

Do Muslim Women (Still) Need Saving?

Commentators noted the political timing of *Time* magazine's cover story about a beautiful young woman from Afghanistan whose nose had been cut off. The unsettling photograph of Bibi Aysha, whose Taliban husband and in-laws had punished her this way, appeared on newsstands in August 2010. Eight months earlier, President Obama had authorized a troop surge, but now there was talk about bringing some Taliban into reconciliation talks. The juxtaposition between the photograph and the headline—"What Happens if We Leave Afghanistan?"—implied that women would be the first victims. Unremarked was the fact that this act of mutilation had been carried out while U.S. and British troops were still present in Afghanistan.¹

Time had selected this photograph from a large number of possible images. The talented South African photographer who took it explained the backstory at the award ceremony when it was declared World Press Photo of the Year. Jodi Bieber had been on assignment in Afghanistan taking portraits of women. She had photographed politicians, documentary filmmakers,

popular television hosts, and women in shelters and burn hospitals.²

Time's managing editor defended his decision to feature this shocking photograph in both moral and political terms. Even if it might distress children, he wrote (and he had consulted child psychologists), they needed to know that “bad things happen to people.” The image, he also argued, “is a window into the reality of what is happening—and what can happen—in a war that affects and involves all of us.” He was not taking sides, he said, but he would “rather confront readers with the Taliban’s treatment of women than ignore it.” He continued: “The much-publicized release of classified documents by WikiLeaks has already ratcheted up the debate about the war . . . We do not run this story or show this image either in support of the U.S. war effort or in opposition to it. We do it to illuminate what is actually happening on the ground . . . What you see in these pictures and our story is something that you cannot find in those 91,000 documents: a combination of emotional truth and insight into the way life is lived in that difficult land and the consequences of the important decisions that lie ahead.”³

Bibi Aysha had been photographed in a shelter in Kabul run by an American organization with a large local staff, Women for Afghan Women (WAW). She was waiting there to be sent to the United States for reconstructive surgery, thanks to the generosity of donors and the Grossman Burn Foundation. Both the photographer and WAW were broadsided by the publicity following the *Time* cover. WAW tried to protect Bibi Aysha from the glare, eventually preventing all interviews and photographs. By then they were sheltering her in New York, hoping she would recover enough from her trauma for surgery to take place.

A member of WAW’s board nevertheless echoed *Time's* political message. She predicted “a bloodbath if we leave Afghanistan.”

Bibi Aysha's plight was to remind the public of the atrocities the Taliban had committed. Esther Hyneman rejected the suggestion made by Ann Jones in the *Nation* that the Taliban were being singled out for demonization when they were not much different from other misogynous groups in Afghanistan, including those in the U.S.-backed government. If the Taliban were to come to power, she warned, "the sole bulwarks against the permanent persecution of women will be gone." These bulwarks were the international human rights organizations and "local" organizations like her WAW.⁴

The controversy over Bibi Aysha indicates how central the question of Afghan women's rights remains to the politics of the War on Terror that, almost from its first days in 2001, has been justified in terms of saving Afghan women.⁵ As an anthropologist who had studied women and gender politics in another part of the Muslim world for so many years, I was not convinced at the time by this public rationale for war, even as I recognized that women in Afghanistan do have particular struggles and that some suffer disturbing forms of violence.

Like many colleagues whose work focuses on women in the Middle East and the Muslim world, I was deluged with invitations to speak at the time of heightened interest in 2001. It was the beginning of many years of being contacted by news programs, as well as by departments at colleges and universities, especially women's studies programs. I was a scholar who had by then devoted more than twenty years of my life to this subject, and it was gratifying to be offered opportunities to share my knowledge. The urgent desire to understand our sister "women of cover" (as President George W. Bush had so marvelously called them) was laudable. When it came from women's studies programs where transnational feminism was taken seriously, it had integrity. But I was uncomfortable.

Discomfort with this sudden attention led me to reflect on why, as feminists in or from the West, or simply as people concerned about women's lives, we might be wary of this response to the events and aftermath of September 11, 2001. What are the minefields—a metaphor sadly too apt for a country like Afghanistan (with the world's highest number of mines per capita)—of this obsession with the plight of Muslim women? What could anthropology, the discipline whose charge is to understand and manage cultural difference, offer us as a way around these dangers? Critical of anthropology's complicity in a long history of reifying cultural difference, linked to its ties with colonial power, I had long advocated "writing against culture." So what insights could I contribute to this public discourse?

