From Militant to Military: The Ambivalent Politics of Liberal Feminism in the American War on Terror

by

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Abstract

The widespread use of feminist, human rights, and international development discourse for justifying military intervention is part of a long and storied tradition of imperial feminism – a tradition which is deeply embedded into the normative Western ideologies of neoliberalism and modernization. However, the narrative of feminism that has been appropriated by the US military in order to justify the war on terror is that of liberal feminism; it is a discourse of feminism that privileges a white, middle-class, Western audience. In other words, it is blind to the historically disproportionate experience of oppression faced by women of colour. On a global scale, liberal feminism undermines the agency of women’s movements in the global south by assuming the universality – as well as the superiority – of Western human rights discourse. This paper will examine how the liberal feminist discourse became a dominant narrative in the war on terror. It will also analyze the implications of that dominance – both global and local.

Keywords: Liberal Feminism; Military-Industrial-Media Complex; Imperial Feminism; Gendered Orientalism
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Chapter 1.

Introduction: The Mobilization of Feminism

On April 12th, 2015, Hillary Clinton uploaded a two minute video entitled “Getting Started” on her official YouTube channel. Just over half of the video showcases a series of “everyday Americans” with uplifting plans for the year ahead; these include a Hispanic mother moving with her daughter to another city, a gay couple getting married, and a blue collar worker starting a new factory job. A minute and a half into the video, Clinton appears, announcing that she, too, has big plans – to run for president. She proclaims, “Americans have fought their way back from tough economic times, but the deck is still stacked in favour of those at the top. Everyday Americans need a champion – and I want to be that champion” (Hillary for America, 2015). The message is clear; Clinton represents the interests of everyone – people of colour, the working class, the LGBT community, the elderly, and of course, women. In fact, much of Clinton’s popular support has been based on her public persona as a women’s rights advocate. Her 2008 candidacy earned the support of several major women’s organizations, and she has continued to be praised for her inspirational work as a feminist.

Clinton is not the first former First Lady to be commended as a supporter of women. In the wake of September 11th, 2001, Laura Bush mobilized the language of women’s rights in a series of speeches aimed at bringing Western feminist values to Afghanistan. This moment, in which women’s issues occupied a significant space in the Western media landscape, was lauded as historic; however, it was not without precedent. The widespread use of feminist, human rights, and international development discourse for justifying military intervention is part of a long and storied tradition of imperial feminism – a tradition which is deeply embedded into the normative Western ideologies of neoliberalism and modernization. However, the narrative of feminism that
has been appropriated by the Western military-industrial-media complex\textsuperscript{1} in order to justify the war on terror is that of liberal feminism – one that privileges a white, middle-class, Western audience. This is due to the fact that the liberal feminist discourse equalizes the experience of all women. In other words, it is blind to the historically disproportionate experience of oppression faced by women of colour. On a global scale, liberal feminism undermines the agency of women’s movements in the global south by assuming the universality – as well as the superiority – of Western human rights discourse. Clinton’s campaign does the same, but on a national scale; by claiming to be a “champion” for all of these “everyday Americans”, she essentializes the experiences of those Americans. The liberal feminist discourse is ahistorical, decontextualized and alienating to both men and women of different cultures, races and classes.

In justifying the military intervention in the Middle East during the war on terror, the US military-industrial-media complex erased the cultural and political history of its targeted nations; instead, the Western media projected an image of the Middle East that was extremely patriarchal and brutally misogynist. This was one example of how “[c]onsent for war is often manufactured through a Manichean dichotomy between the ‘West,’ and barbarism” (Stone, 2013). Consequently, liberal feminist discourse was cast as the universal answer to misogyny. The mainstream corporate media’s continued dissemination of this narrative of feminism has a number of problematic implications, including the reification of gendered Orientalism; the agency of Muslim women is erased as they are portrayed as victims, with Western women and Western narratives of feminism as their only lifeline.

This paper will examine how the liberal feminist discourse became a dominant narrative in the war on terror. It will also analyze the implications of that dominance – both global and local. During the American war on terror, the US government, along with several other Western governments, used the language of feminism to justify militarism. The liberal feminist discourse in particular has benefitted from this; it has enjoyed a very

\textsuperscript{1}The military-industrial complex refers to the US’s interlocked network of relationships between its defense and economic sectors. Media critic Norman Solomon has argued that this complex “now extends to much of corporate media”, culminating in the military-industrial-media complex (Solomon, 2005).
visible space in the media landscape as a result of the military’s public promotion of liberal feminism as a universal narrative. Accordingly, this paper will begin with a brief literature review in Chapter 2, examining the military-industrial-media complex. It will analyze how this complex serves to produce – and reproduce – the hegemonic, Western ideologies of modernization, capitalism, development and imperialism. This paper will look at content from CNN as an example of corporate media. It will discuss the impact of the digital space for these narratives, using Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky’s propaganda model and Jodi Dean’s framework of communicative capitalism.

Chapter 3 will discuss the liberal feminist discourse and its relation to militarism and imperial feminism. It will present a brief history of liberal feminism – particularly its modern roots in second-wave feminism. This paper will then go on to discuss Hillary Clinton’s political career as a case study, examining in particular her roles as First Lady, Senator, Secretary of State, and two-time presidential candidate. It will examine Clinton’s campaign speeches and interviews, as well as articles written by Clinton and published in a variety of major US publications. Material from her official Hillary for America campaign will also be analyzed, as well as the coverage of her campaign on both mainstream and alternative media. This paper will then go onto discuss the narrative of imperial feminism, and how Hillary Clinton and other Western feminists\(^2\) have contributed to and perpetuated this narrative.

Chapter 4 will explore the implications of liberal feminism on a global scale; it will detail the perpetuation of gendered Orientalism by both liberal feminism and the Western military-industrial-media complex by beginning with an examination of the Western liberation narrative, and how it has been used to justify the war on terror. It will discuss how the Western media has situated Islamic culture as the site of conflict, a practice which obscures the geopolitical and ideological conflicts between Western and non-Western nations. Finally, this chapter will explore forms of feminist agency and local resistance in the Middle East, which oppose US militarism as well as the feminist politics

\(^2\) By using the term “Western feminists”, I am not suggesting that Western feminism is a homogenous or monolithic movement with singular goals. I am instead referring to the narratives of feminism that begin from the vantage point of “the West” – a complex notion of its own – as a referential starting point. This means an implicit assumption of “the West” in juxtaposition to the non-Western Other.
of the West. It will then conclude with a discussion of intersectionality as a potential avenue for future study.
Chapter 2.

The Military-Industrial Media Complex and the Production of Ideology

The US government’s discursive appropriation of liberal feminism for a pro-war agenda is encouraged through the production of ideology by the military-industrial-media complex. This is a political-economic complex that exists in many Western nations, but is particularly dominant in the US. In an article published by US media watchdog Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting, media critic Norman Solomon refers to the military-industrial-media complex as the intersecting economic and political relationships between the US government, the military, private corporations and most recently, the corporate media (2005). This chapter will examine the close historical link between the US military and communications sphere, and how this relationship has cultivated the militarization and hegemony of corporate media. It will also look at how hegemonic narratives maintain their dominance in the media, while marginalizing alternative ideas and voices.

2.1. India Charlie Tango: Developed by the Military, for the Military

Initially, information and communications technologies (ICT) in the US were developed solely for military purpose. Communications scholar Dan Schiller identifies the significance of President William McKinley’s 1899 address to Congress, which spoke of the necessity for US control over communications in the Pacific Islands (2011, p. 266). This speech came at a time in which the US was beginning to establish its power at the international level; protecting economic and political interests abroad became dependent on the US’s ability to install and maintain communications infrastructure outside of its borders. As a result, maintaining a robust communications network was an important military directive.
By the time of the Cold War, the US had established a militarized communications sector in the form of government intelligence agencies. These agencies would gain legitimacy as a method of combating socialism – in official rhetoric, this was referred to as “containment”, or the preservation of democracy. This restructuring of military and state was accompanied by the reorganization of corporate America:

Companies developing every conceivable kind of communications and information hardware and software were showered with military contracts. War industry constituted an enormous, multifaceted and highly profitable endeavor – with communications at its center (Schiller, 2011, p. 267).

War is good for business. It not only spawns jobs and funds technological innovation, it also creates demand in two massive markets: the military, as well as the civilian consumers of media. War coverage on mainstream media in the West is sensationalized, glorifying militarism and commodifying conflict. This is exemplified by the CNN homepage on March 20th, 2003 – the day after the beginning of the Iraq War:

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3 In the late 1940s, the US Defense Department was established, which unified and gave rise to several military sectors including the National Security Council and the CIA; this would give the US’s militarized communications sector a permanent presence for the first time in US history (Schiller, 2011, p. 267).
The entire homepage is dedicated to coverage of the war, with a sensationalist headline taken directly from the Pentagon at the front and center. This is telling of the demand for war coverage, and how that demand translates into visibility and profitability in corporate media. It is this profitability of war that lays the foundation for the military-industrial-media complex, and creates a media sphere with a vested interest in promoting hegemonic, pro-war narratives.

