

From native informant to diasporic activist: the gendered politics of empire

By Sunera Thobani

During 'Operation Protective Edge' (2014), the Israeli war on Gaza, activist-writer Ayaan Hirsi Ali called for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. Ali, a migrant from Somalia, has built her political career on denigrating Islam and Muslims. She hardly stands alone in this. In *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Azar Nafisi excoriates what she sees as the small-minded, anti-intellectualism of Iranian Muslims. The book became an instant bestseller and was integrated into university courses across North America. In a similar vein *Beneath the Veil*, a documentary on Afghan women living under Taliban rule, was broadcast repeatedly after 9/11, and as the US launched its invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, *Kandahar*, a 'docu-drama' scripted by Afghan-Canadian feminist Pilfer Pazira, was screened for President Bush to acquaint him with Afghan society.

In this essay, I explore a number of issues raised by this increasing array of highly publicised instances of diasporic women's participation in the 'new' imperialism of the twenty-first century wherein the politics of war and occupation are articulated in the register of women's rights. Most scholars studying such media and literary production focus on the question of women's agency and their critiques of their communities of origin (see Dabashi 2011; Mahmood 2008). My interest is somewhat different. I am interested in studying the place of such diasporic activism in producing the knowledge that legitimises contemporary imperialist practices. My research finds that feminism now grounds such practices; indeed, it is only as feminists that these diasporic intellectuals stake their claim to subject status

as they attempt to transcend their historical constitution as empire's objects. The 'War on Terror', I argue, reveals the extent to which feminism is integrated into imperialist structures of authority.

Empire's (proto) subject

With the Bush administration identifying its objectives in the war as fighting 'terror' and 'liberating' Afghan women, the question of 'the Muslim woman' moved centre-stage in global politics. Images of veiled Muslim women and bearded Muslim men brandishing the Qur'an became pervasive in news reports, signifying the 'barbarism' of Islam and the 'fanaticism' of its adherents. These images conflated the spatial and temporal status of Muslims, collapsing the diverse traditions articulated in the name of 'Islam' along with the heterogeneity within Muslim societies. Moreover, de-historicising and de-contextualising the relationship between the 'West' and 'Islam', the war's politics hinged on the ideological construction of absolute enmity between the two.

Colonial expansion had earlier brought European powers in contact with Islam, transforming both in profound ways. Although Muslims were at the forefront of the anti-colonial struggles of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, secularising forces emerged dominant in the postcolonial order (Sayyid 2004; Crooke 2009; Asad 2003). Moreover, labour shortages in the West during the mid-twentieth century made migration indispensable to its economic expansion. As immigration policies and citizenship were reformulated to provide this labour, Muslim communities migrated there in significant numbers. Western states juggled their labour market needs with maintaining the 'whiteness' of their nations, casting immigrants as perpetual strangers (Lowe 1996; Bannerji 2000; Thobani 2007; Ahmed 2000). Yet, despite the prevalence of racial discrimination, Muslim immigrants experienced some measure of socio-economic mobility. It was in this context that the attacks of 9/11 occurred, and the films and literary texts that I studied were produced and distributed for mass consumption.

An overall trend in the award-winning documentaries and films made by Muslim filmmakers that I analysed was their grounding of imperialist ideologies of Western benevolence in the lives of Muslim

women. These texts typically focused on gendered violence and produced sensationalised images of the veil as signifier of Islamic misogyny. Their unrelenting descriptions of the veil as ‘suffocating’ and ‘imprisoning’ led me to categorise these texts as ‘veilmentaries’ for they obscured, rather than revealed, the complexities that shape the gender relations being depicted.¹ So, for example, *Beneath the Veil*, *Return to Kandahar*, and *Faith Without Fear* use veiled Muslim women’s lives as the raw material, as it were, to argue Muslim women would benefit most from Western gender norms in a manner that advanced the Bush administration’s bid for control of the material resources – oil and natural gas – of the Middle East and Central Asia. Moreover, such portrayal of Muslim women as abject victims is matched by an equally disturbing portrayal of Muslim men as all-powerful misogynists. So in the feature film *Osama*, a Mullah allied with the Taliban is portrayed as a perverted paedophile who has fantasies about nymphs (‘boys who look like girls in heaven’); the old man already has a number of wives and children when ‘Osama’, a young adolescent girl, is forced to marry him. This depiction leaves little doubt that the saving of Muslim women requires the extermination of the Muslim male.

Anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod has studied the burgeoning industry of Muslim women’s ‘autobiographies’ in the war in terror. Abu-Lughod argues these narratives provide disturbing but titillating accounts of rape and sexual violence which are pornographic in style. Such fantasies of rape also permeate the documentaries and films that I studied; violence is invariably depicted here as sparked by the perversities sanctioned by ‘Islam’. In *Kandahar*, for example, the heroine-journalist on a rescue mission in Afghanistan depicts violence as the primary condition of life in this barren and lifeless space, ‘even in the children’s games.’ She describes how ‘everything is at war, dog fights dog, bird fights bird, human fights human.’ Nature is at war with itself here, such that the human beings are little more than animals. Deploying her (previous) Afghan identity as seal of the authenticity of her narrative, she legitimates Western domination while affirming her present ‘Western’ status in common with that of her audience.

The texts referred to above help crystallise images of the victimhood of Muslim women at the hands of Muslim men, they

simultaneously secure the constitution of Western subjectivity as superior by virtue of its alleged commitment to gender egalitarianism. Using her mobility as demonstrative of such commitment, the diasporic filmmaker traffics in the liminality of the space between 'here' and 'there,' 'us' and 'them.' Her production of 'the' Muslim woman thus helps underwrite US foreign policy through her feminist condemnation of Muslims and Islam.

Native informant redux

Distinguishing the 'native informant' from the 'native informer,' Hamid Dabashi critiques the writings and political activism of prominent immigrant intellectuals from the Muslim world. Whereas the category of native informant 'credits comprador intellectuals with the knowledge they claim to possess but in fact do not,' he argues the term native informer is more appropriate to the present moment as it flags 'the moral degeneration specific to the act of betrayal' by these intellectuals (Dabashi 2011: 12). In this perspective, the intellectual labour of these diasporic subjects produces '...the public illusions' that sustain the very empire waging war on their communities of origin (*ibid.*: 13).

Once valorised as indispensable to the anthropological project of categorising the cultural difference that colonial administrators sought to manage, the native informant came to be derided in the postcolonial era. With neoliberal globalisation, this figure became linked to the discourse of multiculturalism and increasingly integrated into the circuits of capital, speaking 'in the name of indigenous knowledge' to further biopiracy (Spivak 1999). My analysis of a number of films and documentaries recently produced by Muslims demonstrates these intellectuals have made no small contribution to advancing imperialist ideology. Embodying and grounding this ideology in Muslim women's biographies is the means by which these filmmakers further their own status as the (proto) subject of Empire.

The 'War on Terror' has transformed the rights of Muslims by subjecting them to unprecedented surveillance and violence. My study demonstrates that the diasporic subject who services the imperial machine has, thus far, been indispensable to disseminating

Endnotes

1. The films I have studied include *Beneath the Veil*, *Return to Kandahar*, *Daughters of Afghanistan*, and *Faith without Fear*. I have also studied the feature films *Kandahar*, *Osama* and *Slumdog Millionaire*. See Thobani (2009); Thobani (2010); Thobani (2008).

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