Cultural Explanations and the Mobilization of Women

In an essay I published in 2002, less than a year after I gave it as a lecture at Columbia University, I argued that we should be skeptical regarding this sudden concern about Afghan women. I considered two manifestations of this response: some conversations I had with a reporter from the *PBS NewsHour*; and the radio address to the nation on November 17, 2001, given by then first lady Laura Bush. The presenter from *NewsHour* first contacted me in October 2001 to see if I would be willing to provide some background for a segment on Women and Islam. I asked her whether they had done segments on the women of Guatemala, Ireland, Palestine, or Bosnia when the show covered wars in those countries. But I agreed to look at the questions she was going to pose to panelists. I found them hopelessly general. Do Muslim women believe X? Are Muslim women Y? Does Islam allow Z for women? I asked her if she would ask the same questions about Christianity or Judaism. I did not imagine she would

call me back. But she did, twice. The first was with an idea for a segment on the meaning of Ramadan, which was in response to an American bombing during that time. The second was for a program on Muslim women in politics, following speeches by Laura Bush and Cherie Blair, wife of the then British prime minister.

What is striking about these three ideas for news programs is that there was a consistent resort to the cultural, as if knowing something about women and Islam or the meaning of a religious ritual would help one understand the tragic attack on New York's World Trade Center and the U.S. Pentagon; how Afghanistan had come to be ruled by the Taliban; what interests might have fueled U.S. and other interventions in the region over the past quarter of a century; what the history of American support for conservative Afghan fighters might have been; or why the caves and bunkers out of which Osama bin Laden was to be smoked "dead or alive," as President Bush announced on television, were paid for and built by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

To put it another way, why was knowing about the culture of the region—and particularly its religious beliefs and treatment of women—more urgent than exploring the history of the development of repressive regimes in the region and the United States' role in this history? Such cultural framing, it seemed to me, prevented the serious exploration of the roots and nature of human suffering in that part of the world. Instead of political and historical explanations, experts were being asked to give religious or cultural ones. Instead of questions that might lead to the examination of internal political struggles among groups in Afghanistan, or of global interconnections between Afghanistan and other nation-states, we were offered ones that worked to artificially divide the world into separate spheres—re-creating an imaginative

geography of West versus East, us versus Muslims, cultures in which first ladies give speeches versus others in which women shuffle around silently in burqas.

Most troubling for me was why the Muslim or Afghan woman was so crucial to this cultural mode of explanation that ignored the complex entanglements in which we are all implicated in sometimes surprising alignments. Why were these female symbols being mobilized in the War on Terror in a way they had not been in other conflicts? As so many others by now have pointed out, Laura Bush's radio address on November 17, 2001, revealed the political work such mobilization accomplished. On the one hand, her address collapsed important distinctions that should have been maintained. There was a constant slippage between the Taliban and the terrorists, so that they became almost one word—a kind of hyphenated monster identity: the “Taliban-and-the-terrorists.”⁶ Then there was the blurring of the very separate causes of Afghan women's suffering: malnutrition, poverty, class politics, and ill health, and the more recent exclusion under the Taliban from employment, schooling, and the joys of wearing nail polish. On the other hand, her speech reinforced chasmic divides, principally between the “civilized people throughout the world” whose hearts break for the women and children of Afghanistan and the Taliban-and-the-terrorists, the cultural monsters who want to, as she put it, “impose their world on the rest of us.”

The speech enlisted women to justify American military intervention in Afghanistan and to make a case for the War on Terror of which it was a part. As Laura Bush said, “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 . . . The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women.”⁷

These words have haunting resonances for anyone who has studied colonial history. Many who have studied British colonialism in South Asia have noted the use of the woman question in colonial policies. Intervention into *sati* (the practice of widows immolating themselves on their husbands' funeral pyres) and child marriage were used to justify rule. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak famously put it, "white men saving brown women from brown men."⁸ The historical record is full of similar cases, including in the Middle East. In turn-of-the-century Egypt, what Leila Ahmed has called "colonial feminism" governed policy on women.⁹ There was a selective concern about the plight of Egyptian women that focused on the veil as a sign of their oppression but gave no support to women's education. The champion of women was the same English governor, Lord Cromer, who had opposed women's suffrage back home.

Marnia Lazreg, a sociologist of Algeria, has offered vivid examples of how French colonialism enlisted women to its cause in Algeria:

Perhaps the most spectacular example of the colonial appropriation of women's voices, and the silencing of those among them who had begun to take women revolutionaries . . . as role models by not donning the veil, was the event of May 16, 1958 [just four years before Algeria finally gained its independence from France after a long struggle and 130 years of French control]. On that day a demonstration was organized by rebellious French generals in Algiers to show their determination to keep Algeria French. To give the government of France evidence that Algerians were in agreement with them, the generals had a few thousand native men bused in from nearby villages, along with a few women who were solemnly unveiled by French women . . . Rounding up Algerians and bringing them to demonstrations of loyalty to France was not in itself an unusual act during the colonial era. But to unveil women at a well-choreographed ceremony

added to the event a symbolic dimension that dramatized the one constant feature of the Algerian occupation by France: its obsession with women.¹⁰

Lazreg gives memorable examples of the way in which the French had even earlier sought to transform Arab girls. *The Eloquence of Silence* describes skits at the award ceremonies at the Muslim Girls' School in Algiers in 1851 and 1852. In the first skit, written by "a French lady from Algiers," two Algerian girls reminisce about their trip to France with words including: "Oh! Protective France: Oh! Hospitable France! . . . Noble land, where I felt free Under Christian skies to pray to our God: . . . God bless you for the happiness you bring us! And you, adoptive mother, who taught us that we have a share of this world, we will cherish you forever!"¹¹

These girls are made to invoke the gift of a share of this world, a world where freedom reigns under Christian skies. This is certainly not the world the Taliban-and-the-terrorists would "like to impose on the rest of us."