The first recorded reference to the “military-industrial complex” is dated to January 17th, 1961, during US President Dwight Eisenhower’s famed farewell address. Approximately halfway through the 15-minute speech, Eisenhower warns:
In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex … We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes (Eisenhower, 1961).

Over the next five decades, the complex to which he refers would expand to incorporate the mainstream corporate media. For example, the Gulf War saw the press become a pillar of the war effort; standard media coverage painted the pro-war message as objective, while anti-war rhetoric was perceived to carry a bias (as cited in Solomon, 2005). The mainstream media is consistently framed in a manner that is best suited to garnering public support for war. This trend, which has consistently been used by the US during conflict, was also referred to by American journalist Walter Lippmann in 1922 as the manufacture of consent.

2.2. Manufacturing Consent 2.0

Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky first introduced the propaganda model in 1988, in their formative book, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. This concept outlines five consecutive filters through which information passes before it is deemed fit for dissemination as news:

[A propaganda model] traces the routes by which money and power are able to filter out the news fit to print, marginalize dissent, and allow the government and dominant private interests to get their message across to the public (Herman & Chomsky, 2002, p. 2).

4 In 1991, Norman Solomon and Martin A. Lee found that General Electric was a major US military contractor, responsible for almost every weapon system used by the US military during the Gulf War. General Electric is also the owner of NBC, a major news network whose correspondents, in lauding the performance of US weapons, were actually praising their employers (Solomon, 2005).

5 The “filters” are identified by Herman and Chomsky as follows: 1) ownership by a hegemonic, concentrated media industry with close ties to government, 2) the economic dependence of these media corporations on advertisers, 3) the dependence of reporters and journalists on information provided by the government and/or corporations, 4) the media vulnerability to “flak” and criticism due to its commercial interests and 5) “anti-communism”, or ideological-based fear (Herman & Chomsky, 2002).
This model is still in use today – a direct result of the military-industrial-media complex. While both the propaganda model and the military-industrial-complex are concepts developed specifically out of an analysis of the media sphere in the US, both would arguably apply to most Western, capitalist countries that share the same basic political and economic structure (Herman & Chomsky, 2002).

The utilization of the propaganda model commonly results in a decontextualized narrative of military conflict. During the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, Saddam Hussein was highly publicized in the Western media – as evidenced by Figure 1.1 earlier, where his name appears five times on the homepage alone. He was portrayed as a tyrant responsible for reprehensible war crimes in the Middle East, who also posed an imminent threat to the West. By extension, all of Iraqi society was portrayed as barbaric. What these news institutions failed to mention, however, was the fact that beginning in the 1980s, the US had endorsed 24 American companies in selling weapons to Hussein (as cited in Solomon, 2005).

In corporate medialand, history could be supremely relevant when it focused on Hussein’s torture and genocide, but the historic assistance he got from the U.S. government and American firms was apt to be off the subject and beside the point (Solomon, 2005).

These practices of media framing are also aligned with development communication, a Western foreign aid initiative aimed at bringing modernization to the developing world. The sphere of communication was vital for this goal, as the media had the ability to promote capitalism and democracy to its audiences. In the context of the Cold War, however, the narrative of development communication “combined propaganda, counterinsurgency warfare, and selective economic development of targeted regions, was rapidly integrated into U.S. psychological warfare practice worldwide” (Simpson, as...}

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6 The methods of framing employed by corporate media institutions are not limited to the cherry-picking of historical context. Solomon’s article also details the use of newspeak in the Gulf War as well as the 1999 bombings of Yugoslavia, which sanitized US military operations to appear relatively bloodless. He also details the cooperative efforts between CNN and the Pentagon during the invasion of Iraq in 2003, where CNN would clear its on-air discussants with the Department of Defense (Solomon, 2005).
cited in Whyte, 2010, p.40). This would ultimately reify the historical practice of using crisis to rationalize unilateral state control over the nation’s critical infrastructures, including communications technology and the media. The aftermath of the attacks of September 11th, 2001 followed this rationale; however, the fact that the civilian space was the site of crisis – rather than a disenfranchised developing country – propelled the issues of national security and foreign policy to the forefront of every major news outlet. Schiller writes of the shifting power relations between the state and the communications sphere: “Military dominance in overseeing nationwide network security had been formalized in the National Communications System … [which was] relocated in 2003 to the Information Analysis and Infrastructure Protection Directorate of the new Department of Homeland Security” (2011, p. 270). With the civilian space now cast as a battlefield, US control over communications infrastructure was no longer solely focused on foreign expansion and protecting foreign investments. It was now equally important to turn its attention inwards, and ensure that its Western audiences were on board with the war agenda.

The war on terror, however, had an important distinction from wars past: the digital space. This is what would allow for the manufacture of consent in the digital age, or manufacturing consent 2.0. The advent of the Internet brought an unprecedented level of access to the war; instead of politicians, reporters and other public figures being the sole participants of the discourse on the war, the population at large was able to contribute to the discussion at the grassroots level through the Internet. New media provided ease of access as well as immediacy to the war coverage; online news articles were readily available at the click of a button, opinion pieces and blogs could be published by just about anyone, and war footage uploaded to streaming sites could be viewed over and over again. As of 2015, a search for “war on terror raw footage” on YouTube yields over a hundred thousand results, with the particularly violent videos receiving hundreds of thousands of views.

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7 This quote by Simpson is a response to Daniel Lerner’s studies of modernization theory as well as his work in the practice of development communication, which was widely regarded as politically neutral (Whyte, 2010, pp. 39-40).
This perception of the Internet – as a technology with the potential to be a global public sphere, as a democratic space promoting the free flow of information – is what drove the rapid development of the digital space.\(^8\) There exists a popular and normative belief surrounding the Internet that just because the masses might have the means to contribute, any and all ideas will be heard. However, this is not necessarily the case. With the sheer volume of messages, data and users produced by the digital space, visibility becomes more valuable than actual meaning. During the war on terror, the pro-war message had a cohesive, centralized agenda that was articulated in the US (and much of the Western world) through corporate media and official state press releases. Alternative discourses, on the other hand, were largely presented through alternative, independent and foreign media. Syndicated radio, Internet blogs and large-scale grassroots protests also supplied a strong anti-war message.\(^9\) However, nothing was done on the part of the US government to critically engage with this message. This phenomenon can fruitfully be considered in light of Jodi Dean’s concept of “communicative capitalism”. Dean writes:

[D]espite the terabytes of commentary and information, there wasn’t exactly a debate over the war. On the contrary, in the days and weeks prior to the US invasion of Iraq, the anti-war message morphed into so much circulating content, just like all the other cultural effluvia wafting through Cyberia (2005, p. 52).

An example of this is the White House’s response to the worldwide anti-war rally on February 15\(^{th}\), 2003. This demonstration, held in over 600 cities around the world, was in protest of the imminent war on Iraq. Three days later, President George W. Bush opened a speech in response to the massive protest with, “[D]emocracy’s a beautiful thing … people are allowed to express their opinion, and I welcome people’s right to say

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\(^8\) The dot.com bubble, beginning in the mid 1990’s, was partly driven by the public perception of improved communications access as a catalyst for democracy. The democratic potential of the Internet was rooted in the convenience it provided for millions of people to not only access information, but also to make their voices heard. Jodi Dean refers to this as the “fantasy of abundance” (Dean, 2005, p. 58).

\(^9\) The anti-war message was conveyed through several channels, including Amy Goodman’s syndicated radio show, “Democracy Now”, the Nation magazine, and countless Internet blogs. Furthermore, several alternative, leftist news outlets covered the grassroots anti-war movements in London and Washington that were left out of mainstream US news outlets (Dean, 2005, p. 52).
what they believe” (NPR, 2003). He did nothing to interact with the dissenting opinions beyond acknowledging their existence. This points to a very problematic aspect of communicative capitalism – the depoliticization of discourse.

Today, the circulation of content in the dense, intensive networks of global communications relieves top-level actors (corporate, institutional and governmental) from the obligation to respond. Rather than responding to messages sent by activists and critics, they counter with their own contributions to the circulating flow of communications, hoping that sufficient volume (whether in terms of number of contributions or the spectacular nature of a contribution) will give their contributions dominance or stickiness (Dean, 2005, p. 53).

