

# Journalists in Feminist Clothing: Men and Women Reporting Afghan Women during Operation Enduring Freedom, 2001

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## Abstract

The following discussion is based on an extensive survey of UK mainstream television news reports broadcast between September and December 2001 during the military attacks on Afghanistan, known as Operation Enduring Freedom. Also conducted was a survey of British radio and print media published and produced within the specified period. I argue that the 2001 news media coverage of Afghanistan was an important precursor to current debates about Muslim women in Europe and the United States since it highlights many of the contradictions and hypocrisies housed within western public discourses on women's rights. Detailing numerous examples, I contend that the prevalent theme of women's liberation on international news agendas did nothing to alter the prevailing norm of news media coverage, which denied Afghan women access to media spaces throughout Operation Enduring Freedom. Afghan women were invariably the subjects rather than the agents of such debates. Moreover, regardless of their gender, the vast majority of journalists reporting the 2001 conflict failed to recognise and confront the co-option of women's rights for the purpose of justifying military aggression on humanitarian grounds. I argue that this has grave implications, not merely for future reporting on Afghan women, but for the widespread practice by mainstream politicians and their associates of co-opting the discourse of women's rights to justify military conflict.

*Keywords:* Afghan women; Operation Enduring Freedom; pseudo-feminist reporting

'[D]rag[ing] Afghanistan's brutalised men and invisible, downtrodden women out of the dark ages' (Jonathan Miller, Channel Four website, 2004).

'The brutal Taliban regime [...] makes its women non-people' (David Williams, the *Daily Mail*, 29 September 2001).

## Contested interpretations of the veil

The concealment of female bodies under the *burqua* was a major focus of attention for British reporting on Afghan women during Operation Enduring Freedom, 2001. The British fixation with the veil has a long history extending to times of colonial expansion and periodically resurfacing in response to migration to the United Kingdom from India,

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Pakistan and Bangladesh during the twentieth century. This recurrent preoccupation again arose at the beginning of the so-called War on Terror. The enduring currency of the veil as a metonym for oppression has been the subject of many articles and commentaries by women from Asia and the Middle East advising that the garment be situated in its shifting historical, political and social contexts. Indeed, Nadia Wassef argues that the veil represents 'a gross essentialisation of a fabric worn by different women in different ways and in different settings to express different things' (2001: 118). Nevertheless, repeated vilification of the Afghan *burqua* during 2001 suggests how under-theorised this garment was in public debates throughout Britain and the United States.

As recent news media coverage of the *burqua* shows, there is a clear need to complicate British popular understandings of the garment. On 1 October 2001, for example, the *Mirror* carried an article headed by a photograph of a *burqua*-clad woman with a caption reading: '[a] mother in traditional Islamic dress'. This depiction may be criticised on two fronts. Firstly, it peddles what Nirmal Puwar has called 'homogenised, static readings' of the garment (2002: 65) and, secondly, it implies that Islam is, in the words of Nadia Wassef, the ultimate 'explanatory force behind women's lives' (113). One means of combating 'homogenised' readings of the garment is to historicise the *burqua's* origins and to catalogue its changing significance at different historical junctures. The *burqua* made its first appearance in the Ottoman Empire, where it was used as a curtained sedan-chair by upper-class Christian women to denote status and as protection from thieves and dust. From this period, the head-to-toe *burqua* evolved within a Christian context, making its relationship to Islam by no means as straightforward as the *Mirror* caption implies (Lederman, 1998: 51). Moreover, the garment has a more complicated relationship to political patriarchy than news media coverage generally allows. As Christine Aziz notes, during the twentieth century, Afghan women have 'slipped in and out' of the *burqua* 'according to the male dictates of the day' (1998: 44). Although Amanullah's rule between 1919 and 1929 was in many ways an emancipatory time for Afghan women, they had to adhere to a strict policy of forcible unveiling (1998: 54). Neither has the *burqua* been a classless garment. For this reason alone, it is important to attend to the considerable variation in social position and status between urban and rural women, Hazara, Tajik and Pashtun women<sup>2</sup>, and between upper-class women and their maids.