Just as we need to be suspicious when neat cultural icons are plastered over messier historical and political narratives, so we need to be wary when Lord Cromer in British-ruled Egypt, French ladies in Algeria, and First Lady Laura Bush, all with military troops behind them, claim to be saving or liberating Muslim women. We also need to acknowledge the differences among these projects of liberating women. Saba Mahmood points particularly to the overlap today between the liberal discourses of feminism and secular democracy; the missionary literature from earlier eras, like the Algerian school skit, show instead that the earlier language was not secular.¹²

Politics of the Veil

Let us look more closely at those Afghan women who were said to be rejoicing at their liberation by the Americans. This necessitates a discussion of the veil, or the burqa, because it is so central to contemporary concerns about Muslim women. This sets the stage for some thoughts on how anthropologists, feminist anthropologists in particular, contend with the problem of difference in a global world and gives us preliminary insights into some of what's wrong with the rhetoric of saving Muslim women.

It is commonly thought that the ultimate sign of the oppression of Afghan women under the Taliban is that they were forced to wear the blue burqa. Liberals sometimes confess their surprise that women did not throw off their burqas after the Taliban were removed from power in Afghanistan in 2001. Someone who has worked in Muslim regions would ask why this should be surprising. Did we expect that once "free" from the extremist Taliban these women would go "back" to belly shirts and blue jeans or dust off their Chanel suits? We need to be more sensible about the clothing of "women of cover," and so there is perhaps a need to make some very basic points about veiling.

First, it should be recalled that the Taliban did not invent the burqa. It was the local form of covering that Pashtun women in one region wore when they went out. The Pashtun are one of several ethnic groups in Afghanistan and the burqa was one of many forms of covering in the subcontinent and Southwest Asia that had developed as a convention for symbolizing women's modesty or respectability. The burqa, like some other forms of cover has, in many settings, marked the symbolic separation of men's and women's domains, part of the general association of women with family and home rather than public spaces where strangers mingle.

Hanna Papanek, an anthropologist who worked in Pakistan in the 1970s, has described the burqa as “portable seclusion.” She notes that many saw it as a liberating invention because it enabled women to move out of segregated living spaces while still observing the basic moral requirements of separating and protecting women from unrelated men.¹³ Ever since I came across her phrase “portable seclusion,” I have thought of these enveloping robes as “mobile homes.” Everywhere, such veiling signifies belonging to a particular community and participating in a moral way of life in which families are paramount in the organization of communities and the home is associated with the sanctity of women.

The obvious question that follows is this: If this were the case in Pakistan or Afghanistan, why would women suddenly want to give up the burqa in 2001? Why would they throw off the markers of their respectability that assured their protection from the harassment of strangers in the public sphere by symbolically signaling to all that they were still in the inviolable space of their homes and under the protection of family, even though moving about in public? In fact, these forms of dress might have become so conventional that most women gave little thought to their meaning.

To draw some analogies (none of them perfect), why should we be surprised that Afghan women did not throw off their burqas when we know perfectly well that in our society it would not be appropriate to wear shorts to the Metropolitan Opera? At the time these discussions of Afghan women’s burqas were raging, a wealthy friend of mine was chided by her husband for suggesting that she wanted to wear a pantsuit to a wedding: “You know you don’t wear pants to a WASP wedding,” he reminded her. New Yorkers know that the beautifully coiffed Hasidic women, who look so fashionable next to their somber husbands in black

coats and hats, are wearing wigs. This is because religious belief and community standards of propriety require the covering of the hair. They also alter boutique fashions to include high necks and long sleeves. People wear the appropriate form of dress for their social communities and their social classes. They are guided by socially shared standards and signals of social status. Religious beliefs and moral ideals are also important, including as targets for transgressions to make a point (one thinks of Madonna here). The ability to afford proper and appropriate cover affects choice. If we think that U.S. women live in a world of choice regarding clothing, we might also remind ourselves of the expression, “the tyranny of fashion.”