It is visibility and market penetration that keep mainstream corporate media outlets dominant; because these massive corporations have the resources needed to monopolize public attention, they are thus able to control what stories and ideas reach the masses. They are able to highlight the narratives that fall into the “canon” of public discourse – the ideas that are the most marketable, and the most normative to Western society.
Chapter 3.

(Liberal) Feminism: The Universal Answer to Patriarchy?

So how then, does feminism – a discourse that has historically challenged the hegemony of patriarchy – come to dominate the media landscape, as it did during the war on terror? This chapter will begin with a brief literature review of liberal feminism and how it came to become almost synonymous with second-wave feminism in the Western world. It will then go on to present Hillary Clinton’s political career as a case study for liberal feminism. This chapter will also examine how feminism can be appropriated to support hegemonic power structures; an example is imperial feminism. It will discuss how liberal feminism has taken on many of the features of imperial feminism, resulting in a feminist amnesia that is present in the majority of mainstream Western feminist discourses. Liberal feminism is a dominant form of feminist thinking within mainstream Western culture, but it is rooted in racial and class tensions; thus, it is important to first examine its history in order to understand how liberal feminism came to occupy a dominant position, as well as how its history of racism and classism have translated into its contemporary forms.

3.1. A Brief Overview of Liberal Feminism

Feminist scholar Rosemarie Tong describes how liberal feminism is rooted in the larger tradition of liberal political theory; its core goals are social, economic and political equality, articulated through the equality of civil rights, as well as political and economic opportunities, between men and women (2008, pp. 16-25). Liberal feminism and second-wave feminism are closely intertwined; while first-wave feminism focused on suffrage and property rights, second-wave feminism expanded the conversation on women’s rights to include issues of sexuality, reproductive rights, family, professional
careers, and other legal inequalities. In the same vein, liberal feminism was focused on autonomy and freedom – that is, allowing women to be freed from the oppressive, traditional gender roles determined by patriarchal society, and to be able to freely pursue any and all of their professional and political goals.

There are two main critiques of liberal feminism. First, it is a narrative of feminism that ultimately complements and operates within the existing structures of power, rather than challenging them. As a result, liberal feminism actually contributes to the systemic oppression of women around the globe, because it ultimately supports the systems of power that have created deeply entrenched global inequalities. This is subsequently tied to a second widespread criticism of liberal feminism: that it is an approach that neglects any racial considerations or class struggle, since it presumes that the white, middle-class woman’s experience of patriarchal oppression is a universal one.

Critical theorist Nancy Fraser argues that this has become a widely held view of second-wave feminism as a whole:

It is often said that the movement’s relative success in transforming culture stands in sharp contrast with its relative failure to transform institutions. This assessment is double-edged: on the one hand, feminist ideals of gender equality, so contentious in the preceding decades, now sit squarely in the social mainstream; on the other hand, they have yet to be realized in practice … And so, it is frequently argued: second-wave feminism has wrought an epochal cultural revolution, but the vast change in mentalités has not (yet) translated into structural, institutional change (Fraser, 2013, p. 210).

Fraser is critical of this view because she argues that it diminishes the historical significance and potential of second-wave feminism. She suggests that this view obscures the ways in which the cultural attitudes born out of second-wave feminism “have served to legitimate a structural transformation of capitalist society that runs directly counter to feminist visions of a just society” (2013, p. 210). As a result, Fraser takes a different approach to examining second-wave feminism. She traces the evolution of second-wave feminism from the 1970s to the present, identifying three specific phases which situate the trajectory of second-wave feminism in relation to the history of capitalism (Fraser, 2013, pp. 209-210). The first phase is the emergence of second-wave feminism, which was a fundamentally emancipatory movement; it challenged the
structure of society and its inherent injustices stemming from “the pervasive androcentrism of state-led capitalist societies in the postwar era” (2013, p. 209). The second phase saw the evolution of second-wave feminism in response to neoliberalism; here, Fraser argues that the ideals of feminism converged with that of transnational capitalism (2013, p. 210). Finally, the third point refers to the present context, in which the restructuring of capitalism and US politics could potentially mark a shift away from neoliberalism; here, Fraser argues that the revival of the emancipatory promise of early second-wave feminism could potentially be brought about “in a world that has been rocked by the twin crises of finance capital and US hegemony” (2013, p. 210).

However, Joan Sangster and Meg Luxton argue that Fraser’s “reinterpretation of feminist history” homogenizes second-wave feminism as “a compliant bedfellow, or worse, an apologist for global capitalism”, and must be challenged (2012, p. 288). They write:

In contrast to Fraser’s claim that second-wave feminism came to share a ‘subterranean elective affinity’ with neoliberalism, we argue that liberal feminism’s compatibility with neoliberalism is an explicit, structural compatibility, and that it has been able to achieve almost hegemonic status as ‘second-wave feminism’ only to the degree that socialist feminism has been ignored or defeated (Sangster & Luxton, 2012, p. 289).

Rather than second-wave feminism only selectively incorporating aspects of neoliberalism, as Fraser suggests, Sangster and Luxton argue instead that the two are inextricably intertwined at the structural level.

So what, then, are the implications of this inseparable relationship between neoliberalism and second-wave feminism? Chandra Mohanty offers a succinct yet insightful analysis for how neoliberalism has shaped “material and ideological conditions” in a way that has eliminated alternative or counterhegemonic discourses: “while neoliberal states facilitate mobility and cosmopolitanism for some economically privileged communities, it is at the expense of the criminalization and incarceration of impoverished communities” (Mohanty, 2013, p. 970). This points to the systemic economic, cultural and political oppression that is inherent to neoliberalism. While liberalism supported the nuclear family, “neoliberalism relies on individuals apparently
freed of domestic responsibilities, and available to work competitively in the labour force” (Sangster & Luxton, 2012, p. 291). Consequently, the individual is discursively constructed as the center of the public domain, while collective responsibility is depoliticized and collapsed into the personal:

Questions of oppression and exploitation as collective, systematic processes and institutions of rule that are gendered and raced have difficulty being heard when neoliberal narratives disallow the salience of collective experience or redefine this experience as a commodity to be consumed (Mohanty, 2013, p. 971).

Both Mohanty and Sangster & Luxton credit the erasure of the radical, socialist feminist movement to neoliberalism (Mohanty, 2013; Sangster & Luxton, 2012). This focus on the individual is aligned with liberal feminism’s emancipatory message, which emphasizes the importance of individual rights for women. However, liberal feminism also defines the collective experience of all women as a universal experience. In this way, it commodifies that experience in order to capitalize upon it by appealing to all women. However, in actuality, liberal feminism represents the interests of a very specific group of women – that of the white, middle-class, and Western.

Thus, neoliberalism acts as the bridge between the military-industrial-media complex and the liberal feminist discourse; this is exemplified by Hillary Rodham Clinton, who reconciles her militaristic and oftentimes racist foreign policies with her public persona as a feminist activist through her neoliberal politics.

### 3.2. Hillary Clinton: Militant Feminist

In 2007, shortly after she announced her first campaign for the Democrat presidential nomination, Hillary Clinton received a highly publicized endorsement from the National Organization of Women (NOW), one of the largest feminist advocacy groups in the US. The endorsement came as a testament to Clinton’s purportedly “long history of support for women’s empowerment” (Clinton, 2007, para. 2). In light of Clinton’s 2016 candidacy announcement, NOW – as well as several other women’s groups, including the Women’s Media Center – have renewed their public support for her. In a statement issued by NOW president Terry O’Neill, Clinton’s “life experiences as
a woman give her knowledge, insights, and wisdom that others do not have” (2015, para. 1). This comment points to a normative perception that has been central to the outpouring of public support for Clinton’s political career – that simply being a prominent female figure in the political sphere is an advancement for feminism. Another example of this is the fact that Clinton has been consistently targeted with sexist comments in the media throughout her career, making her the topic of many discussions regarding feminism in the political and public spheres.

Clinton’s support from feminists is rooted primarily on her image as an advocate of gender issues and women’s rights. Clinton has been outspoken about these topics throughout her career; one example is her 1995 speech at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. It was here that she famously proclaimed, “[h]uman rights are women’s rights and women’s rights are human rights once and for all” (American Rhetoric, 1995). Another example is Clinton’s role as first lady. Traditionally, the roles and responsibilities of the wife of the US President reflect gender norms which limit her to the private sphere. She is understood in relation to the family, constrained into the roles of “hostess and homemaker” (Burrell, as cited in Boyer, 2006, p. 13). However, Clinton publicly rejected the gender norms associated with first ladyship. Her unconventional nature was seen as a threat to patriarchal American society: “the Clintons, mostly Hillary, were criticized by Republicans because they presented themselves to the public as equal partners in marriage and in politics” (Boyer, 2006, p. 14). Clinton was an active participant in both the public and private spheres, ultimately combining them.

