

Hot Potato

Imperial Wars or Benevolent Interventions?

Reflections on "Global Feminism" Post September 11th

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Feminists must continually question the narratives in which they are embedded.

(Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan 1994)

Any serious analysis has to begin with the premise that genders, sexualities, races, classes, nations, and even continents exist not as hermetically sealed entities but, rather, as part of a set of permeable, interwoven relationships.

(Ella Shohat 2001)

This essay aims to provide some reflections on feminist theory and practice in a post September 11th environment. Specifically, it aims to address whether some dominant and popular strands of "global feminism" are able to analyze and offer alternatives to an understanding of global relations between women specifically, and First World/Third World relations in general, in the aftermath of September 11th. Feminist reflections on this question are needed not only because of the enormity of events and developments that beg a feminist perspective, among others, to respond thoughtfully and sensibly to what is going on. Feminist reflections are also needed, specifically, as the war waged in Afghanistan is being presented as a humanitarian war which is about saving women. While there is some diversity among feminist responses to the US political response to September 11th there is as yet little challenge to this image of the war.¹

The fact that the Taliban regime which the war in Afghanistan aimed to overthrow had a

horrendous record for status and treatment of women is an issue which has caused feminist responses in Canada and the US to the war to range from uncritical celebration of the end of the Taliban regime to confusion and ambiguity regarding the nature of developments. It is interesting that celebration or ambiguity characterize the most typical responses among feminists even though the response of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), one of the most prominent and outspoken women's groups in Afghanistan, has repeatedly and unambiguously expressed its concerns about the US bombing and the choice of the Northern Alliance as allies in war and the choice for government.² While some feminists who have expressed ambiguity on US responses to September 11th still take an anti-war position, others are cautiously optimistic about the potential for change in the post-war period asking for Afghan women's participation in the "peace process."

What is common to these responses among feminists, whether they support the war or are against it, is the sense of solidarity they express with the women of Afghanistan. In this sense, some may characterize the general nature of the North American feminist response as one representing "global sisterhood." What I would like to do in this paper is to argue that in the absence of critical questions being asked about the nature of existing and new global power structures, and First World/Third World women's and feminists' relationships, as well as the ways in which the war is affecting the nature of social and political relationships in Western countries, there is no

innocence to a position of "global sisterhood." Rather than supporting a feminist cause globally or locally, I suggest that an unproblematized and uncritical position of "global sisterhood" on the part of First World women would, on the one hand, provide legitimacy and support to existing and newly redefined relations of imperialism, and on the other hand, fail to focus on many regressive political developments taking place in their home countries.

IMAGES OF AFGHAN WOMEN AND EXPRESSIONS OF "GLOBAL SISTERHOOD"

In the days and weeks that followed September 11th, Western media became flooded with images, testimonies and commentaries of Afghan women's treatment by the Taliban regime. After the war started, the images continued to exist with a conspicuous absence of images depicting the human costs of bombing. Since the Northern Alliance captured the cities of Afghanistan, images and dominant interpretation of images have been painting a story of a happy ending, or at least the beginning of a happy ending in which the women of Afghanistan are saved from their oppressors and on the road to liberation. In presenting these "happy" images of liberation, the Western media turned the gaze on Afghan women to a *stare*, whereby daily photographs of unveiled or partially veiled women came to symbolize what was good about this war. In the days following the fall of Taliban, the media summarized the mood of the Afghani people with references to children flying kites, music in the streets and women with the veils of the burqas lifted. Presently, the media is continuing to celebrate the outcome of the war for women with depictions such as "wind in their hair, sun on their faces."³ While these images may selectively capture instances of hope among people who have faced nothing but war for the last twenty years, the media presents them as representing much more than hope, a state of emancipation. The images, irresistibly seductive to a Western audience, reduce complex realities and a very messy and uncertain political situation to sugar-coated clichés about the meaning of liberation. While some feminists have expressed caution about these images, this caution leans in the direction of cautious optimism,⁴ rather

than a challenge to the ways in which these images are used to manipulate public, including feminist, opinion and justify new relations of ultra-imperialism.

There are several serious problems with these images of victimization and subsequent liberation. One obvious problem has to do with hypocrisy. It has been military hawks, right-wing politicians and columnists, with very different approaches to women and feminism in their own countries, who have been most outspoken in the discourse of saving Afghan women. Hypocrisy also exists in the media, through the ignorance and amnesia it has actively contributed to creating and maintaining, and the questions it has failed to raise about, the very recent history of Western intervention in Afghanistan and the West's role in creating fundamentalist regimes in the region. The US government, whose level of involvement in Afghanistan through the 1980s not only brought an end to the Soviet invasion, but also brought fundamentalist forces to power, and media which, until about ten years ago, celebrated fundamentalist forces as "freedom fighters," are conveniently silent about their recent history.