What happened in Afghanistan under the Taliban was that one regional style of covering or veiling—associated with a certain respectable but not elite class—was imposed on everyone as “religiously” appropriate, even though previously there had been many different styles that were popular or traditional with different groups and classes. There had been different ways to mark women’s propriety or, in more recent times, piety. Even before the Taliban, the majority of women in Afghanistan were rural and non-elite. They were the only ones who could not emigrate to escape the hardship and violence that has marked Afghanistan’s recent history. If liberated from the enforced wearing of burqas, most of these women would choose some other form of modest head covering, like those living across the region who were not under the Taliban—their rural Hindu counterparts in the North of India (who cover their heads and veil their faces from in-laws) or their fellow Muslims in Pakistan.

Even the *New York Times* carried a good article in 2001 about Afghan women refugees in Pakistan, attempting to educate readers about this local variety of modes of women’s veiling.¹⁴ The article described and pictured everything from the now-iconic

blue burqa with embroidered eyeholes, which a Pashtun woman explains is the proper dress for her community, to large scarves they call “chadors,” to the new Islamic modest dress that wearers refer to as “hijab.” Those wearing the new Islamic dress are characteristically students heading for professional careers, especially in medicine, just like their counterparts from Egypt to Malaysia. One wearing the large scarf was a school principal; the other was a poor street vendor. The telling quote from the young street vendor was, “If I did [wear the burqa] the refugees would tease me because the burqa is for ‘good women’ who stay inside the home.”¹⁵ Here you can see the local status in the Afghan refugee community that is associated with the burqa—it is for good, respectable women from strong families who are not forced to make a living selling on the street. It has nothing to do with being mute garbage bags by the side of the road, as the German human rights poster described in the introduction was to insinuate a decade later.

The British newspaper the *Guardian* published an interview in January 2002 with Dr. Suheila Siddiqi, a respected surgeon in Afghanistan who held the rank of lieutenant general in the Afghan medical corps.¹⁶ A woman in her sixties then, she came from an elite family and, like her sisters, was educated. Unlike most women of her class, she had chosen not to go into exile. She was presented in the article as “the woman who stood up to the Taliban” because she refused to wear the burqa. She had made it a condition of returning to her post as head of a major hospital when the Taliban came begging in 1996, just eight months after having fired her along with other women. Siddiqi is described as thin, glamorous, and confident. But further into the article, it is noted in passing that her graying bouffant hair is covered in a gauzy veil. This is a reminder that though she refused the burqa, she had no question about wearing the chador or scarf. Over the past

decade, the demographics and meaning of wearing (and not wearing) the burqa in public have changed, varying especially between the cities and countryside.¹⁷

Veiling must not be confused with, or made to stand for, lack of agency. Not only are there many forms of covering, which themselves have different meanings in the communities where they are used, but veiling has become caught up almost everywhere now in a politics of representation—of class, of piety, and of political affiliation. As I describe in *Veiled Sentiments*, my first ethnography of a Bedouin community in Egypt in the late 1970s and 1980s, for women I knew there, pulling the black head cloth over the face in front of older, respected men was considered a voluntary act. One of the ways they could show their honor and assert their social standing was by covering themselves in certain contexts. They would decide (and debate) for whom they felt it was appropriate to veil.¹⁸

To take a radically different case, the modest Islamic dress that so many educated women across the Muslim world have been adopting since the mid-1970s both publicly marks their piety and can be read as a sign of educated urban sophistication, a sort of modernity.¹⁹ For many pious women in the Islamic revival, this new form of dress is embraced as part of a bodily means, like prayer, to cultivate virtue. It is, as Mahmood has described, the outcome of their professed desire to be close to God.²⁰ Lara Deeb, who has written about the public piety of women in Lebanon who are associated with Hizbollah, described how these women see themselves as part of a new Islamic modernity, an “enchanted modern.”²¹ In some countries, and not just Europe, women have to violate the law to take on this form of dress. In other countries, like Iran, women’s play with color or tightness, or the revelation of a shoulder, a belly button, an ankle, or a wisp of hair mark political and class resistance.²²

So we need to work against the reductive interpretation of veiling as the quintessential sign of women's unfreedom, even if we object to state imposition of this form, as in Iran or with the Taliban. (It must be recalled that earlier in the twentieth century, the modernizing states of Turkey and Iran had banned veiling and required men, except religious clerics, to adopt Western dress and wear European hats.) What does freedom mean if we accept the fundamental premise that humans are social beings, raised in certain social and historical contexts and belonging to particular communities that shape their desires and understandings of the world? Is it not a gross violation of women's own understandings of what they are doing to simply denounce the burqa as a medieval imposition? One cannot reduce the diverse situations and attitudes of millions of Muslim women to a single item of clothing. And we should not underestimate the ways that veiling has entered political contests across the world.²³

The significant political-ethical problem the burqa raises is how to deal with cultural "others." How are we to deal with difference without accepting the passivity implied by the cultural relativism for which anthropologists are justly famous—a relativism that says it's their culture and it's not my business to judge or interfere, only to try to understand? Cultural relativism is certainly an improvement on ethnocentrism and the racism, cultural imperialism, and imperiousness that underlie it; the problem is that it is too late not to interfere. The forms of lives we find around the world are already products of long histories of interactions among those living far from each other.