[S]he worked to maintain her position by setting policy and being a public advocate through her work with international women’s rights and healthcare, while also working to fulfill the idea of a proper hostess through state dinners and annual Easter egg hunts. She also wrote “It Takes a Village,” a book about how to raise children. These actions, combining the public and private spheres, position Hillary Rodham Clinton within liberal feminism. (Boyer, 2006, p. 16)

10 One example of this is the fact that Hillary Clinton did not take the surname “Clinton” until it began to affect her husband’s re-election campaign for the Governor of Arkansas in 1982 (as cited in Boyer, 2006).
As a result, Clinton sparked controversy, and set a precedent that would allow first ladies to become more politically visible. She also maintained a political presence outside of her first ladyship, as evidenced by her future roles as Senator (2001 – 2009), Secretary of State (2009 – 2013), and as a two-time presidential candidate (2008 and 2016). As a feminist, Clinton is firmly situated within the rhetoric of liberal feminism: “She personifies the liberal feminist vision of inclusion at the most powerful levels of business and politics without fundamentally challenging the underpinnings of these institutions” (O’Brien, 2015). Much of Clinton’s feminist advocacy begins and ends with a push for women to be given equal opportunity in the male-dominated public sphere; there are no considerations of intersectionality, or causes apart from gender that limit women from political or professional success. This is arguably a politically strategic move for Clinton; she is managing her feminist politics in accordance to what is normative to mainstream America.

In many instances, this would mean catering to corporate America. An article published in *Bloomberg Business* on January 10th, 2013 reflected on Clinton’s 2009 to 2013 tenure as secretary of state. Elizabeth Dwoskin writes, “In a hectic four years punctuated by one international crisis after another … her work as a spokeswoman for American business is a less visible part of her legacy. Yet it may be the most durable” (2013, p. 1). As secretary of state, Clinton pursued corporate interests in the name of US political and strategic interests. In this sense, she has sought to become “the government’s highest-ranking business lobbyist”; Clinton has focused her efforts on opening market opportunities for the US in the developing world, in order to compete with the significant Chinese presence there (2013, p. 2). She has also been candid about these goals. In 2011, Clinton published an article with *Foreign Policy* entitled “America’s Pacific Century”, where she advocates a shift in foreign policy focus from the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific region:

> Open markets in Asia provide the United States with unprecedented opportunities for investment, trade, and access to cutting-edge

11 Elizabeth Dwoskin outlines several lucrative deals made by Clinton on behalf of US companies: a $3.7 billion deal for Boeing in Russia and a $7.2 billion deal for Lockheed in Japan are two examples (2013).
technology … Just as Asia is critical to America’s future, an engaged America is vital to Asia’s future. The region is eager for our leadership and our business – perhaps more so than at any time in modern history. We are the only power with a network of strong alliances in the region, no territorial ambitions, and a long record of providing for the common good (Clinton, America’s Pacific Century, 2011).

This passage once again reveals Clinton’s imperialistic vision for the US, framed in neoliberal language; she assumes the supremacy of the US by suggesting that all of Asia – one of the most culturally and ethnically diverse regions in the world, where over half of the human population resides – is eager for US leadership. She goes on to promote an extension of treaty alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines and Thailand; one of her suggestions for an updated alliance is “to guarantee that the defense capabilities and communications infrastructure of our alliances are operationally and materially capable of deterring provocation from the full spectrum of state and nonstate actors” (Clinton, 2011). This echoes President William McKinley’s 1899 speech, mentioned in Chapter 2, which emphasizes the importance of foreign communications infrastructure in maintaining US interests abroad. The structure of the military-industrial-media complex is such that ownership over the technology often translates into control over policy, or even control over the message itself.\(^\text{12}\)

However, it is difficult to reconcile Clinton’s image as a women’s rights activist with her policymaking:

While [Clinton] has indeed spoken about gender and sexual rights with considerable frequency, and while she may not share the overtly misogynistic and anti-LGBT views of most Republican politicians, as a policymaker she has consistently favored policies devastating to women and LGBT persons (Young, 2015).

During her first presidential campaign, Clinton attempted to distance herself from the war on terror. The 2007 Democratic primary debate at St. Anselm College was an example; Clinton stated, “The Iraq war is Bush’s war. He is responsible for this war. He started this war. He mismanaged the war. He escalated the war. And he refuses to end the war. We are trying to end the war” (On The Issues, 2015). However, these comments erase

\(^{12}\) See Dan Schiller’s “The Militarization of US Communications” (2011).
Clinton’s involvement in the invasion of Iraq during her Senate career. In 2002, Clinton voted in favour of using military force in Iraq. Bush’s authorization to launch the invasion came from a Congressional resolution; Clinton was a part of a minority of congressional Democrats who voted with the Republican majority to provide the necessary number of votes for the war (Zunes, 2008). She has since gone on record to take responsibility for her vote during the Senate debate in New York in 2006, but makes no apologies for it.

Q: Do you regret voting that way at the time?

CLINTON: I regret the way [President Bush] used [the authority that Congress gave him]. I don’t believe in do-overs in life. I made the best judgment at the time. (On The Issues, 2015).

However, this does not excuse Clinton’s involvement in the Iraq War. When public opinion polls indicated that her support of the Iraq War would cost her the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination, Clinton began to publicly criticize the war – specifically, President’s Bush’s handling of it. Her vote in favour of giving President Bush the authority to use military force gave her the ammunition to denounce how the Iraq War was waged during the 2008 presidential primaries, when public commentary on the unpopularity of the war was at its height. Furthermore, it is difficult not to view her attempts to distance herself from the war with skepticism when considering her penchant for favouring war escalation policies.

Clinton has been historically inclined to pursue an aggressively imperialistic and militaristic foreign policy agenda throughout her political career. On April 21st, 2008, Clinton appeared on CNN’s Larry King Live as part of her campaign. It was here that she revealed her reasoning for pulling the US military out of Iraq:

[B]y our staying in Iraq, we are losing ground elsewhere in the world. Our military and foreign policy experts have all said that we have lost ground in Afghanistan. The Middle East is in a much more dangerous position than it was. We have all kinds of problems, from Latin America to Africa to Asia. China and Russia are reasserting their positions in the world. We are not moving to really take the global leadership that America must take for our own security and for the stability of the rest of the world (CNN, 2008).
Her speech reveals a very imperialistic political agenda in which US hegemony and domination is the status quo, and ought to remain so – not only in terms of corporate interests, but empire as a whole. Earlier in the interview, Clinton asserts that the US has “given the Iraqis the precious gift of freedom” (CNN, 2008). This statement has multiple implications: that the devastating invasion of the country was actually a gift, and that millions of displaced civilians are now “free”. It also implies that the project of “liberation” has been achieved or completed in Iraq. Thus, Clinton is arguing that the primary reason for the withdrawal of troops from Iraq is not that the US was never justified in its military actions in the first place, but rather to focus efforts on the (re)assertion of US imperialism elsewhere. The language that she uses throughout the interview also echoes that of President Bush’s rhetorical tropes. Journalist Andre Gumbel published a piece in The Huffington Post on March 4th, 2008, cautioning Clinton’s use of the term “freedom”. He notes the overlap in rhetorical tropes between Clinton’s retrospective narrative of the Iraq War, and President Bush’s initial justifications for the invasion:

“The gift of freedom” is, of course, a curious way to describe an unprovoked invasion and occupation causing hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths and leaving just about every aspect of life chaotic and fraught with daily dangers … It’s the sort of thing George Bush has said to justify his decision both to launch the invasion in the first place and then stay the course – a course Hillary Clinton has spent many months telling primary and caucus voters she thinks was misconceived from the start (Gumbel, 2011).

The painting of violence and armed conflict as a liberation mission exemplifies the imperialist propaganda that has flooded the mainstream media landscape in every conflict involving the US – the same can be said for the majority of Western nations. This is where the narrative of imperial feminism plays a monumental role in the framing of war.

3.3. Imperial Feminism and Feminist Amnesia

After 9/11, the global war on terror provided a political opportunity for groups like the Feminist Majority Foundation, a US non-profit liberal feminist organization that actively supported the American war on terror. The appropriation of feminist rhetoric by
the US military-industrial-media complex was – in more ways than not – beneficial for liberal feminists. It not only provided international media attention, but also served to elevate liberal feminism into an objective and universal discourse. Ann Russo describes how the Feminist Majority Foundation publicly backed the Bush Administration’s war effort, despite the war on terror’s “counter-hegemonic politics against gender violence”; they “reaffirmed, rather than rejected, the project of US imperialism and retaliatory violence as a method of maintaining US power”. This is directly in line with the liberal feminist rhetoric of change from within the existing patriarchal power structure. Russo goes on to explain how the Feminist Majority Foundation ultimately operates from “a framework of ‘imperial feminism’ that ultimately serves to bolster US world hegemony and empire” (Russo, 2006, p. 558). Imperial feminism, also referred to as colonial feminism, has a long history in the West – particularly during military conflict. Furthermore, in the context of the war on terror, the liberal feminist discourse has come to resemble that of imperial feminism in many ways.