The actions and experiences of Afghan women hardly begin and end with their apparel. As Sahar Saba of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) argues, adopting the *burqua* as a visual symbol of women's oppression proved counterproductive, since it set the parameters of discussion within such narrow confines that some Afghan women actually declared they could even live with the *burqua* if they had the right to pursue their chosen life goals, to receive an education or have access to healthcare.<sup>3</sup> However, despite the complex history of Afghan women's alternate involvement and exclusion from national politics since the early-twentieth century, disproportionate news-media focus on the *burqua* risks defining women as victims and precluding them as agents of change. Relatively emancipatory times, as Aziz (1998) argues, have paradoxically involved a degree of coercion, such as enforced mixed-sex education despite strong local opposition and reprisals during the Soviet invasion.

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<sup>2</sup> Hazara and Tajik women have traditionally had a great deal more political leverage than Pashtun women.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Sahar Saba.

Women have also been central to the armed struggle against, and occasionally for, the Soviet occupation,<sup>4</sup> joining the resistance, enlisting in militia and regular army units, participating in the establishment of mujaheddin organisations and sometimes using explosives and teaching young men how to use them (1998: 55-56). More recently, Herati women organised themselves into militias against the Taliban and set up a university (59). Rashid's *Taliban, Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia* notes that Afghan women have 'had as many roles as there were tribes and nationalities', and points to the significant role played by Hazara women both in defensive operations against the Taliban in the Bamiyan district and recounting that the eighty member Central Council of the Hazara *Hizb-e-Wahadat* party had twelve women members (2000: 110 & 69). This sort of information about women was scarce during coverage of Operation Enduring Freedom.

### **Politicians in feminist clothing**

The complex interaction of international politics and gender politics is of central importance to this investigation because it landed journalists in an ethical quagmire. This was because Afghan women and their *burquas* featured so prominently in coalition rhetoric of political and social liberation. Despite the morally compromising alliance between the United States and the Saudi Arabian royal family, coalition leaders understood the political expediency of adopting the *burqua* as a potent metaphor of liberation (Roy: 2002). Correspondents were thus faced with the problem that feminist discourses of liberation were appropriated for the purpose of marketing western liberal secular democracy through military intervention. For commentators such as Krista Hunt, this was nothing less than 'violence cloaked' in women's rights (2002: 119). The events of September 11 2001 saw a sudden surge of interest in women's organisations such as RAWA. As Saba relates, a RAWA film, posted on the association's website, of a woman being executed in Kabul Stadium has been offered to media outlets two years previously, including the BBC and CNN, but was turned down on the grounds that it was too shocking to show to news audiences. After September 11, however, the Pentagon took the film from the website without permission and brought it into the public domain to justify military action against Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup>

The pseudo-feminist content of coalition rhetoric depended on an astonishing degree of historical amnesia regarding US support for the Taliban between 1994 and 1996. As Rashid points out, during this period the position of Afghan women was 'conveniently ignored' until Clinton was forced to reverse his policy when he required the help of the feminist lobby to survive the political fall-out from the Lewinsky affair in 1997 (2000: 176).<sup>6</sup> However, as much as being a quest to save Afghan women from Afghan men (and Muslim women from Muslim men), the *burqua* – or its absence – was thus co-opted as a sign of western freedom as much as Afghan unfreedom (Rogers 2003:

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<sup>4</sup> According to Christine Aziz, many women joined the Soviet side because they were afraid of losing their rights to education and other associated freedoms under Communist rule (56).

<sup>5</sup> Communicated by Sahar Saba at the Women Against Fundamentalism and for Equality (WAFE) conference in Paris, 25-26 February, 2005. Members of RAWA declared themselves to be suspicious of the motives behind the sudden interest in the film and also concerned that as a result RAWA might be seen to support military intervention.

<sup>6</sup> Rashid suggests that the role of the Lewinsky affair in the formulation of international policy illustrates how frequently such policies are pursued with an eye on domestic agendas (2000: 176).

206). The apparent feminist turn in coalition liberation rhetoric, then, was not – as Roy points out – because US soldiers were on some ‘feminist mission’ (2002) but instead related to the flexing of moral and military muscle with the declared aim of restoring order amid the clamour of ‘medieval’ Islamic misogyny. Correspondingly, the *burqua*’s vilification was intimately related to the self-image of British, US and Australian society as providing an emancipatory environment where women are, as Chandra Talpade Mohanty suggests, ‘secular, liberated, and hav[e] control over their own lives’ (2001: 481).