I suggest that we approach the issues of women, cultural relativism, and the problems of "difference" from three angles. First, we need to consider what feminists should do with strange political bedfellows.²⁴ I used to feel torn when I received the e-mail petitions circulating in defense of Afghan women under the

Taliban. I was not sympathetic to the dogmatism of the Taliban; I do not support the oppression of women. But the provenance of the campaign worried me. I do not usually find myself in political company with the likes of Hollywood celebrities.²⁵ I had never received a petition from such women defending the right of Palestinian women to safety from Israeli bombing or daily harassment at checkpoints, asking the United States to reconsider its support for a government that had dispossessed them, closed them out from work and citizenship rights, and refused them the most basic freedoms. Maybe some of these same people were signing petitions against sensational “cultural” practices, for example, to save African women from genital cutting or Indian women from dowry deaths. However, I do not think it would be as easy to mobilize so many of these American and European women if it were not a case of Muslim men oppressing Muslim women—women of cover, for whom they can feel sorry and in relation to whom they can feel smugly superior. Would television diva Oprah Winfrey host the Women in Black, the women’s peace group from Israel, as she did the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), which was also granted the *Glamour* magazine Women of the Year Award?

To be critical of this celebration of women’s rights in Afghanistan is not to pass judgment on any local women’s organizations such as RAWA, whose members have courageously worked since 1977 for a democratic secular Afghanistan in which women’s human rights are respected, against Soviet-backed regimes or U.S., Saudi-, and Pakistani-supported conservatives. Their documentation of abuse and their work through clinics and schools have been enormously important. It is also not to fault the campaigns that exposed the dreadful conditions under which the Taliban placed women. The Feminist Majority campaign helped put a stop to a secret oil pipeline deal between the

Taliban and the U.S. multinational corporation Unocal that was going forward with U.S. administration support.

Western feminist campaigns must not be confused with the hypocrisies of the colonial feminism of a Republican president who was not elected for his progressive stance on feminist issues, or of a Republican administration that played down the terrible record of violations of women by U.S. allies in the Northern Alliance, as documented by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, among others. Rapes and assaults were widespread in the period of infighting that devastated Afghanistan before the Taliban came in to restore order. (It is often noted that the current regime includes warlords who were involved and yet have been given immunity from prosecution.)

We need to look closely at what we are supporting (and what we are not) and think carefully about why. How should we manage the complicated situation of finding ourselves in agreement with those with whom we normally disagree? In the introduction to this book, I talk about the blurring between Left and Right on the issue of Muslim women's rights. How many who felt good about saving Afghan women from the Taliban are also asking for a radical redistribution of wealth or sacrificing their own consumption radically so that Afghan, African, or other women can have some chance of freeing themselves from the structural violence of global inequality and from the ravages of war? How many are asking to give these women a better chance to have the everyday rights of enough to eat, homes for their families in which they can live and thrive, and ways to make decent livings so their children can grow? These things would give them the strength and security to work out, within their communities and with whatever alliances they want, how to live a good life. Such processes might very well lead to changing the ways those communities are organized, but not necessarily in

directions we can imagine. It is unlikely that such changes would not include being good Muslims, and debating, as people have for centuries, how to define a good Muslim, or person.

Suspicion about bedfellows, I argued in those early days of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan, was only a first step needed for our rethinking. To figure out what to do or where to stand, I suggested that we would have to confront two more issues. First, we might have to accept the possibility of difference. Could we only free Afghan women to be “like us,” or might we have to recognize that even after “liberation” from the Taliban, they might want different things than we would want for them? What would be the implications of this realization? Second, I argued that we should be vigilant about the rhetoric of saving others because of what it betrays about our attitudes.

Accepting difference does not mean that we should resign ourselves to accepting whatever goes on elsewhere as “just their culture.” I have already introduced the dangers of “cultural” explanations; “their” cultures are just as much part of history and an interconnected world as ours are, as I explore more fully in this book. Instead, it seems to me that we have to work hard at recognizing and respecting differences—but as products of different histories, as expressions of different circumstances, and as manifestations of differently structured desires. We should want justice and rights for women, but can we accept that there might be different ideas about justice and that different women might want, or even choose, different futures from ones that we envision as best?²⁶ We must consider that they might be called to personhood, so to speak, in different languages.