What exactly, then, is imperial feminism? Feminist scholar Deepa Kumar describes it as “the appropriation of women’s rights in service of empire” (2014, para. 3). In other words, it is the use of feminist language in legitimizing an imperialistic agenda. The practice is rooted in nineteenth century European colonialism, which rested on the construction of non-Western cultures as uncivilized and savage Others. One historical example is the case of Egypt in the late 19th century. As Britain moved to occupy and colonize the region, there was a selective focus on the plight of Egyptian women. Evelyn Baring, the Earl of Cromer and a British controller-general in Egypt, was publicly vocal about the veil as a symbol of the oppression of Egyptian women; however, back in England, he was opposed to women’s suffrage rights (as cited in Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 784). Mohanty would likely argue that this represents the commodification of the collective experience of Egyptian women. By using their experiences only so far as they support his imperialist agenda, Baring embodies a strategically crafted feminist rhetoric – that is, one that conveniently appeals to the public through empathy, but ultimately is not wholly concerned with women’s rights.

Baring’s politics also bear a striking resemblance to that of President George Bush during the war on terror. At a White House press conference exactly one month
after the 9/11 attacks, Bush refers to Muslim women as “women of cover” (Bush, The President’s News Conference, 2001), a patronizing term which would then be marched across mainstream media outlets. Then, exactly a year after the 9/11 attacks, Bush wrote an opinion piece for The New York Times where he proclaims, “We believe that … the oppression of women [is] everywhere and always wrong.” (Bush, 2002). However, in the US, Bush’s policies have been decidedly anti-feminist. Katharine Viner notes how on his first day in office, Bush cut funding for international family-planning organisations which would offer abortion services and counselling to women around the world (2002).

This use of imperial feminism – or this “theft of feminist rhetoric”, as Viner refers to it – is not limited to only white political figures with the objective of US expansion; it is also prevalent in many Western women’s movements. Former UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Valerie Amos, and feminist filmmaker Pratibha Parmar co-authored an influential article titled “Challenging Imperial Feminism” for Feminist Review in 1984. They write:

The ‘herstory’ which white women use to trace the roots of women’s oppression or to justify some form of political practice is an imperial history rooted in the prejudices of colonial and neo-colonial periods, a ‘herstory’ which suffers the same form of historical amnesia of white male historians, by ignoring the fundamental ways in which white women have benefitted from the oppression of Black people (1984, p. 5).

The majority of mainstream Western women’s movements, including liberal feminism, are marginalizing to women of colour. This unspoken exclusion is due to the general lack of conversation on the plurality of experiences regarding women’s oppression around the globe. Specifically, this refers to the intersectionality of class, race and culture – in addition to gender – in contributing to unique experiences of oppression held by different groups of women. Liberal feminism, and many other mainstream narratives of feminism, assume the universality of all women’s experiences of oppression; it is seen in a “straightforward and non-contradictory way”, and “women organizing as women is seen as positive, regardless of the context” (Amos & Pratibha, 1984, p. 4). Essentially, the initial efforts to illustrate a universal female experience were limited in scope due to its primarily white, middle-class, Western perspective. This neglects the plurality of feminism as a social and political movement, and does not leave room for an
understanding of feminism as a socially and culturally situated discourse. Amos and Parmar use the example of Margaret Thatcher having been uncritically accepted by some white feminists as a positive female image during her time as Prime Minister of the UK (1984, p. 4). Simply by virtue of her gender, Thatcher’s ascension into a powerful political position was hailed as a victory for women. The same can also be said for Hillary Clinton, whose penchant for aggressive and militaristic foreign policy has done little to diminish her public perception as a resolute feminist advocate – largely because her gender, in combination with her powerful political influence, is immediately seen as a victory for female empowerment, regardless of context. While both Thatcher’s and Clinton’s success in the political sphere may be construed as a victory for some women, others, however, have been marginalized by their politics.

Amos and Parmar argue that this is a form of amnesia that alienates women of colour: “[T]he perception white middle-class feminists have of what they need liberating from has little or no relevance to the day to day experience of the majority of Black women in Britain” (1984, p. 5). A significant historical example of this lies in the women’s suffrage movement. In both Britain and the US, the emancipation of women and the struggle for women’s rights to vote was largely based on the rhetoric of racial superiority. The arguments made by some female activists for women’s suffrage in the 19th century were “opportunistic and racist”, making “simplistic comparisons between the position of Black men and white women” (as cited in Amos, 1984, p. 5). For example, in 1865, American suffragist and abolitionist Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote that many women had fought for the abolition of slavery and the freedom of African Americans “as long as he was the lowest in the scale of being” – however, as the conversation on civil rights was beginning to expand, “it becomes a serious question whether we had better stand aside and see ‘sambo’walk into the kingdom first” (as cited in Amos, 1984, p. 5).

This history is erased in the rhetoric of liberal feminism, which universalizes the gendered subject of the West: “Liberal feminism was incapable of fundamentally challenging a key outcome of neoliberal economies and policies, namely the widening class differences between women” (Sangster & Luxton, 2012, p. 291). Amos and Parmar

13 A racist, historical term for a black person or a person of mixed race.
would argue that these differences between women stem from the fact that white women have benefitted from the historical oppression of black women, in the same way that many Western women have benefitted from the oppression of Muslim women in the war on terror. Feminism is not a static, monolithic narrative; to understand it as such inevitably creates social hierarchies, and leads to the alienation of those who do not belong to dominant society.

Imperial feminism, as well as feminist amnesia, has since resurfaced in new forms in the US – most recently with the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001: “Borrowing a trope from Britain in India and Egypt, and France in Algeria, the US argued that it was going to liberate Afghan women” (Kumar, 2014, para. 4). This points to the symbiotic relationship between the hegemonic US military-industrial-media complex and liberal feminism. Regarding the Feminist Majority Foundation’s campaign against gender apartheid, Russo writes that the project of US imperialism appropriates the use of the campaign to serve its own interests; in turn, “the Feminist Majority Campaign ultimately accepts the terms of this imperialism to serve its own interests” (Russo, 2006, p. 559). The same can be said for Hillary Clinton’s politics. Clinton’s first major 2016 campaign speech took place at the Women in the World Summit in New York City on April 23rd, 2015. Her speech revealed her intentions of running a feminist-centric campaign, commenting on issues such as the wage gap and reproductive rights. However, throughout her career, Clinton has consistently favoured policies that have been detrimental to women – especially women of colour. Kevin Young and Diana C. Sierra Becerra challenge Clinton’s claim that by the time that she and President Clinton left the White House, welfare rolls had dropped by 60 percent. They attribute this statistic to the cutting of funding for welfare – of whom women and children are the majority of recipients – rather than a declining poverty rate (Young & Becerra, 2015, para. 12).\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{14} Young and Becerra cite Jeffrey St. Clair in \textit{Counterpunch}, who notes that prior to the Clinton Administration’s welfare reform, “more than 70 percent of poor families with children received some kind of cash assistance. By 2010, less than 30 percent got any kind of cash aid and the amount of the benefit had declined by more than 50 percent from pre-reform levels” (as cited in Young K. a., 2015).
The use of imperial feminism, however, does not only impact women in the Western world; there are also far-reaching, global implications – particularly during wartime – which result in the perpetuation of gendered Orientalism.
Chapter 4.

Gendered Orientalism: The Global Implications of Liberal Feminism

On March 26th, 2010, WikiLeaks released a classified document from the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) that outlined potential public relations strategies to maintain Western European support for the war in Afghanistan. The report bluntly suggests “tailoring messaging” in order to “forestall or at least contain backlash” in Germany and France (2010, p. 4). It goes on to suggest that:

Afghan women could serve as ideal messengers in humanizing the ISAF role in combating the Taliban because of women’s ability to speak personally and credibly about their experiences under the Taliban, their aspirations for the future, and their fears of a Taliban victory. Outreach initiatives that create media opportunities for Afghan women to share their stories with French, German, and other European women could help to overcome pervasive skepticism among women in Western Europe toward the ISAF mission (WikiLeaks, 2010, p. 6).

The strategies outlined in this document are not new; they have been employed by Western governments to frame war in the Middle East as a women’s liberation movement since the beginning of the war on terror (Altwaiji, 2014, p. 316).