A second major problem has to do with which realities these images omit and replace. Missing or marginalized in the media are images, discussion or even serious questions about the human costs of the war: Numbers of civilian casualties of bombing, people dislocated and forced into refugee camps with the war, those who face starvation, sickness and death due to challenges the war presents for provision and delivery of food or medical aid. While Laura Bush and the western media continue to celebrate what they represent as liberation of the women of Afghanistan, other stories, directly relating to women's status in the post-Taliban era, also remain conspicuously absent from the media. For example, on November 27th, a women's march in Kabul, planned by the newly formed Union of Women, was banned by the new minister of the Interior, Younis Qanooni. The news of the ban could only be found on the Internet, and was ignored by the mainstream media.

Western feminists have been demanding that their governments participate in efforts to improve Afghan women's conditions after the overthrow of the Taliban regime. Some feminists identify the hypocrisy in Western leaders' messages

about the "humanitarian" nature of the war and keep a cynical and vigilant eye as to whether there are in fact any improvements in women's conditions in Afghanistan.⁵ Such healthy cynicism and efforts to make governments accountable are doubtlessly valuable. However, there are questions that are not asked in these critical perspectives, questions about the mode of intervention, who is intervening and why, and what power relations are created with what potential implications for the women and people of Afghanistan.

A third serious problem with the images of women victimized and emancipated has to do with the seductiveness of the images. I suggest that what is making these images "seductive" may not simply be a rather innocent contentment that any "happy ending" narrative provides. I will argue that the seductiveness is rather caused by the definitions of and power relations entailed in "us" and "them" that they perpetuate and re-establish: "them" as victims of a "barbaric" culture, and "us" not just as liberated subjects of a civilized world but also as "saviors" of victims of culture. I will further argue that it is the participation of some feminist theory and practice in these discourses of "us" and "them" which may cause the relative acquiescence and absence of critical challenges by feminists to government and mainstream media interpretation of events.

EUROCENTRIC "GLOBAL FEMINISM": SOLUTION OR PROBLEM?

If feminism is to be different, it must acknowledge the ideological and problematic significance of its own past.

(KumKum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, cited in Grewal and Kaplan 1994, 18)

One of the questions to be asked is whether "global feminism" can provide the tools of analysis and the principles of feminist action and solidarity in the post-September 11th environment. Despite the contributions made to feminist theory and practice for at least the last two decades by anti-racist, multicultural and postcolonial feminists, and despite many attempts to base global feminist politics of solidarity on anti-racist and anti-imperialist principles,⁶ I will suggest that there are some popular approaches to and some dominant paradigms in "global feminism" which may not

only hinder critical analysis of September 11th but also lead to a perpetuation of neo-colonial or imperial relations between First and Third World women.

One popular approach to "global feminism" tries to construct "global sisterhood" on the basis of what is assumed to be a shared common condition (based on gender) for women around the world.⁷ Quests for "global sisterhood" have often been based on assuming unity - inevitably on an abstract basis - rather than working toward it through cumbersome and potentially conflict-ridden relationships of communication and debate with women and feminists around the world. Unity is often assumed by defining a common denominator of womanhood based on women's bodies.

The focus is not on uncovering the material and ideological specificities that constitute a group of women as "powerless" in a particular context. It is rather on finding a variety of cases of "powerless" groups of women to prove the general point that women as a group are powerless.

(Mohanty 1988, 66)

Especially in relation to Third World women, there is an obsessive focus on the treatment of Third World women's bodies. Specifically, it is an obsession with some aspect of women's bodily experience, sexual and reproductive, often ignoring other bodily experiences of production, exploitation or of hunger, which may not seem as culturally exotic and interesting. These approaches to "global sisterhood" create an abstract sense of solidarity with Third World women. This leads to an ignorance about the actual historical and daily constitution of women and their bodies. Thus, rather than being interested in different dimensions of women's conditions and developing an understanding of these conditions in the context of national and international economic and political relations, there is a tendency to isolate women and their issues. Mohanty observes that when women are conceptualized outside national, regional, international and historical spaces, "transcendence, rather than engagement (become) the model for future social change" (1987, 34). Doris Sommer suggests that a romanticized identification with "others" not only constitutes appropriation but that it can also foreclose the possibility of any political

alliance or solidarity across identities (Fuss 1995, 9). Caren Kaplan argues that "feminists with socioeconomic power need to investigate the grounds of their strong desire for rapport and intimacy with the 'other'" (Kaplan 1994, 139). What I think needs questioning here is not feminist sentiments and acts of real solidarity and coalitions based on actual relations and exchange with flesh and blood feminists in specific contexts. It is rather the abstract spiritual solidarity often based on scarce knowledge of the actual conditions of and absence of real relationships with the "other."