Reports from the Bonn peace conference, held in late November 2001 to discuss the rebuilding of Afghanistan just after the U.S.-led invasion, revealed significant differences among the few Afghan women feminists and activists who attended. RAWA’s

position was to reject any conciliatory approach to Islamic governance. According to one report, though, most women activists, especially those based in Afghanistan who are aware of the realities on the ground, agreed that Islam had to be the starting point for reform. Fatima Gailani, a U.S.-based adviser to one of the delegations, was quoted as saying, “If I go to Afghanistan today and ask women for votes on the promise to bring them secularism, they are going to tell me to go to hell.”²⁷ Instead, according to one report, most of these women looked to what might seem a surprising place for inspiration on how to fight for equality: Iran. Here was as a country in which they saw women making significant gains within an Islamic framework—in part through an Islamic feminist movement that was challenging injustices and reinterpreting the religious tradition.

The constantly changing situation in Iran has itself been the subject of heated debate within feminist circles, especially among Iranian feminists living in the United States or Europe.²⁸ It is not clear whether and in what ways women have made gains and whether the great increases in literacy, decreases in birthrates, presence of women in the professions and government, and a feminist flourishing in cultural fields like writing and filmmaking are despite or because of the establishment of an Islamic Republic. The concept of an Islamic feminism itself is also controversial. Is it an oxymoron or does it refer to a viable movement forged by brave women who want a third way? In the decade since that conference in Bonn, as we see in Chapter 6, Islamic feminisms have been thriving and developing well beyond Iran.

One of the things we have to be most careful about is not to fall into polarizations that place feminism, and even secularism, only on the side of the West. I have written about the dilemmas faced by Middle Eastern feminists when Western feminists initiate campaigns that make them vulnerable to local denunciations

by conservatives of various sorts, whether Islamist or nationalist, for being traitors.²⁹ As some like Afsaneh Najmabadi have argued, not only is it wrong to see history simplistically in terms of a putative opposition between Islam and the West (as is happening in the United States now and has happened in parallel in the Muslim world), but it is also strategically dangerous to accept this cultural opposition between Islam and the West, between fundamentalism and feminism. This is because there are many people within Muslim countries who are trying to find alternatives to present injustices—those who might want to refuse the divide and take from different histories and cultures, who do not accept that being feminist means being Western, and who will be under pressure, as we are, to choose: Are you with us or against us?

We need to be aware of differences, respectful of other paths toward social change that might give women better lives, and recognize that such options are set by different historical experiences. Can there be a liberation that is Islamic? Does the idea of liberation, as I explore more fully in this book, capture the goals for which all women strive? Are emancipation, equality, and rights part of a universal language or just a particular dialect?³⁰ To quote Saba Mahmood again, writing about the pious Muslim women in Cairo: “The desire for freedom and liberation is a historically situated desire whose motivational force cannot be assumed a priori, but needs to be reconsidered in light of other desires, aspirations, and capacities that inhere in a culturally and historically located subject.”³¹ Might other desires be as meaningful for people? Might living in close families be more valued? Living in a godly way? Living without war? I have done ethnographic fieldwork in Egypt for more than thirty years and I cannot think of a single woman I know—from the poorest rural peasant like Zaynab to the most educated cosmopolitan colleagues at the

American University in Cairo—who has expressed envy of women in the United States, women they variously perceive as bereft of community, cut off from family, vulnerable to sexual violence and social anomie, driven by selfishness or individual success, subject to capitalist pressures, participants in imperial ventures that don't respect the sovereignty or intelligence of others, or strangely disrespectful of others and God. This is not to say, however, that they do not value certain privileges and opportunities that many American women enjoy.

Saba Mahmood has pointed out a disturbing thing that sometimes happens when one argues for respecting other traditions. The political demands made on those who write about Muslims are quite different from demands made on those who study secular-humanist projects. Mahmood, who studies the piety movement in Egypt, is constantly pressed to denounce all the harm done by Islamic movements around the world. Otherwise, she is accused of being an apologist. Yet there is never a parallel demand on those who study modern Western history, despite the terrible violences that have been associated with the Christian West over the past century, from colonialism to world wars, from slavery to genocide. We ought to have as little dogmatic faith in secular humanism as in Islamism, and as open a mind to the complex possibilities of human projects undertaken in one tradition as the other.

Beyond the Rhetoric of Salvation

My discussion of culture, veiling, and how one navigates the shoals of cultural difference should put First Lady Laura Bush's self-congratulation about the rejoicing of Afghan women liberated by American troops in a different light. It is problematic to construct the Afghan or Muslim woman as someone in need of saving. When you save someone, you imply that you are saving

her from something. You are also saving her *to* something. What violences are entailed in this transformation? What presumptions are being made about the superiority of that to which you are saving her? Projects of saving other women depend on and reinforce a sense of superiority, and are a form of arrogance that deserves to be challenged. All one needs to do to appreciate the patronizing quality of the rhetoric of saving women is to imagine using it today in the United States about disadvantaged groups such as African American, Latina, or other working-class women. We now understand them to be suffering from structural violence. We have become politicized about race and class, but not culture.