### **Journalists in feminist clothing**

My investigation into men and women’s news media coverage of Afghanistan revealed that, irrespective of gender, journalists tended to adopt a narrow focus on the veil without taking into account their own role in reducing women’s bodies to ideological battlefields for the moral high ground. In wartime, opposing sides readily introduce the subject of women’s rights or obligations as a means of discrediting the other (Hunt 2002: 120). Forcible veiling and unveiling, in Afghanistan, Egypt, Iran, Turkey and now in France<sup>7</sup>, for example, have long been used as a means of signalling identification with changing models of progress. As John L. Esposito points out, regimes have used the veil as a means of displaying westernised identity. To this purpose the veil has been banned by Reza Shah Pahlavi of Iran, Attaturk of Turkey and Bourghiba in Tunisia (2002: 131). The coercive nature of forcible unveiling has occasionally been touched upon in news reports such as George Arney’s for BBC *Radio 4*’s ‘From Our Own Correspondent’, which notes an historical instance of this phenomenon at work in Afghanistan during the reign of Amanullah: ‘[i]n a mirror image of Taliban edicts, he forbade women to walk the streets of Kabul unless they were bareheaded’ (‘Talking, Afghan-style’, Friday November 30, 2001). The challenge for journalists in 2001 was not only to interrogate the rhetoric of women’s ‘honour’ as a pretext for violence but to resist – or at least question - the co-option of women’s rights for the same purpose (Hunt, 2002: 119). The war in Kosovo had already seen the defence of female ‘honour’ as a strong component in the rhetoric of nations opposing the UN intervention, such as Cuba, Iran and Pakistan (DelZotto 2002: 146). Another responsibility resting on journalists’ shoulders is the way in which the relentless intrusive and voyeuristic gaze of the United States and its allies has been used by Muslim conservatives as justification for curtailing women’s freedoms (Fatima Mernissi in Karim H. Karim, 2002: 107). Nevertheless, news reports about Afghan women tended to blame Islamic misogyny or medieval conservatism for women’s suffering, and this explanation was generally preferred to more nuanced explanations. Connections were not made, for example, between Taliban repression and the fear of being seen as a puppet government of the United States which, as Rashid contends, had a major bearing on the escalating strictness of Taliban policies on women, a policy that became the last outpost of non-compromise and the sustainer of their political morale (2000: 112). Journalists’ attention to the Afghan women’s ‘plight’ therefore ran the attendant risk not merely of complying with the coalition’s moral and ethical justification for military intervention but of indirect complicity with forms of Islamic conservatism more closely related to a history of foreign domination than images

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<sup>7</sup> In France, girls are now banned from wearing the veil in school on the basis that the French education system is ‘secular’.

of 'medieval Afghanistan' allow. Fahima Vorgetts suggests that 'fanaticism' be redefined as the forcing of one's views on others, making the point that, during the Soviet occupation, the policy of coercing village women to attend school meant that education became forever associated with 'un-Islamic and anti-Islamic' foreign domination, which was in the end counter-productive for women's rights (2002: 96).<sup>8</sup>

The *burqua*'s prominence in the pseudo-feminist discourse of chief political players and their associates exposes a range of contradictions and hypocrisies housed within western public discourses on women's rights. On 19 November 2001, Cherie Booth's high-profile interest in Afghan women was the subject of a number of television news reports, as with the following commentary by the news anchors of ITV's early evening news:

News anchor one: The Prime Minister's wife showed today that Mr. Blair isn't the only one in the family working on the problems of Afghanistan.

News anchor two: *Mrs Blair* gave her support today to a campaign to make sure the country's women get a better deal when a new government is set up. She hosted a meeting of Afghan women at number 10 [Two second mid-shot of unveiled Afghan women in Downing Street] (emphasis in original).

The commentary's implicit characterisation of British women as liberated from the structures of sexual inequality is belied by the fact that a public gesture of solidarity with Afghan women accrues prestige and credibility solely through her association with a man in power: top QC Cherie Booth becomes '*Mrs. Blair*'. The implicit alignment of power with masculinity disturbs the contention, intimated by the pictures of Booth with unveiled Afghan women, that unveiled women automatically have the political leverage to help veiled women 'get a better [political] deal'. Furthermore, implicit in the gathering of the unveiled is the conception of veil-wearers as aspirant unveiled women.<sup>9</sup>