Whereas gender essentialism and gender reductionism characterize some approaches, cultural essentialism and reductionism characterize others. A second problematic approach in "global feminism" has to do with the assumptions commonly held about "Third World women." There is often a simplistic dualism in the ways First World women are conceptualized as the "self" and Third World women as the "other." As "other," Third World women, unlike their western sisters, are defined by their "Third World difference."

Third-world women as a group or category are automatically and necessarily defined as: religious (read "not progressive"), family-oriented (read "traditional"), legal minors (read "they-are-still-not-conscious-of-their-rights"), illiterate (read "ignorant"), domestic (read "backward") and sometimes revolutionary (read "their-country-is-in-a-state-of-war; they-must-fight"). (Mohanty 1988, 80)

In these conceptions, differences between "self" and "other" are exaggerated and absolutized, while the "other" is essentialized, exoticized and mystified. Abstract, static and monolithic conceptions of culture and religion dominate understanding of how Third World difference is constituted. Often, what is defined as a sensational practice is chosen to stand for the "culture" and women's status and experience in others' cultures. Thus, infibulation comes to represent "African culture," the veil or the burqa represent "Muslim culture." These representations are so powerful that they stand on their own, replacing any need to learn the reality and diversity of women's lives.

The totalitarian character of the existing representation of difference appropriates differential items haphazardly, and incorporates them into a structure that becomes autonomous and stands for the lived reality of Third World women.
(Lazreg 2001, 285)

There is an insatiable appetite that seems to exist in some perspectives in First World feminism for the exotic practices on women's bodies in Third World countries. Such exclusive focus on exotic practices often goes along with not just ignorance but also a general lack of curiosity about the social, economic and political conditions in these countries or other dimensions of women's lives.

Some of these tendencies, such as the focus on (some aspects of) women's bodies as the site of feminist politics, are so common that they often go unquestioned. For example, talking about women's rights as human rights at the government forum at the World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, the following was the list of practices Hillary Clinton mentioned:

female infanticide, dowry burning, rape, genital mutilation, and the denial of the right of women to plan their families, including being forced to have abortions or being sterilized against their will.

(cited in Bulbeck 1998, 170)

Not only did this list privilege sexual body over other sites and contexts, such as women's working conditions in offshore industries, as of relevance to human rights, but it also reiterated the dualistic, civilization vs. barbarism, "us" vs. "them" position. Luckily, the platform on violence against women that came out of the conference rejected Clinton's approach and took a more inclusive approach, stating that "any harmful aspect of certain traditional, customary or *modern* practices that violates the rights of women should be prohibited and eliminated" (Bulbeck 1998, 170). Despite interventions from women and feminists from the Third World to encourage more inclusive approaches to violence against women and gendered conceptions of human rights, Eurocentric conceptions of "self" and "other" still continue to dominate such discourses. In recent discussions on

women's rights as human rights, for example, there is almost an exclusive focus on Third World women as subjects of human rights violations.⁸ What is rarely discussed in "global" discussions of human rights is the treatment of groups of women in policies and legislation by Western countries. For example, one hardly finds human rights discourse used in the analysis of immigration laws and policies in Western Europe nor North America, nor on the effects of legislation such as the US federal *Personal Responsibility Act* of 1996⁹ on single mothers on social assistance.

Whether their differences are eradicated or suppressed under universal womanhood, or exaggerated and essentialized in dualisms of "self" and "other," representations of Third World women remain problematic in the dominant Eurocentric approaches to "global feminism." Sorely lacking in most studies of "Third World women," and especially of Middle Eastern and Muslim women, has been historical specificity. Orientalism leads not just to cultural reductionism, but also to static notions of certain cultures and religions. So, "Islam" - depicted as an unchanging monolith, hardly different from its fundamentalist interpretations - becomes *the* cause of women's oppression in "Muslim societies," always and everywhere. Most find this approach rather unproblematic even though they would find references to equally reductionist monolithic conceptions of "Christianity" and "Christian societies" totally absurd. What is needed to break out of, what Marnia Lazreg calls the "totalitarianism of the religion paradigm" is a study of the "historical conditions under which religion becomes significant in the production and reproduction of gender difference and inequality" (2001, 290). Such a study requires that we do not isolate "women's issues" from their complex articulation with national, regional and international issues and contexts.