We should be wary of taking on the mantles of those late nineteenth-century Christian missionary women who devoted their lives to saving their Muslim sisters. One of my favorite documents from the period is a collection called *Our Moslem Sisters*, the proceedings of a conference of women missionaries held in Cairo in 1906.³² The subtitle of the book is *A Cry of Need from the Lands of Darkness Interpreted by Those Who Heard It*. Speaking of the ignorance, seclusion, polygamy, and veiling that blight women's lives across the Muslim world, the missionary women assert their responsibility to make these women's voices heard: "They will never cry for themselves, for they are down under the yoke of centuries of oppression."³³ "This book," it begins, "with its sad, reiterated story of wrong and oppression is an indictment and an appeal . . . It is an appeal to Christian womanhood to right these wrongs and enlighten this darkness by sacrifice and service."³⁴

One hears uncanny echoes of their virtuous goals today, even though the language is distinctly secular and the appeals are less often to Jesus than to human rights, liberal democracy, and Western civilization, as we explore in Chapters 2 and 3. Sometimes

the appeals are even simpler: to modern beauty regimes and the rights to cut hair. This was the surprising message of a group of hairdressers who went to Kabul to open a beauty academy for Afghan women, teaching them “hair and make-up.” These Australians, Americans, and exiled Afghans were part of an initiative called “Beauty without Borders,” supported, not surprisingly, by the cosmetics industry and *Vogue*.³⁵

The continuing currency of the missionaries’ imagery and sentiments can be seen in the way they are deployed for even more serious humanitarian causes. In February 2002, a few months after coalition forces entered Afghanistan, I received an invitation to a reception honoring the international medical humanitarian network called Médecins du Monde/Doctors of the World (MdM). Under the sponsorship of the French ambassador to the United States, the head of the delegation of the European Commission to the United Nations, and a member of the European Parliament, the cocktail reception was to feature an exhibition of photographs under the clichéd title “Afghan Women: Behind the Veil.” The invitation was remarkable not just for the colorful photograph of women in flowing burqas walking across the barren mountains of Afghanistan but also for the text, which read in part:

For 20 years MdM has been ceaselessly struggling to help those who are most vulnerable. But increasingly, *thick veils* cover the victims of the war. When the Taliban came to power in 1996, Afghan Women became faceless. To unveil one’s face while receiving medical care was to achieve a sort of intimacy, find a brief space for *secret freedom* and recover a little of one’s dignity. In a country where women had no access to basic medical care because they did not have the right to appear in public, where women had no right to practice medicine, MdM’s program stood as a stubborn reminder of human rights . . . Please join us in helping to *lift the veil*. (emphasis added)

Although I do not take up here the fantasies of intimacy associated with unveiling—fantasies reminiscent of the French colonial obsessions so brilliantly unmasked by Malek Alloula in his book, *The Colonial Harem*, about Algerian colonial postcards—I can ask, and try to answer in the chapters that follow, why humanitarian projects and human rights discourse in the twenty-first century need to rely on such stereotyped constructions of Muslim women.

It seems to me that it is better to leave veils and vocations of saving others behind. Instead, we should be training our sights on ways to make the world a more just place. The reason that respect for difference should not be confused with cultural relativism is because it does not preclude asking how we, living in this privileged and powerful part of the world, might examine our own responsibilities for the situations in which others in distant places find themselves. We do not stand outside the world, overlooking a sea of poor, benighted people living under the shadow—or the veil—of oppressive cultures; we are part of that world. Islamic movements have arisen in a world intimately shaped by the intense engagements of Western powers in Middle Eastern and South and Southeast Asian lives; so has Islamic feminism.

A more productive alternative might be to ask ourselves how we could contribute to making the world a more just place—a world not organized around strategic military and economic demands; a place where certain kinds of forces and values that we consider important could have a wide appeal; a place where there is the peace necessary for discussion, debate, and institutional transformation, such as has always existed, to occur and continue within communities. We need to ask ourselves what kinds of world conditions those of us from wealthy nations could contribute to making, such that popular desires elsewhere will not

be determined by an overwhelming sense of helplessness (or angry reaction) in the face of forms of global injustice. Where we seek to be active in the affairs of distant places, we might do so in the spirit of support for those within those communities whose goals are to make women's (and men's) lives better.³⁶ And we might do so with respect for the complexity of ongoing debates, positions, and institutions within their countries. Many have suggested that it would be more ethical to use a more egalitarian language of alliances, coalitions, and solidarity, rather than rescue.

Even members of RAWA, which was so instrumental in bringing to U.S. women's attention the excesses of the Taliban, opposed the U.S. bombings from the beginning. They did not see Afghan women's salvation in military violence that only increased hardship and loss. They called for disarmament and for peacekeeping forces. Spokespersons pointed out the dangers of confusing governments with people, or the Taliban with innocent Afghans who would be most harmed. They consistently reminded audiences to take a close look at the ways policies were being organized around oil interests, the arms industry, and the international drug trade. They were not obsessed with the veil, even though they were perhaps the most radical feminists working for a secular democratic Afghanistan. Unfortunately, only their messages about the excesses of the Taliban were heard, even though their criticisms of those in power in Afghanistan had included previous regimes.