The prevalence of antifeminist definitions of Afghan women leads to Afghan women being commonly depicted in the possessive mode ('their women'), which underwrites notions of Afghan women as passive victims rather than as active agents of their destiny. As Gloria Steinem observes, women campaigners in the United States had little influence over foreign policy when they opposed their country's support of pre-Taliban<sup>10</sup> elements (2002: 67). Furthermore, Lederman points out that her US-born husband had Afghan women colleagues a full decade before he had female colleagues in the States, suggesting that approaches to women's advancement in the US have not always been as exemplary as some might wish (2002: 50). Details such as these suggest

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<sup>8</sup> This means that statements in news reports, such as that by Rebecca Milligan, noting that '[u]nder the Taliban, women are barely allowed out of their homes' ('Afghanistan: Through veiled eyes', 'From Our Own Correspondent', Saturday 8 January 2000) suffer from a lack of context, both of well-documented confinement of women by Durrani that undermines the designation of women's oppression as post-Taliban and of the historical variation in women's political agency and fortune in Afghanistan (Rashid 2000; Tapper 1991). [not in refs]

<sup>9</sup> Women's agency is not automatically directed in ways audiences might wish or expect: Afghan women may be agents of conservatism as well as of change. There were very few news stories about women who force the *burqua* on other women. Anthropologists such as Nancy Lindisfarne and Amanda Cornwall have generally been more successful than journalists at examining the role of women in promoting patriarchal practices.

<sup>10</sup> The term 'pre-Taliban' generally refers to those disparate political groups and individuals who would shortly join forces to form the Taliban.

that British and US critiques of women's position in Afghanistan are driven by men and women's self-constructions as liberators and liberated.

Channel Four News also covered the campaign's launch:

[Backdrop of two women in blue *burquas*]

News anchor: Cherie Blair has launched the campaign to help the women of Afghanistan. She wants them to regain the human rights that they've been losing under the strict Taliban regime. Today the Prime Minister's wife held talks with Afghan women in Downing Street explaining how Afghan women had suffered terrible injustices under the Taliban [...] But in Afghanistan, some women say they object to being dictated to by politicians from the West [...] many women in Afghanistan are still wearing the *burqua* [...] it's part of their religion and culture. Many say it's a choice that should be left to them (Zabaida Malik, 19 November 2001).

The report depicts Cherie Blair/Booth as a benevolent and politically mature spokesperson dispensing feminist help and advice to Afghan women. As Talpade Mohanty points out, however, '[a]ssumptions about "responsibilities"' betray solidarities based on biological identity rather than 'historical and political praxis' (in Wassef 2001: 47). As this campaign illustrates, such solidarities may be more conservative than they appear, offering solutions predicated on a unidirectional model of change whereby Afghan women simply learn to rise above their object status (Talpade Mohanty, 2001: 479). Moreover, its second implied solution that Afghan women simply be granted access to power tends to filter out Afghan men and women's collective experience of war-related poverty and its relationship to the actions of powerful nations on whose continued wealth Afghanistan's own fortunes to an extent depend.

In an article about the British fashion industry's enthusiastic embrace of 'Asian chic', Nirmal Puwar points out the inherent contradiction of Cherie Blair/Booth's condemnation of the *burqua* while making frequent public appearances in Asian dress, suggesting 'the power of whiteness to play' and 'grant legitimacy' to 'items it had only yesterday almost literally spat at' (2002: 75). Moreover, the equation of high heels or make-up with Afghan women's liberation seems little more than ethnocentrism parading as cross-cultural female solidarity. Once again, there is an implicit conceptualisation of Islam as the common denominator accounting for Afghan women's oppression (Tapper in Wassef 2001: 113). As Talpade Mohanty implies, alliances predicated on *women* as 'a coherent, already constituted group' are rarely able to straddle the vast social, economic and cultural fault lines that separate the global south from its northern counterpart (2001: 480). Despite the best intentions, alliances between rich and poor women of widely different cultures are apt to fail in extreme circumstances. A dramatic example of this is when Yvonne Ridley refuses to enter a cell with two Afghan women prisoners sitting cross-legged inside: 'I am not going into that cell. I don't do squalor: I am a British journalist and you cannot treat me like this' (2001: 142). Her statement illustrates power's shifting and context-specific nature since, just as colonial women's alignment with power was implicit in the orders they gave, so does Ridley evoke her rights as a 'British journalist' rather than as a woman.