So, part of the problem in knowledge about Third World women has had to do with production of this knowledge. This is only part of the problem, though. A greater problem has to do with the reading and interpretation of knowledge that inevitably goes through the lenses and perspectives that already dominate. Recent feminist literature has been enriched by accounts of geographically and historically specific analyses often written by feminist scholars from specific Third World

countries. Even when sophisticated and historically specific analyses are available, however, the ways they are being framed, read and understood may still reflect the already mentioned dominant paradigms of "global feminism." So, "reception" may continue to be problematic even when some production problems are solved. Recently, a number of feminist scholars, namely Inderpal Grewal, Caren Kaplan, Marnia Lazreg, Lata Mani, Chandra T. Mohanty, Uma Narayan, Ella Shohat and Gayatri Spivak have suggested that we cannot take transnational communication for granted, and that reception of written works as well as activism by Third World women takes place in a context of prevailing discourses and power relationships. Reception is a central question having implications for a number of different topics: who gets published or invited for talks to Western, white, middle-class audiences; on which topics; what people *want* to hear; what they do hear; etc. Reception theorists suggest that what gets to earn central focus and attention in detailed accounts of the conditions of women in historical or ethnographic studies, what causality gets attributed to women's oppression in "other" cultures, and whether Third World women are seen as resisting and fighting agents or pitiful total victims, all depend on the context of reception.

Amal Amireh (2000) has written a brilliant analysis of the reception for Nawal El Saadawi's work and its differential reception in Egypt and other Arab countries on the one hand, and Britain and the US on the other hand. Translated into English in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution, in a period of growing Western fears about Islam, the reception of El Saadawi's famous book, *The Hidden Face of Eve* was "conditioned by Western interest and hostility to Islam" (2000, 221). The first significant change was in the title of the book. The title in the Arabic original literally meant "the naked face of the Arab woman." Amireh shows how, when the book came out in its first British edition, translated from Arabic, it was not just the title which was changed substantively, but the content of the book. In crossing from Egypt to Britain and then to the US, certain sections completely disappeared, among them two entire chapters on "Woman's Work in the Home" and "Arab Woman and Socialism." Added to the English edition were two chapters "The Grandfather with Bad Manners" and "Circumcision of Girls" (the latter, only a small

section consisting of a few paragraphs in the original) (Amireh 2000, 224-25). Even though El Saadawi clearly warned the readers of the British edition from focusing exclusively on issues such as female circumcision, or dealing with it at the expense of and in isolation from other issues - a warning which disappeared from the later American edition - many of the reviews focused on clitoridectomy, rather than women's education, health and employment, which the book was largely about. While selectively highlighting parts of the book at the expense of the other parts, the reviews also omitted references to El Saadawi's politics as a socialist feminist and Arab nationalist, opposed to the Camp David agreement and to the Gulf War.

El Saadawi's voice and image, then, are framed by the Western discourse about her in a way that fits first-world agendas and assumptions: the socialist feminist is rewritten as a liberal individualist and the anti-imperialist as a native informant.

(Amireh 2000, 228)

Amireh's account suggests not only that context is important in the production and reception of work, but also that context may determine whether Third World women's voices may get *used* instead of heard. The case demonstrates the difficulties of transnational reception. "Global feminism" is a project that aims to bring First and Third World women together in feminism. It is about forming alliances and creating relations of mutuality. Necessarily central to the forming of such relations would be questions of: whose agenda, whose issues, whose definitions, whose perspective, whose leadership and whose interests. In theory and in practice, "global feminism" requires cultural exchange. Meaningful exchange is a challenge given the existing power differences globally. It is also very difficult when certain paradigms have tended to dominate the relationship between First and Third World women, historically as well as in the present: the "saving brown women from brown men" model; the "victims of culture" model, and the "feminist by exposure to the West" model (Amireh and Majaj 2000, 7). The discourses that depict Third World women in a particular way are "predicated upon assumptions about Western women as secular, liberated, and having control over their own lives" (Mohanty 1988, 81). The

same discourses of "self" and "other" do something more important, however. When conceptions of the "other" define "brown women" as helpless victims and "brown men" as their barbaric predators exercising the authority given them by traditional culture, the discourse of the "self" inevitably becomes one who has a moral and political duty to intervene to save. When it works with these paradigms, the project of "global feminism" has to involve "benevolent rescues" and "principled interventions" and become part of a larger civilizing project which has historically involved missionary projects and modernizing efforts (Grewal and Kaplan 1994, 7). Interventions "on behalf" of women have a long history in colonialism, from non- or anti-feminist religious missionary activities to feminist campaigns during the first wave. After the end of formal colonization, they continue, albeit in more subtle forms which bell hooks calls "neocolonial paternalism" (hooks 2000, 45).

What does all this discussion have to do with feminist politics post September 11th? Has September 11th not proven that conceptions of "self" and "other," perhaps not valid in every case, are unquestionably applicable to this specific situation? When there are no questions about the nature of the Taliban regime and its total and absolute control of the bodies and lives of Afghani women, what is the point of this criticism of Eurocentric "global feminism"? Is this just a case of wishy-washy postmodern relativism? I would like to think not. I will suggest that there are several specific implications of the dominant paradigms for the shape of reactions to September 11th that are problematic for a feminist, and general democratic, politics.

