increasingly did not seem to have one, to rally around. This same crew also revealed that Lynch had not been shot or stabbed but had been badly injured when her truck rolled after taking a wrong turn; that the Iraqis had already tried to give Lynch back to the Americans, but that the ambulance carrying her was shot at and had to turn back; that she received good care and suffered no abuse at the hospital - a nurse had even sung to her and others had donated blood; and that there were no Iraqi troops guarding the hospital and no resistance to her being taken in its care. Trying to deflect attention from the discrepancies in her story, the American government then released a report that she was suffering from amnesia, although her parent's reported that her memory was fine. NBC, nevertheless, then went ahead, without her cooperation, with a TV movie, celebrating American heroism, called *Saving Jessica Lynch*.

Despite these attempts to silence her, Lynch, vocal about the ways in which the American government used her, described herself as a "symbol"; like the Afghani women, she was used as a prop to justify war. Yet in her biography, *I am A Soldier Too: The Jessica Lynch Story*, there is still the claim that her shattered body was sodomized in the three hours she "lost" after being pulled from the truck and deposited at a hospital. Again she is silenced, leaving the reader, as Rick Bragg, the author, asks us to do: "to fill in the blanks of what Jessie lived through" in her unconscious state. Despite the fact that the biography is written by a discredited *New York Times* journalist, who claims in the book that "everyone knew what Saddam's soldiers did to women captives," despite the Iraqi doctors' insistence that there was no evidence of anal sexual trauma, despite the fact that all the other claims about her capture were false, and despite the fact that Lynch "has no memory of the rape," headlines generated by the book read: "They Raped Jessica" and "Fiends Raped Jessica" (Colford and Siemaszko). These headlines play into the trope of the "fair" woman held captive by the violently sexual Arab man, motivating the heroic Western man, roused by her helplessness, to fight to save her. The photos from

hard core porn cites that stage actors portraying American military men raping actors playing Iraqi women that are circulating in the Arab media as “real” rape (and mixed in with the actual photos of abuse from Abu Gharib) are, in an Occidentalist reverse of this trope, about arousing the same desire amongst Arab men to save and fight for “their” women, as wars continue to be fought in the name of women’s bodies even as women continue to be silenced.

While Western women in the Afghan war were celebrated for stripping off as a sign of their freedom and power, during the Iraq war, they were portrayed as vulnerable and virginal. After Larry Flynt, the publisher of *Hustler*, paid for some pictures of Jessica Lynch posing nude for some of her military mates, he locked them away in a vault. He bought them and planned to publish them to show that Lynch was being used by the government as a “pawn” to justify the war and that she was not as innocent as painted. But he decided against publishing them when his wife told him America would “hate” him for it and there was a public outcry: “I’m getting so much heat for this is it’s unbelievable... I’m going to take [the photos] out of circulation” (Rush and Hutchinson). “Patriotic porn” was out in this war and Western women were no longer being lauded for their “patriotic” sexual exhibitionism, but were portrayed as innocents who needed to be protected from sexually aggressive Arab men.

Shoshana Johnson, however, quietly took apart this pervasive Orientalist narrative of the predatory Arab man, and she was largely ignored because of it. She was also captured, shot in both legs, but unlike the blue-eyed, blonde, petite Lynch, she got very little attention: there was no dramatic media coverage of her ordeal, no movie based on her, no lucrative book contracts, and she has received a much smaller disability pension from the military than Lynch. First mistaken for the enemy by rescuing troops who didn’t recognize this black, single mother as “American,” she said in a comment that got no headline play, that when she was captured by Iraqis: “They opened my NBC [nuclear, biological, chemical] suit and noticed I was female’ and after that she said they treated her ‘very well’” (Freeze). The sensationalist accounts of her impending “sexual torture” that dominated the media reports after her capture, proved nothing more than a fantasy generated by a Western imaginary, fueling animosity toward an imagined enemy.

Perversely playing out this Western fantasy of the Arab man who violently lusts after the infinitely desirable Western woman, the male prisoners in Abu Gharib were forced to simulate sex while American women taunted them. Hayder Sabbar Abd, one of the hooded men in the photos

that circulated around the world, said, “he and six other inmates were beaten, stripped, named... forced to pile on top of one another, to straddle one another’s backs naked, to simulate oral sex. American guards wrote words like “rapist” on their skin with Magic Marker. ...[H]e recalled being forced against a wall and ordered by the Arabic translator to masturbate as he looked at one of the female guards. ‘She was laughing, and she put her hands on her breasts,’ Mr Abd said. “Of course, I couldn’t do it. I told them that I couldn’t. So they beat me in the stomach, and I fell to the ground. The translator said, ‘Do it! Do it! It’s better than being beaten.’ I said, ‘How can I do it?’ So I put my hand on my penis, just pretending” (Fisher). The Orient of the Western imaginary, the exotic, decadent, sexually charged East here surfaces as just that - a fantasy. In the context of imperialism, it is a performance that involves the abuser writing “rapist” on his victim, while forcing him to perform an “otherness” of an unbridled and perverse sexuality that has been scripted for him. The fantastical fear of the other that fuels both the war in Afghanistan and Iraq - the vulnerable Eastern or Western women in need of rescue from tyrannical dark-skinned men - is rooted in a fear of the self. The prison scandal is a microcosm of deeper psychic paranoia.