As U.S. involvement in Afghanistan increasingly came to resemble the quagmire in which the Soviets found themselves in the 1980s, arguments of groups like RAWA have been proven prescient. In a comprehensive analysis of the situation in Afghanistan six years after the invasion, Deniz Kandiyoti drew attention to two key factors adversely affecting Afghan women.

Looking closely at the political history of the country and at the current political jockeying among groups in a weak and aid-dependent government, she noted easy threats to women's legal and social rights, which are readily pawned. As WAW's Esther Hyneman had warned in her defense of "the bulwarks" against retreats on women's rights, women have indeed become part of what Kandiyoti calls a "new field of contestation between the agenda of international donor agencies, an aid-dependent government and diverse political factions, some with conservative Islamist agendas."³⁷

But this expert on gender in the Muslim world asks us to concentrate not on Kabul, with its politicians, technocrats, and international experts (including transnational feminists), but on what the war economy has done to people's social lives across the country. In the shift from subsistence agriculture and herding to opium production and arms smuggling, this criminal economy has funded and emboldened local warlords, including the Taliban, while putting most rural households into debt. Families and communities have been stripped of their autonomy and live in a constant state of insecurity. In the rural areas, Kandiyoti notes, we see "corrosive interactions between poverty, insecurity, and loss of autonomy." These create new forms of vulnerability with serious consequences for women. As I describe in the introduction for *Zaynab* in southern Egypt, women's options in places like Afghanistan are "conditioned by the fortunes of the communities and households in which their livelihoods and everyday lives are embedded."³⁸ They are distant from the government and formal legal systems, Islamic or secular. A disturbing development has been a new pattern of commodification of women. Like Bibi Aysha, who was given to her husband's family allegedly to settle a murder debt, daughters are now regularly given by their impoverished or frightened families to militia commanders

and drug traffickers. Kandiyoti heard stories of young girls being offered to old men in “distress sales” or sent away to save them from roving bands of Taliban youth.³⁹

These abuses are not extensions of local custom or traditional culture. They are reactions to the current situation in Afghanistan. Kandiyoti says, “What to Western eyes looks like ‘tradition’ is, in many instances, the manifestation of new and more brutal forms of subjugation of the weak made possible by a criminal economy, total lack of security and the erosion of bonds of trust and solidarity that were tested to the limit by war, social upheaval and poverty.”⁴⁰ Traditions built on mutual obligations have been undermined by rapidly changing, desperate economic circumstances and by political instability. Men are no longer able to meet their obligations to women or fulfill their ideals of honor, protection, or generosity. This is the problem; this is the situation on the ground.

Yet Afghanistan, with its thirty-year legacy of conflict, continues to be understood as traditional. In the 2010 *Time* magazine article that accompanied the photograph of Bibi Aysha, we find a typical example of a seamless move between Islam and tradition. A timeless culture appears directly following a quote from the minister of the economy, leader of an Islamist party who expressed his views against coeducation: “That is in accordance with Islam. And what we want for Afghanistan is Islamic rights, not Western rights.” The article comments that “traditional ways, however, do little for women. Aisha’s family did nothing to protect her from the Taliban. That might have been out of fear, but more likely it was out of shame. A girl who runs away is automatically considered a prostitute in deeply traditional societies, and families that allow them back home would be subject to widespread ridicule . . . In rural areas, a family that finds itself shamed by a daughter sometimes sells her into slavery, or

worse, subjects her to a so-called honor killing—murder under the guise of saving the family’s name.”⁴¹

I have much more to say about so-called honor killing in Chapter 4. For now I want to suggest that rather than resorting to such general cultural statements, we owe it to women in Afghanistan to look at their history and its impact on their current situation. With its power rivalries and its war economy, Afghanistan’s circumstances are thoroughly tied up with the West, its everyday worlds embedded in a global economy and an international War on Terror. Militarization always has hidden consequences for women; these surely have more force than “culture” or “tradition.”⁴²

So a first step in hearing the diverse voices of Afghan women and the political message of groups like RAWA, which even in 2001 expressed concern about military intervention, is to break with the language of (alien) cultures, whether to understand or to change them. Missionary work and colonial feminism belong in the past. We should be exploring what we might do to help create a world in which those poor Afghan women—for whom First Lady Laura Bush said “the hearts of those in the civilized world break”—can have safety, decent lives, and a range of rights. What we have learned since the United States and its allies intervened is that conflict, insecurity, impoverishment, and international drug trafficking do not bring them closer to having such lives.