Further, the CIA report goes on to suggest that media events featuring Afghan women and their experiences “would probably be most effective if broadcast on programs that have large and disproportionately female audiences” (WikiLeaks, 2010). This once again feeds into the traditional, normative perception that women’s rights –

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15 This classified CIA analysis came as a response to declining support for the war in Afghanistan in Western Europe – specifically France and Germany. There was a fear that this could jeopardize NATO’s International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan (WikiLeaks, 2010).
both at home and abroad – only concern women. The focus on Afghan women as “ideal messengers”, and the perception that their struggles would appeal most to Western women, caters to the Western liberation narrative. This is the idea that the West – both its military power and its way of life – are obligated to save the oppressed civilian population of non-Western societies. The liberation narrative is bred from the logic of Orientalism, an ideology that is not only normative to, but also crucial for the US military-industrial-media complex.

Orientalism is best described by Edward Said in his seminal book, *Orientalism*, written in 1978. He reduces the argument to its simplest form:

There are Westerners, and there are Orientals. The former dominate; the latter must be dominated, which usually means having their land occupied, their internal affairs rigidly controlled, their blood and treasure put at the disposal of one or another Western power (Said, *Orientalism*, 1994, p. 36).

This dichotomous mode of thinking, Said argues, has been centuries in the making. It was not simply a narrative used to justify colonial rule after the fact, but a deep-seated, normative perception held by West. This is to the point where “the sense of Western power over the Orient is taken for granted as having the status of scientific truth” (Said, *Orientalism*, 1994, p. 46). Said illustrates using the example of British colonialism in Egypt in the early 20th century; Arthur James Balfour, a former Prime Minister of the UK, made a series of remarks to the British House of Commons in 1910 regarding his use of the term “Oriental” in describing the people of Egypt. His ideas on the matter are centered on the notion of knowledge; for Balfour, “British knowledge of Egypt is Egypt” (Orientalism, 1994, p. 32). That is, the British perspective of the Egyptian civilization at any given moment in history is objective and ontological; this is because Britain’s self-determined position of superiority gives it the ability and authority to produce categorical knowledge about Egypt.

A century after Balfour’s speech, Orientalism still persists – and is arguably more visible than ever. In 2003, Said published a follow-up article to *Orientalism* where he writes:
In the demonization of an unknown enemy for whom the label “terrorist” serves the general purpose of keeping people stirred up and angry, media images command too much attention and can be exploited at times of crisis and insecurity, of the kind that the post-9/11 period has produced (Said, “Orientalism 25 Years Later”, 2003, para. 18).

The framing of conflict through these narratives has far-reaching implications outside of the Western world; this chapter will examine the global implications of the perpetuation and appropriation of the liberal feminist discourse. First, the narrative of liberation and its implications will be critically analyzed. This section will look at how the liberation narrative has been marketed to Western audiences, and how this rhetoric has a negative impact on both men and women in the Middle East. This chapter will also examine the media practice of situating conflict within the cultural sphere. It will discuss how the focus on the cultural humanizes and encourages public support of the war, while obscuring its geopolitical and ideological contexts.

4.1. “White Saviors”: The Western Liberation Narrative

The leaked 2010 CIA report called for the mobilization of Afghan women as iconographic victims of the war on terror, a media tactic that has been ongoing since 9/11. According to Pierre Bourdieu, “2001 has inaugurated a century of practicing symbolic power on the perpetrators, the Arab world. This symbolic power usually refers to a power used by the empire to create a hegemonic version of reality” (as cited in Altwaiji, 2014, p. 313). This is a practice that serves the liberation narrative, a product of imperialism; it is a marketing tactic used to justify international military intervention by appealing to international development and social justice discourses. Feminist scholar Sunera Thobani writes about how the plight of the Afghan woman would become a highly visible media trope; she would characterize “the hegemonic representation of the ‘Muslim’ woman in US foreign policy as one who requires Western intervention to liberate her from her culture, community and coreligionists, a discursive construct indispensable to legitimating the war on Afghanistan” (2008, p. 221). An example of this is the TIME magazine cover of August 9th, 2010, which featured a young Muslim woman whose nose and ears had been brutally cut off by a Taliban officer.
This image is meant to draw awareness to the violent situation of many women living under the Taliban. However, the headline of the article accompanying the cover – “What Happens if We Leave Afghanistan” – politicizes and sensationalizes the image. It serves to reify the liberation narrative by implying that the US is the only thing standing between the Taliban and its brutal oppression of Afghan women.

But the image of the hypervictimized Muslim woman and its proliferation in mainstream media was not limited solely to the US; Thobani identifies an internationally acclaimed Canadian documentary, Return to Kandahar (2003), as a prime example of how the Western media collectively propagated this narrative of victimization. The film follows a Canadian journalist, Nelofer Pazira, as she returns to her former home in Afghanistan to attempt to locate a friend who was left behind during the Afghan civil war. The opening scene depicts Pazira removing her veil for the viewer; according to Thobani’s reading of this scene, Pazira’s wearing of a veil is meant to convey her authenticity as a Muslim woman. However, her removal of it portrays her as
Westernized, liberated and relatable (Thobani, 2008). She is no longer an oppressed subject, but what Thobani refers to as a “native informant” (2008). Pazira is a prime candidate for enlightening her audience about the dire situation for women in Afghanistan, because she is intimately familiar with both an Afghan perspective as well as a Western perspective. Thus, she is granted a level of agency and superiority over other Afghan women by virtue of having been “saved” by the West.

Hillary Clinton is no stranger to this liberation narrative in Afghanistan. On November 24th, 2001, she published an article for TIME entitled “New Hope for Afghanistan’s Women”.

Thanks to the courage and bravery of America’s military and our allies, hope is being restored to many women and families in much of Afghanistan. As we continue the hard work of rooting out the vestiges of Taliban control and al-Qaeda terrorism, we must begin the hard work of nurturing that newfound hope and planting the seeds of a governing system that will respect human rights and allow all the people of that nation to dream of a better life for their children – girls and boys alike. (Clinton, 2001).

This passage has a number of implications. It reaffirms the narrative of the US military as a liberating force offering salvation to suffering “women and families”. It also reveals how Clinton takes a Western system of governance for granted as a model that will “respect human rights”; she asserts that the articulation of US values in Afghanistan will guarantee “a better life” for their children. This once again disguises the project of US imperialism by taking an Orientalist framework which assumes the superiority of the West.

Women’s and Gender Studies scholar Lila Abu-Lughod, among many other scholars, is highly critical of this liberation narrative: she writes that it is “deeply problematic to construct the Afghan 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” (2002, p. 788). It represents a framework of gendered Orientalism, in which misogyny is the basis for the presumed inferiority of a non-Western society.

This rhetoric of liberation or salvation also obscures the violence that is entailed in that mission – the victims of which are often women and children. On the day of the
9/11 attacks, the former US Secretary of State, Lawrence Eagleburger, made a statement to CNN: “There is only one way to begin to deal with people like this, and that is you have to kill some of them even if they are not immediately directly involved in this thing” (Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting, 2001). American right-wing commentator Ann Coulter stated that “We should invade their countries, kill their leaders, and convert them to Christianity”; she goes on to compare the terrorists to Hitler: “We weren’t punctilious about locating and punishing only Hitler and his top officers. We carpet-bombed German cities; we killed civilians. That’s war. And this is war” (Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting, 2001). Though these opinions were not shared by everyone in the US, they were the loudest – and they also seemed to be shared by the Bush Administration.

On July 1st, 2002, US planes fired two rockets at a house in the village of Kakarak in the province of Uruzgan, where American military officials reported that an anti-aircraft gun had been fired repeatedly. As a result of the blast, Afghan officials reported that approximately 40 civilians at a wedding – many of whom were children – were killed. There were also accounts of the planes shooting at people who were fleeing to safety (BBC, 2002). After this incident, Afghan President Hamid Karzai issued a series of pleas to the US, and other foreign military forces, to end civilian bloodshed. One such speech occurred in 2007 after the death of an estimated 90 civilians in the span of ten days; he asserted that “Afghan life is not cheap and it should not be treated as such” (as cited in Witte, 2007). Karzai has also made several demands over the years for the coordination of military operations between foreign forces and the Afghan government; however, civilian deaths from NATO airstrikes would continue to occur well into 2011 – the result of purportedly unavoidable collateral damage.