Thomas Mann wrote in *Dr. Faustus*: “He who believes in the devil already belongs to him.” Thus, Osama Bin Laden calls America “Satan” and blows up the World Trade Centre killing thousands of people. He and the *mujahideen* got their start with the help of Saudi and American governments and were funded and armed by the CIA to fight a holy war against the Soviets, who had been dubbed the “evil” empire by President Ronald Reagan. Sympathy for the victims of the American bombing poured in from around the world, but Bush retaliated, “forgetting” any complicity in Bin Laden’s creation, calling him “an incredibly evil man” and the American populus was further whipped into a state of moral outrage by the pictures of heavily veiled women that graced the covers of their newspapers, an image that has a long history, as suggested earlier, of being used as a rallying cry by imperialists in Egypt, Algeria, and the Ottoman Empire. In the logic of Mann, Saddam Hussein and George Bush took turns calling each other “Satan.” Yet up to the invasion in Kuwait, the dictator Hussein, through the 1980s, was fully supported by the American government in the war against Iran, at that time the source of “evil.” Under Reagan, Iraq was removed from Jimmy Carter’s 1979 list of countries that supported terrorists to enable closer economic ties with the US; the UN security council was blocked by the British and American governments from denouncing Iraq’s use of chemical weapons; American companies were

licensed to supply Iraq with equipment, raw materials, and biological and bacterial agents; Donald Rumsfeld, the current Secretary of Defense, had in 1983 and 1984 met with Hussein in Bagdad and ignored his use of chemical weapons against Iran in the interests of supporting American-Iraqi relations, and then during this war vocally condemned Hussein for this use, citing this atrocity as a rationale for the war against Iraq.

“Bush,” “Osama,” and “Hussein,” and what they represent, have all three been supported by a military, industrial complex, have been empowered by a similar network of interests, (all wealthy) have consistently declared themselves on the side of the “disenfranchised” and have appealed variously to “freedom fighters,” the “common man,” the “oppressed.” The simplistic “good and the evil” and “us and them” of their speeches is used to construct a divide that does not exist any more than the Western fantasy of a “perverse” East, the role forced on the tortured and twisted bodies of the prisoners in Abu Gharib. They are born of the same blood and they feed on each other in an endless cycle played out for a mainstream media that seems incapable of acknowledging the complications of history, that selectively presents the “facts” for dramatic effect as opposed to trying to get closer to the truth of them, and that depends on the simplicity of this drama to sell its papers and broadcasts.

Bombing and killing more civilians in Afghanistan (there are no precise numbers as to how many more) than died in the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in America (where the records are meticulous); invading Iraq on the false grounds that the “secular” Hussein had links to Al Qaeda and nuclear weapons; sweeping up Palestinians, whose land is being occupied, under the label of terrorists; and now turning a blind eye to Russian abuses in Chechnya (in a 1999 speech, Bush said about this situation “we cannot excuse Russian brutality”); the divisions between war and terrorism, between freedom fighters and criminals, between liberators and occupiers become equally murky as wars produce their own terror and freedom fighters become criminals and vice versa. There is no more solidity to these terms than to Bush’s or Bin Laden’s or Hussein’s distinctions between “us” and “them.”

Neither the Afghan war nor the war in Iraq is about retaliation for the killings in New York and Washington, which like many mass killings and deaths around the world and over time, and these being tragic but small in comparison, take their place in history. Rather these wars are being fought to save Americans from an as yet unnameable future terror that has its roots in the atomic bomb, unnameable because total annihilation would leave no record, no trace, no one left to name or remember. Only the

Americans, killing well over two hundred thousand civilians and destroying the cities of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, have ever used nuclear warfare and the traumatic amnesia that this mass murder has induced - the insistent mantra “we are right, we are good, we are liberators” that dominates the mainstream press, despite all evidence to the contrary - seeks to name this unnameable “terror,” like the orientalist narratives that have fueled these wars, as outside of the self and beyond the borders of the nation. Quick to fill the role are the largely American creations – Hussein and Bin Laden and their followers – who jump to play the “other” that has been so meticulously scripted for them.

At its most simplistic, the current division between the West and East today is often understood as involving a fundamental divide: spiritualism vs. capitalism, tradition vs. modernity, community vs. individual rights, religion vs. the secular, and at the heart of this divide is the figure of the veiled/unveiled woman, who secures it. But it also this figure that undoes this divide; it is the very place where it breaks down. A member of RAWA, speaking necessarily under a pseudonym, said in an interview: “The U.S. and British First Ladies tried to project the bombardment of Afghanistan as benefitting Afghan women, but the entire world knew that it was a punishment given to the puppets by the masters and nothing else” (Ravishankar). There is no divide: there are only “puppets” and “masters” - those who want to shut down any conversation with their rhetoric of “good” and “evil” and those who would work to keep it going.

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