In the discussion on dominant paradigms on "global feminism," I suggested that some of these paradigms create several serious obstacles to communication and collaboration among feminists. Unfortunately, wars may not provide the best environment for transnational communication. Rather, wars thrive on and further perpetuate ignorance about "self" and "other." It has to be acknowledged that the images of Muslim women as total victims of religion and culture, and images of Muslim men as hyper-masculine (but, unlike "our" men, of an irrational, uncivilized and barbaric kind), were already a very central part of Western common-sense, long before anybody knew anything

about the Taliban. These images tremendously increased the moral and common-sensical appeal of the war as a right and legitimate response to attacks on September 11th. They also comforted parts of the public who would otherwise question the moral legitimacy of the world's strongest and wealthiest country waging a war against one of the poorest countries of the world, already devastated by more than twenty years of war.

One dominant and very popular interpretation of what happened and why on September 11th that prevailed in the media has been that the horrific events were a result of a "clash of civilizations." The "clash of civilizations" thesis was developed by American academics such as Bernard Lewis (1990) and Samuel Huntington (1993), who occupy advisory positions for the US government, to predict - or to plan?- in the post Cold War period, what the nature of new global divisions and conflicts would be. Among media commentators and columnists, the thesis, based on an extremely simplistic understanding of the world and the cultures it is supposed to interpret, gained enormous popularity and recognition as a work of prophetic quality. What may be disturbing for feminists to recognize is that the "clash of civilizations" perspective - which hardly distinguishes fundamentalist approaches to culture and civilization with cultures and civilizations as they exist - resonates strongly with some of the premises held in Eurocentric versions of "global feminism" and a long history of feminist theory and practice rooted originally in colonialism, and remain only partially challenged in the contemporary theory and practice.

"Clash of civilizations" and similar conceptions of "self" and "other" not only exaggerate the differences between the two but also remain blind to the historical and continuing interrelations between "the West and the rest." When colonialism and imperialism are erased from pictures of the world with "clashing civilizations," the "other" necessarily is seen as self-constituted with its unchanging and totalizing traditions. When "us" and "them" are not seen in relational terms, when there is no conception of the mutual constitution of the "West and the rest," then the West carries no responsibility for the effects of its interventions in the constitution of the "other." The only interventions that get mentioned in this course

would be benevolent, principled and humanitarian interventions to "correct" the violence of tradition.

In the post September 11th period, the ignorance and ignoring in the common public discourse in First World countries and especially in the US, of the history of the role of US foreign policy in the emergence of fundamentalist regimes in Afghanistan conveniently serves the dismissal of responsibility in developments and justifies most violent forms of "benevolent" intervention. The more ignorant people are about this history, the more they are likely to think of what happened in terms of "culture" conceptualized in mystified, static and essentialist ways. It is very important that feminist analysis attempting to make sense of women's conditions in Afghanistan drop references to abstract studies of "Islam" and instead question how US foreign policy has, in a cold war environment, directly contributed to weakening of other political alternatives - including ones far more favourable for women - and a strengthening of political Islam in Afghanistan.

References to culture and religion as the cause of women's oppression are immensely useful and convenient to an imperialist project not just in justifying an otherwise destructive war as a "humanitarian" one to a Western audience, and claiming credit for what might appear to be the positive outcome of the war; but also in terms of disowning the failures, embarrassments or limitations of the war. For example, emphasis on culture as the central explanatory concept can help to attribute the atrocities committed by the Northern Alliance against prisoners of war as an unfortunate outcome of the innate wildness and barbarism of "our allies." If Afghan women do not achieve any improvements in their conditions at the end of war, invasion and Western involvement in Afghan government, this again can be blamed on "our allies" not being able to overcome "tradition" in a short period.¹⁰

References to "culture" and religion bring almost a titillating quality to some news, while marginalizing others. Thus, while the mainstream media interest in Afghan women seemed to go far beyond a gaze and became a *stare* when certain news and images helped present a "just" war, there has been a conspicuous absence of interest in Afghan women otherwise. We may want to reflect on which stories of victimhood may earn

recognition in this discourse and which stories become irrelevant or uninteresting. While the stories of a TV broadcaster back at work, or a few women who have taken off the burqa may be gratifying to hear, we may want to ask why it is that we are not allowed to hear, or may not find it as interesting to register even if we heard, from or about women who may be dead or injured by the bombing, or hundreds of thousands of women who because of the war are in refugee camps in Pakistan and Iran - to which the Western media has access - and are unable to return because of continuing war conditions, or women who are facing death by starvation or disease because of the disruptions to delivery of food or medical aid caused by bombing.