These incidents, as well as the Afghan civilian death toll, were revealed to have been downplayed in the American media. In 2001, CNN Chair Walter Isaacson issued a memo to his staff ordering them to “balance images of civilian devastation in Afghan cities with reminders that the Taliban harbors murderous terrorists” (Fairness & Accuracy

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16 This opinion was widely echoed throughout the mainstream American media immediately following 9/11. On September 12th, a columnist for the New York Post wrote, “As for the cities or countries that host these worms, bomb them into basketball courts”. Bill O’Reilly stated on September 13th, that it didn’t make any difference who was killed in the process of bombing the Taliban (Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting, 2001).
in Reporting, 2001). The goal was to essentially editorialize the war coverage so as to frame responsibility for civilian deaths as the Taliban’s, rather than the US military’s. But this practice was not limited to only US corporate media outlets – it also extended to the US military itself. On July 25th, 2010, in what was the biggest breach of military security in US history, WikiLeaks released a compilation of over 91 000 reports covering the Afghanistan War from 2004 to 2010, known as “The Afghan War Diary” (WikiLeaks, 2010). The leaked documents reveal hundreds of civilian killings by the coalition forces that were never documented in US ground reports.17

This lack of regard for civilian casualties, as well as the US military-industrial-media complex’s apparent attempts to downplay them, throws into question the sincerity of the liberation narrative – a narrative that is already founded on problematic assumptions of Western superiority and Orientalism. Thus, the perpetuation of the liberation narrative is an attempt by the US military-industrial-media complex to divert attention to the cultural.

4.2. Culture as the Site of Conflict

Abu-Lughod has also detailed the disproportionate focus on the culture of the Middle East in the post 9/11 media landscape – that is, the focus on religious beliefs and treatment of women in the region:

Such cultural framing, it seemed to me, prevented the serious exploration of the roots and nature of human suffering in this part of the world. Instead of political and historical explanations, experts were being asked to give religio-cultural ones. Instead of questions that might lead to the exploration of global interconnections, we were offered ones that worked to artificially divide the world into separate spheres – recreating an imaginative geography of West versus East, us versus Muslims, cultures in which First Ladies give speeches versus others where women shuffle around silently in burqas (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 784).

17 For example, Task Force Bushmaster lodged a report in 2008 detailing a military operation which resulted in the deaths of 30 insurgents. However, an official UN investigation found that 90 civilians were killed during that operation – none of which was mentioned in the US ground report (Jepson & Fraser, 2010).
The construction of these binaries – between “developing” and “modern” cultures – is a longstanding legacy of the US’s “continued reliance on culturalism to promote its imperial dominance” (Amin-Khan, 2009, para. 6). These tactics are not new to the war on terror; they were also employed during the Cold War to target Marxists and leftists, and to paint an image of the West as culturally superior to non-Western cultures by virtue of its self-designation as “modernized” and “free”. This dichotomy is essential to the liberal feminist and imperial feminist discourses. On November 17th, 2001, First Lady Laura Bush gave a nationwide radio address voicing her concern for women’s rights in Afghanistan. She stated that “civilized people throughout the world are speaking out in horror – not only because our hearts break for the women and children in Afghanistan, but also because in Afghanistan we see the world the terrorists would like to impose upon the rest of us” (Bush L., Radio Address by Mrs. Bush, 2001). This quote clearly demarcates the thick line between a “civilized” Western world, and the terrorists’ “uncivilized” world.

The media focus on Afghan women – and Islamic culture as the source of their oppression – not only legitimates a military campaign aiming to “free” them, but it also diverts attention away from the political history of the region. Amin-Khan writes: “This culturalism of political Islam conceals the social and economic disfigurement caused by capitalist globalization and redirects political questions on to the terrain of culture” (2009). Abu-Lughod agrees with Amin-Khan:

…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 US Pentagon, or how Afghanistan came to be ruled by the Taliban, or what interests might have fueled US and other interventions in the region over the past 25 years … or why the caves and bunkers out of which Bin Laden was to be smoked “dead or alive,” as President Bush announced on television, were paid for a built by the CIA (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 784).

The US, along with its Western allies, had a stake in the Middle East that had little to do with the livelihood and wellbeing of Muslim women and children. For example, the region
was coveted for its natural resources – namely, oil.\textsuperscript{18} The US also held an ideological stake in occupying these Islamic states. The politics of the Cold War, where socialists were stigmatized and demonized in the media, set the precedent for “Public Diplomacy 2.0”, a US government initiative: “Diverging from a traditional sender-receiver model of influence, Public Diplomacy 2.0 aims at strategically intervening in communication environments so as to encourage and amplify the communication of pro-American, as opposed to ‘problematic’, audiences” (Whyte, 2010, pp. 49-50). This took the form of a state-sponsored Digital Outreach Team, whose mission was to “explain US foreign policy and to counter misinformation” (Khatib, Dutton, & Thelwall, 2012, p. 453). However, this only provides another opportunity for the reification of hegemonic narratives. The media focus on the cultural – specifically on the Islamic faith and on Muslim women – painted the war on terror as a war that was provoked by the violation of human rights abroad. This was an attempt to distance the war from geopolitics or ideology, which would depict the US as the aggressors or the antagonists of the war.

A final consequence of the cultural being cast as the primary site of conflict in the war on terror is that it diminishes the agency of women within that culture. This will be discussed further in the following section.

4.3. Feminist Agency and Local Resistance

The selective focus on the cultural points not only to the depoliticization of discourse and the dominance of hegemonic narratives in the media, but it also reaffirms the politics of Orientalism by diminishing the agency of non-Western feminists.

As several Third World Feminists have argued, a historical weakness of liberal feminism in the West has been its racist, patronizing attitude towards women of color who have been seen less as allies / agents and more as victims in need of rescue. This attitude prevails both in relation to

\textsuperscript{18} There have been many accusations against the US government for invading Iraq in order to gain access to its many oil fields. One of the most prominent anti-war voices on this issue was Nelson Mandela, who stated in 2003, "It is a tragedy what Bush is doing in Iraq. All he wants is Iraqi oil" (Janson, 2013).
women of colour within Western nation states, as well as women in the global South (Kumar, 2014, para. 7).

The focus on the image of the hypervictimized Afghan woman, juxtaposed by white saviors like Hillary Clinton and Laura Bush, erases awareness of any alternative feminist groups or movements. This is perhaps done strategically and purposefully, since it serves to heighten the urgency of the liberation narrative, further cast Afghan women as helpless victims, and solidify the Orientalist perception of Afghanistan’s “backwards” human rights policy. But that isn’t to say that local forms of resistance in Afghanistan don’t exist.

The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) is an independent women’s rights group advocating secular democracy in Afghanistan. Established in 1977, RAWA is funded independently by membership dues and public donations. They have organized a number of protests, and despite being ordered to cease activities by the Taliban and the Northern Alliance, RAWA has continued their work, releasing media statements and fundraising for schools, hospitals and orphanages. RAWA holds a critical stance on the war on terror. On October 14th, 2009, a spokesperson for RAWA known only by her first name, Zoya, gave a speech in a US college where she denounced the US’s war on terror; she argued that the US was attempting “to use the establishment of democracy, the liberation of women and the war on terror to legitimize its ‘occupation’ of Afghanistan” (Blum, 2009, para. 2). Zoya went on to describe the progress of the war effort from 2001 as “purely cosmetic”, and argued that the US-supported regime is no better than the Taliban (Blum, 2009, para. 3-9). RAWA has also advocated disarmament of the region, arguing that the US bombings have only caused increased devastation for Afghan women and children. In the wake of a US airstrike on May 5th, 2009 which killed over 150 civilians, RAWA published a media statement expressing outrage at the underreporting of civilian deaths.19

However, RAWA’s message was only received and broadcast selectively by the mainstream Western media. Their accounts of the Taliban’s oppression, and of the

19 RAWA states that the Pentagon reported only 12 civilian deaths, and that the blame for these deaths was shared between both the Taliban as well as US forces (RAWA, 2009).
suffering of Afghan women, were the only messages that supported the interests of the US military-industrial-media complex – thus, they were the only ones that were heard in the Western world. An example of this is in December 2001, when US authorities used four photographs from the RAWA website without permission. One of these photographs depicted an Afghan man beating a veiled woman with a stick; it was printed on flyers advertising the US-sponsored broadcast frequency for Radio Free Afghanistan. RAWA threatened to sue for using these photos illegally and out of context (RAWA, 2001).

There are also local forms of feminist activism that do not necessarily advocate secularism, as RAWA does. Islamic feminism is a discourse that situates female discrimination not within Islam, but within state actors and elites who have manipulated certain tenets of the religion to suit their political agendas. Ziba Mir-Hosseni, a prominent Islamic feminist scholar, writes:

Feminist scholarship in Islam as in any other religious tradition has a lot to offer to both the understanding of religion and the search for justice. Women advocating Islamic feminism assert that shari’ah principles like qiwama20 could have several different interpretations, yet throughout history male elites have used and interpreted the law in a perversion of justice for their own ends (as cited in Boland, 2014).