### **Denying Afghan women's agency: then and now**

The broad failure of news commentary to interrogate the self-forgetful premises on which many public displays of solidarity are founded leads to the historically amnesiac implication that 'injustices' committed against Afghan women begin and end with the Taliban and can be swiftly resolved by the Taliban's expulsion. Moreover, such approaches comply with a form of strategic re-historicisation on the part of the anti-terror coalition regarding ways in which key coalition players are implicated in the rise of the Taliban. Again, there is a failure to recognise the political orthodoxies underpinning public displays of feminist Anglo-Afghan solidarity. Nevertheless, if the Channel Four report is somewhat vague about the contexts surrounding the *burqua*, attributing its wearing merely to 'religion and culture', it at least gestures towards the possibility that injustice to Afghan women is no recent phenomenon and has no single or simple origin. Importantly, too, the report bears traces of dissenting voices, mentioning, albeit in a non-specific manner, that Afghan women 'object to being dictated to' and implying, without providing details, that the *burqua* is not to be simplistically linked to Taliban rule but has a longer and more complex association with Afghanistan.

More generally, however, news coverage tended to read the *burqua* as a straightforward metonym for women's oppression under Taliban rule, illustrated by the following report by John Simpson for the BBC1 *Six O' Clock News* towards the end of Operation Enduring Freedom:

[Close-up shot of an elderly man being shaved.]

Simpson: Shaving is a way of demonstrating your liberation.

[Mid-shot of a woman's unveiled face.]

So is showing your face in public if you're a woman.

And there's one more thing. Children can fly kites again. Freedom is in the air.

[Close-up shot of a kite. Mid-distance shot of a woman in a blue *burqua* walking behind the kite-flyer] (13 November 2001).

Clearly, the presence of a 'post-Taliban' Afghan woman in a *burqua* complicates and undermines both the simplistic narrative of liberation. The same is true of an ITV news report on the same day by Julian Manyon:

Manyon: But it was women who suffered most from the bigotry of the Taliban who forced them to wear the veil [close-up shot of a woman wearing her *burqua*.]

Against the objections of men standing nearby, I asked this woman about life under the Taliban [close-up of interviewee]. They were cruel, she told me. They beat us (Early evening news).

Once again, the objections of the very men who are at that moment celebrating the Taliban's departure and the fact that the woman remains in her *burqua* put paid to Manyon's suggestion that the Taliban are the source of all 'bigotry'. At least within the commentary's narrow terms, the interviewee does not fit the mould of a newly-liberated woman. An interview on the same day with correspondent Kate Clark for the BBC1 'Six O' Clock News' reveals an equally unnuanced understanding of the *burqua*. The

commentary runs: 'in a few days' time [...women] will be taking off their *burquas*, uncovering their faces and that will be the most visible sign of the end of Taliban rule here'. The fact that, in terms of substance, journalists' gender appears largely irrelevant when it comes to reporting the *burqua* again suggests male and female journalists' shared investment in preserving their cultural or national self-images as non-sexist men and liberated women. In the case of this report at least, it is not true that a woman correspondent's access to Afghan women leads to a better understanding. Very occasionally, television news reports problematised notions of 'post-Taliban' liberation, as can be seen with Alex Thompson's report for 'Channel Four News' on the same day: 'But the vast majority of men here, the Northern Alliance included, prefer to keep their beards. Just as many women will still prefer to wear the *burqua*' (13 November 2001). However, suggestive though these comments are, the reasons remain unexplored.

Media interest in the campaign to facilitate Afghan women's access to political power quickly waned; relatively little attention was paid to Afghan women's right to be present at the talks in Bonn, Germany (Hill and Aboitiz 2002: 145). Coverage of the Bonn talks was problematic from this point of view and James Robin's report for BBC1's late evening news suffers from the kind of oversights and omissions that typify that day's coverage of the Bonn talks:

[Close-up of female Afghan delegate seated at the round table]

Robins: And one other positive sign: two women at the negotiating table for a change. Afghanistan could emerge from years of suffering as a more inclusive society (27 November 2001).