The dead in Afghanistan are not even allowed to become statistics. They are invisible, given over to their rulers by the obscenity of such words as "collateral damage."

Worse, the dead are disappeared. Given over to the unmarked mass graves of those the world can choose not to mourn. (Abbas 2002, 19)

Popular discourses on "self" and "other" dehumanize Afghan men - those who are not on "our" side - enough to justify war as the only solution to solving problems, and enough to allow their specific treatment as prisoners of war - illegal under international law - to go relatively unchallenged. The same discourses also silence Afghan women, when their voices may not support the war agenda. Since Afghan women are seen as total victims, it is often assumed that they don't have a voice, or organizations to represent them. So, whereas most people know about the treatment of women by the Taliban, few people know about the existence of several women's groups who have resisted and fought the Taliban and still try to influence Afghan politics today. Ignorance about the agency of Afghan women helps to confirm colonial images of women as victims who could only be "saved" by the colonizers. Such ignorance also conveniently helps Western countries to ignore the positions women's groups such as RAWA, have expressed about the recent developments, and do what they think is best for the people of Afghanistan - or themselves. It is interesting that the same media which for a while made Afghani

women the central focus and spectacle of the war, have hardly made any references to the objection of RAWA to US bombing, and their very serious warnings against the choice as ally of Northern Alliance - who ruled the country from 1992 to 1996 and were notorious for their violence against the population and specifically against women; whose brutality towards and rape of women were specifically one of the issues which facilitated the coming to power of the Taliban.

A FEMINIST PEACE MOVEMENT: NECESSARY, BUT SUFFICIENT?

A feminist anti-war position is immeasurably valuable at a time of thoughtless patriotism and unhindered militarism. Such a position is also useful to help question how being in war changes priorities of spending; how it helps push issues of health, education, and social security down in the government agenda. However, an anti-war position on its own, a position which does not simultaneously ask critical political questions, has some shortcomings. One of the dominant positions in feminist peace activism in different contexts has been one that considers women to be naturally nurturing and peace loving and men to be violent and war-mongering. As Mojab argues, such a position of "gender determinism is theoretically untenable and politically destructive. It cannot see how gender relations themselves are shaped by the unequal distribution of social, cultural, economic, and political power" (1997, 75). In this particular historical context, to claim that women, as women, are against war is inaccurate. Not only do many women support this war, but women also participate in discourses that are sometimes used to reproduce power relations internationally. Many wars historically have been fought to defend a "motherland," or the women and children of a country. This war is specifically sold to part of the Western public as a benevolent, humanitarian war, not just protecting "our" women and children against terrorism, but also saving "their" women. Feminists need to address these claims explicitly. Secondly, an essentialist womanist peace position could marginalize women and feminists. It may help feminists to stand pure and clean in an otherwise ugly men's world gone crazy. However, remaining pure and clean may also mean an

inability to engage with issues and developments and to challenge them. What we need instead is an explicitly political and engaged activism.

Masculinity in several different forms is certainly very prevalent in this war as in others - from the posturing of political leaders to increased militarism, from the "rationality" of "our" leaders to the barbaric madness of "theirs." Nonetheless, there are many dimensions of the war which cannot simply be reduced to playing out of masculinity. Such explanations would not take us very far in inquiries into: the rise of fundamentalisms in recent history; global economic and political inequalities; new forms of imperialism; the post Cold War crisis of legitimating Cold war institutions of colossal military-industrial complexes and military and intelligence units; the politics of de-democratization under way in many First World countries; or, the smaller politics of legitimizing the authority of a US president whose election status still remains ambiguous.

TURNING THE GAZE ONTO "OURSELVES"

In addition to the seductiveness of power that it seems to ensure, there is something else which is intoxicating about an obsessive gaze on the "other." Such a gaze not only affirms "our" superiority over the "other," but also conveniently shifts our attention away from our own problems, conditions and status. Such a shift of attention not only helps "us" forget or remain unaware of the increasingly grim possibilities of achieving equality and better conditions for women in a period of economic and state restructuring. It also keeps us blind to the state of "our" civilization at a time when western countries are facing a set of changes, since September 11th, of a nature not short of a coup. What we are experiencing since September 11th constitutes no less than a serious weakening, if not a major collapse, of many institutions and practices which were supposed to be central to the self-definitions of western countries as "free," "democratic" and "tolerant." In the name of security, a lot has been justified from violation of international law, to racist attacks on minorities, from general threats to civil liberties and trampling of due legal process under the new "anti-terrorist" security legislation, to specific attacks on specific

oppositional movements such as the anti-globalization movement. The irony, of course, is that it is precisely in the aftermath of September 11th, when discourses such as "the clash of civilizations" are widely employed to exaggerate the assumed differences between "us" and "them," that the institutional and practical basis for "us" is becoming undone.