These Islamic feminists embrace Muslim culture and tradition, while also pushing for legislative reform that reflect a more progressive understanding of women’s rights. One avenue for this that they advocate is for judicial interpretations of Islamic law that are more approving of women’s rights, such as the Hanbali or Maliki readings (Boland, 2014). Islamic feminism represents a local feminist movement in the Middle East that rejects the Western liberation narrative; it is a form of feminism that empowers Muslim women, while not requiring that they abandon their culture. For example, the liberal feminist discourse, which prioritizes individual freedoms, is fundamentally incompatible with Muslim culture, which values the family over the individual.

20 Qiwama is the religious principle that refers to male authority over women; it has been cited as the source for gender inequality being reflected in many legal systems in the Middle East (Boland, 2014).
In the mainstream Western media, mentions of any local forms of feminist resistance in the Middle East are almost nonexistent; instead, Islam is consistently portrayed to be the source of women’s oppression. In the Arabic press, Islamic feminism is often conflated with secular women’s movements (Wagner, 2012) – such as that of RAWA – and the nuances between the two movements’ different visions of female empowerment are lost.

Chandra Mohanty argues for an understanding of the third world “not just through oppression, but in terms of historical complexities and the many struggles to change these oppressions” (Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes’ Revisited”, 2003, p. 501). She advocates an understanding of women in the global south that does not overlook historical context:

I argue that assumptions of privilege and ethnocentric universality on the one hand, and inadequate self-consciousness about the effect of western scholarship on the ‘third world’ in the context of a world system dominated by the west on the other, characterize a sizeable extent of western feminist work on women in the third world (Mohanty, 1988, p. 63)

There is a widespread assumption – particularly in the Western media – that Islam is fundamentally incompatible with feminism. However, this simplistic understanding allows no room for plurality in the definition of either concept. Mir-Hosseni writes that these assumptions are problematic because

...they do not take account of realities; they mask global and local power relations and structures, within which Muslim women have to struggle for justice and equality. We need to start by asking some basic questions: Whose Islam? Whose feminism? Who is speaking for Islam? Who is speaking for feminism? (Mir-Hosseni, 2012)

Mir-Hosseni goes on to point out how in the Western context, feminism emerged and thrived from the privatization of religion, and the subsequent secularization of the public space (2012). But as Mohanty argues, this reading of feminism comes out of an assumption of “priviliege and ethnocentric universality”.

The narratives of feminism offered by feminist groups like RAWA and discourses like Islamic feminism show that there are alternative platforms for female
empowerment in the Middle East. These alternatives do not rely on the adoption of Western values; furthermore, by being agents of their own empowerment, these feminists challenge the Western liberation narrative and the moral superiority that it bestows upon liberal feminism.
Chapter 5.

Conclusion

The dominance of liberal feminism is rooted in its conformity to the normative ideologies and mainstream politics of the West – that is, neoliberalism. It begins with an understanding of women’s oppression as a collective experience shared by all women; from there, liberal feminism argues for equal social, economic and political opportunities for individual women. For liberal feminists like Hillary Clinton, this would mean women being given equal opportunity as men to climb the corporate ladder, or to find success in the political sphere. This is an example of how liberal feminism does not target institutional change; it generally does not threaten the existing organization of power.

As a result, liberal feminism is the most visible narrative of feminism in the Western public sphere. It is widely adopted by white, female political figures – like Clinton – and its language is also used by military and state leaders to justify the war on terror. The discursive appropriation of feminist language by the military-industrial-media complex points to its symbiotic relationship with the liberal feminist discourse. This relationship has also contributed to the dominance of liberal feminism. As a result, it is often reflected in the Western media as the universal narrative of feminism. Thus, nations where it is absent – namely in the global south – are perceived to lack any conception of women’s rights.

This begs the question, what authority does liberal feminism have? Its tendency to equalize the experiences of all women erases history and context; the liberal feminist discourse approaches oppression and marginalization from the perspective of the white, middle class, Western woman. By failing to challenge the structural causes of oppression, the logic of liberal feminism fails to take into account the impact of systemic
global inequality and poverty on women, and ultimately encourages gendered Orientalism.

This form of feminist amnesia ultimately contributes to the oppression of women around the globe; for example, it diminishes non-Western and alternative feminist movements. Sangster and Luxton advocate a feminist historical materialism as an approach for understanding how certain narratives of feminism were able to achieve hegemonic status within the ruling structure of capitalism, while others became invisible. This is an approach that values context, history, the roles of culture and ideology, and human agency (2012, p. 289); it is rooted in 1960’s and 70’s socialist feminism, which

…rejected political approaches associated with the liberal project of modernizing capitalism and with state socialism, both of which sought simply to bring women into the public sphere on equal terms with men without regard for domestic life ... They aimed instead to transform social relationships of class, gender and race at home and at work, and perhaps most important, they shared a utopian faith in the possibility of changing individuals and society (Sangster & Luxton, 2012, p. 304).

Socialist feminism is set apart from liberal feminism because it interrogates the economic and cultural foundations and conditions for the oppression of women.

Black feminism and intersectionality are also alternative narratives of feminism that value plurality, history and context. The two concepts are closely tied together; the term “intersectionality” was first used in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw in a discussion on black women’s employment in the US (Yuval-Davis, 2010, p. 44). In 2001, the Center for Women’s Global Leadership at Rutgers University hosted a discussion on women and human rights. They called for governments to take action to ensure equality of human rights and fundamental freedoms for women facing “multiple barriers to their empowerment and advancement because of such factors as their race, age, language, ethnicity, culture, religion or disability or because they are indigenous people” (as cited in Yuval-Davis, 2010, p. 47).

The concept of intersectionality recognizes that the oppression experienced by women is far from universal. Rather, multiple dimensions – such as class, ethnicity and gender – work in tandem, rather than separately, to shape a woman’s individual
experience of marginalization or discrimination. An intersectional approach suggests that the different aspects that constitute one’s identity are inseparable from one another. But identity is not the sole point of analysis for intersectional feminist analysis; the working group at the Center for Women’s Global Leadership also states that intersectionality “addresses the manner in which racism, patriarchy, class oppression, and other discriminatory systems create inequalities that structure the relative positions of women, races, ethnicities, classes and the like” (Yuval-Davis, 2010, p. 48). That is, the intersectional approach emphasizes the importance of the structural causes of women’s disempowerment. This entails an examination of the social context and cultural history, ideology, policy, and power relations that cause feminist oppression.

The methodologies entailed in intersectionality are ambitious and complex, and they can also be contradictory. Nira Yuval-Davis outlines many of the problematic aspects of intersectional approaches; for example, she argues against the conflation of positionality and fixed social identities, warning that this could result in the erasure of “the crucially important political struggles being carried out in many parts of the world that problematize and contest the boundaries of social collectives” (Yuval-Davis, 2010, pp. 57-58), which are constructed by hegemonic determinations of identity that ultimately alienate certain groups of people. In other words, an analysis of institutional systems of power centered on women’s experiences of subordination and resistance, can be essentialist and reductionist. Mohanty addresses these critiques by arguing that “an explanatory account of the systemic nature of power does not entail inattentiveness to local contradictions or contexts of struggle” (2013, p. 969). This debate is an ongoing one; however, a potential avenue for research is the application of dialectical deconstruction to intersectional feminism. Taking a Marxist perspective, David Harvey argues that “parts and wholes are mutually constitutive of each other” (1996, p. 129). This implies that when broken down, there is nothing essential or fundamental to the multiple factors which contribute to women’s disempowerment; thus, it is the sum of all of these factors which constitute an experience of marginalization.

While intersectional feminism challenges the assumption of Western supremacy, liberal feminism takes it for granted. Said writes:
There's been so massive and calculatedly aggressive an attack on the contemporary societies of the Arab and Muslim for their backwardness, lack of democracy, and abrogation of women’s rights that we simply forget that such notions as modernity, enlightenment, and democracy are by no means simple, and agreed-upon concepts that one either does or does not find, like Easter eggs in the living-room (Said, 2003).

The war on terror reaffirmed the prevalence of Orientalism and renewed its visibility – perhaps more so than ever before, with the advent of digital media. The demonization of Islam, the condescending removal of the agency of Muslim women, and the perpetuation of the liberation narrative in the Western media relies on the normative perception of a culturally, economically and politically superior West. This is a dichotomous, problematic understanding of power relations that needs to be challenged for anti-racist, anti-classist and anti-imperialist narratives of feminism. As Deepa Kumar puts it, “Empire does not liberate, it subjugates” (2014). Intersectionality is not just necessary for a better understanding of women’s experiences of marginalization, but crucial for the promotion of narratives of feminism that do not further exclude or oppress women around the globe.
References