Turning the gaze to "ourselves" may be psychologically difficult and painful. At a time when democrats in general and feminists in particular have every reason to feel powerless, it may indeed to be gratifying to think there are others around the world who have it worse than "us." While it may be psychologically reassuring, however, such a position represents a complete retreat from feminism as a project of change. It is absolutely essential that there is a discussion and exposure of who and what internally the "new war" has really been against.

A NEW WORLD ORDER, "INTERNATIONAL JUSTICE" AND ISSUES OF SOVEREIGNTY

There are several competing explanations as to what the present war in Afghanistan has been about: That it is "a war against terrorism," that it represents consolidation and exercise of US power internationally in a post-Cold War environment; that it is about US oil interests, etc. Among the explanations and representations of the war, feminists need to address one directly and urgently. The relatively successful presentation by the US government of the war in Afghanistan as a saving mission for the women and people of Afghanistan poses a dilemma for feminists. On the one hand, women, as well as other groups whose human rights are violated, have very good reasons to doubt that their oppression can be addressed within the internal politics of nation-states and may hope for the establishment of a system of "international justice" which can go beyond the limits of local communities and nation-states in addressing injustice. On the other hand, those who are victims of national policies and practices also have reasons to question whether claims to "international justice" and "humanitarian" intervention are supported by the real interests and actions of those who claim to exercise them, and what kind of new power

relations these discourses and acts of intervention represent.

In a way, the presentation and sale of wars to national publics as humanitarian missions is not new. Throughout colonial history, wars, invasions and forms of direct intervention were justified as benevolent civilizing, and even pro-women missions. There are, however, perhaps two developments that can be identified as new in the recent period. One important development has been the articulation of the demand by feminists that the human rights discourse be extended to address the specific forms of violence women experience on the basis of gender. Brought forward and supported by Third World as well as First World women, backed by a petition signed by over half a million women from 124 countries, this demand led to the adoption of the Vienna Declaration in 1993 which recognized the human rights of women and girls as part of universal human rights.

A second, very different development, has to do with the emergence, in the post Cold War period, of the US as the biggest and unchallenged military, political and economic global power, going far beyond its previous status as one of the superpowers. The latter development means that internationally the power of the United Nations has been diminished and subordinated to US interests and priorities. In this particular context, there is a challenge for feminists. On the one hand, there is clearly a demand for establishing international standards for women's rights and finding ways to make states accountable for their human rights practices. On the other hand, there is no clarity as to how, by whom and under which relations of power such standards could be enforced.

Parallel to, but independently of feminist discourses on human rights, there have been calls recently from the left and the right to envision models of a global "civil society," global democracy, or "cosmopolitical democracy" (Archibugi 2000) which would enable people to be heard in a global community irrespective of the power or resonance of their voices in nation states. Such visions obviously have enormous appeal for those who are interested in defense of human rights or environmental protection. On the other hand, there are questions whether such visions can realistically be put into action in the present power relations of international politics. Wherever we

stand on the possibility of "cosmopolitical democracy" we still need to debate "*which* authority may use force to violate state sovereignty, *who* such force should be used against or *which* human rights have to be protected" (Archibugi 2000, 147). If we do not ask these very critical questions, we may find that "the seventeenth-century nation state sovereignty is threatened by something older still: the law of the jungle" (Archibugi 2000, 148).

We are increasingly living in a world where a few Western states, or one specifically, act as the judge, the jury and the executioner of justice. While some claim that the 1999 bombing of Yugoslavia and the establishment of the Hague Tribunal to judge the Yugoslav leader constitute a case of the triumph of "international justice" over the now outdated claims of state sovereignty, others question the nature of power relations in the new international regime. The latter group expresses concern that rather than creating international equality and international justice, "in practice, the prosecution of international justice (would) turn out to be the prerogative of the West" (Chandler 2000, 61). So, rather than creating true internationalism or international accountability, there are fears that the new international order may just represent consolidation of international inequalities, almost taking international relations back to a state which prevailed in a period of formal colonialism. Long before US presidents started using terms such as "rogue states" and "axis of evil," even before the military intervention in Afghanistan, there were warnings that:

if the sovereignty of some states - Yugoslavia, Iraq - is to be limited, that of others - the NATO powers - is to be increased under the new order: they are to be given the right to intervene at will. It is, in other words, not sovereignty itself, but sovereign equality - the recognition of the legal parity of nation-states, regardless of their wealth or power - which is being targeted by the new interventionists.

(Chandler 2000, 55)

In the post-war period, with the end of formal colonialism, the United Nations Charter recognized a principle of sovereign equality of nation-states which, at least theoretically, ended the

blatant rule of the world by colonial powers and recognized the right to self-determination of formerly colonized peoples. Even though sovereignty has clearly been abused on countless occasions for oppression of minorities internally, there is the question of whether we may want to completely abandon the principle when what is replacing it may be nothing but a "re-legitimation of the right of the great powers to practice what violence they please" (Chandler 2000, 66).

The currently developing international regime, despite its claims to international justice, is clearly dominated by interests to power. While feminist cynicism of nationalism and nation-states is justified, it is largely questionable whether the current challenges to national sovereignty - of only the weaker states - provides a resolution to concerns of feminists and other minorities. Recently, Third World countries are being left with very few choices in the new world order being defined. Ultimatums such as "you're either with us, or you are the enemy" means that Third World countries can either embrace "their difference" of not just exotic, but dangerous "other" to Western civilization; or, they can remain passive and silent partners to the "self" defined by one world power. Neither of the options is acceptable to Third World peoples who have any commitment to self-determination, democracy and equality. Neither of the options promise to provide a fertile environment to define and practice "women's rights" as acceptable to Third World women.

CONCLUSION

The critique to popular versions of "global feminism" I urge in this paper might be interpreted as a position of isolationism which would keep First World feminists away from a feminist internationalism. It is important to clarify that such a direction is not the intended message of this critique. Rather than isolationism, what we need is perhaps a more engaged feminism both nationally and internationally. "More engaged" means that feminism needs to go beyond a narrow focus on "women's issues" as if these can be isolated from issues and relationships of class, race and imperialism. An engaged feminism would be interested in issues of equality and justice whether women may appear to be implicated in the issues or

not. This means feminism engaging with an array of issues from foreign policy, to immigration, to civil liberties, to sovereignty. "Engaged" also means that we have a better and a critical understanding of power relations of intervention and their complex implications.

What we are facing today, in the aftermath of September 11th, is an increased urgency to rethink the meaning, the mode and relationships of "global feminism." The critiques offered by anti-racist, postcolonial and multicultural feminists and reception theory are valuable in warning us against the neo-colonial or imperial directions in which "global feminism" has gone and may continue to go. The nature and magnitude of changes since September 11th, however, suggest two important points: first, that there is an increased urgency to this rethinking; and second, that we cannot make sense of or offer any alternatives to the existing responses if we continue to think within the confines of what is typically conceived as feminism, namely a concern and activism about women. If feminism is a political project which is not merely about changing women's place in the world, but about questioning and trying to change the world as we know it, we may need to rethink a whole number of issues in new ways: Civil liberties, human rights, "terrorism," imperialism, internationalism and national sovereignty, among others. If critical rethinking about these issues is ignored, we face the possibilities of remaining complacent, or at least indifferent or acquiescent to changes towards a totalitarian world (and national) order being created not just in front of our very eyes, but also (partly) in our name.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank Ena Dua, Mustafa Koc, Kiran Mirchandani, Shahrzad Mojab and Alissa D. Trotz for their constructive comments and suggestions on this paper.

ENDNOTES

1. Although the theme is much more obvious during the war against Afghanistan, it is not completely new. "Women at risk" is becoming a central theme in the military interventions in the newly developing global regime. The theme prevailed previously in the intervention in Yugoslavia.
2. See Groves, 2001 and RAWA's website: <http://rawasongs.fancymarketing.net>
3. "Wind in Their Hair, Sun on Their Faces," *The Toronto Star* (January 5, 2002): A18.
4. See, for example, the beginning of the article in *Ms. Magazine*, which lists Afghan women among women of the year. After references to the conditions Afghan women suffered under the Taliban, the article continues thankfully stating that "as a result of the United States' war on terrorism, the story of their oppression is finally being widely aired" (Anaga Dallal 2001, 52). The article fails to ask questions about, and therefore takes for granted the dominant discourses on, the meaning of the term "war on terrorism" or the impact of this war on women.
5. For example, feminists are asking questions about how the withholding by the US administration of funds from the United Nations Population Fund will affect Afghan women who face high numbers of pregnancies and life-threatening conditions of birth-giving (Landsberg 2002).
6. See, for example, Ch.s 7 and 8 in Miles, 1996.
7. See Robin Morgan's (1984) introduction to her collection.
8. See, for example, the special issue of *Canadian Woman Studies* on Women's Rights are Human Rights (1995) where all the articles are either on women living in Third World countries or on Third World immigrants in the First World.
9. For a critical interpretation of this act which interprets it as "the most aggressive assault on women's rights in this century," see Mink, 1999.
10. See, for example, the emphasis in an article in *The Toronto Star*, February 24, 2002: "Women Still Cover up in Kandahar, Not Because of Islamic Fundamentalism But Because *Burqas* Are Required by the Ancient Pashtunwali Code of Behaviour" (Potter 2002, B5).

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