This represents the report's sole mention of women's presence at the Bonn talks in ways that are fairly representative of celebratory reconstruction stories common towards the end of the military campaign. Moreover, the degree to which the presence of only two women is likely to effect genuine change at a structural level is left unexplored. The recent antifeminist endorsement of legal forms of wife-beating by a female member of the new Iraqi Shia government in 2005 suggests that structural violence against women is not merely countered by female figureheads.<sup>11</sup> Neither, as Saba points out, has anyone been brought to account in Afghanistan for crimes against women committed between 1992 and the fall of the Taliban.<sup>12</sup> Not only does the sort of reporting evidenced at Bonn erase strong traditions of political participation by Afghan women at various junctures, but it ignores feminist voices calling for more substantial representation by women in the new interim government. Even when, in the 2004 election campaign, Channel Four paid some attention to Masouda Jalal's candidacy for the Afghan presidency, the mode in which such coverage is written can be problematic; an article on the Channel Four website by Jonathan Miller represents her campaign as having 'mobilised girl power' ('First Lady', 3 September 2004).

This returns me to the theme of unexamined assumptions implicit in the prevalent mode of news media coverage described so far in this essay. Among the most common of these entails the construction of Afghan women's liberation as past to western feminism's

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<sup>11</sup> [www.wafe.org](http://www.wafe.org).

<sup>12</sup> Communicated in a panel discussion at the Women Against Fundamentalism and for Equality (WAFE) conference in Paris, 25-26 February, 2005.

present, as illustrated by a rather paternalistic statement by Ridley about ‘start[ing] a bum-[sic]-the-burkha campaign just as women had burned their bras in the sixties’ (2001: 105). Aside from the customary reduction of the *burqua* to a symbol of oppression, the statement contains many ironies in the face of unrelenting emphasis in the west on women’s social duty to be attractive while commercial markets rapidly expand to target teenage women. The need for women to resist practices that undermine their intellectual standing and political agency is strongly emphasised by political opposition movements such as the Iranian Council for Resistance.<sup>13</sup> However, in 2001 more open readings of agency beneath the *burqua* were adopted under two very particular and restricted circumstances. The first was when Afghan women were depicted as would-be western women hiding make-up or high heels under their *burquas*. The second circumstance was when garments were ‘donned’ in a form of cultural transvestism, by British female, and occasionally male, correspondents. When Ridley first wears the *burqua* she expresses regret at the way she ‘went from being a Western woman in charge of a project to someone who had no significance at all’ (2001: 91). However, as with Victorian women travellers such as Lady Wortley Montagu in Turkey, she also recognises the power of being ‘invisible’ to give her heightened powers of observation (95), a common claim by *burqua*-wearing journalists, a claim that is only rarely extended to *burqua*-wearing Afghan women. By contrast, focus on the garment’s subversive potential for Afghan women tended to be restricted to its ability to conceal make-up or high heels. Once worn by western journalists, the garment does not automatically efface her or his presence but rather tends to liberate an undercover, trickster spirit capable of fooling Taliban border guards, and Afghans in their own market places.

One important consequence of journalists’ wearing of the *burqua* is the tension set up between empathetic identification on the one hand, and its power to qualify her or him to speak for and on behalf of Afghan women on the other. This is apparent in Ross Benson’s account of wearing the *burqua*:

I know what it feels like because last time I was here [in Afghanistan], I had to disguise myself as a woman in order to avoid the Soviet border patrols.

I was forbidden to speak because in Afghanistan women are allowed no voice. For several hours my only sight of the world was through the fretwork of my enshrouding *burqua*.

It was a terrible view from the inside of how women were subjugated (‘Into the War Zone’, the *Daily Mail*, October 1, 2001).

Benson’s act of transvestism might be classified as a form of empathetic identification. Even so, when it comes to cross-dressing, acts of identification are rarely straightforward, since they accrue power as readily as they relinquish it. The reasons for this are twofold. Wearing the *burqua* in many senses acts as a verifiable marker of an indigenised ‘view from inside’ – an ‘apparent acquisition of “double consciousness”’, leading to a powerful knowledge-claim (‘I know what it feels like’) (Fowler 2004: 213).

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<sup>13</sup> For more on this see the text of a speech by president-elect, Maryam Rajavi, at Women Against Fundamentalism and for Equality conference, Paris, 25 February, 2005 available at [www.wafe.org](http://www.wafe.org).

It is this position of apparent knowledge and insight that permits Benson to speak. This apparent indigenisation (Goldie 1989: 210), of which cross-dressing is a tangible sign, tends to detract from the asymmetrical power relation – in representational terms – between journalists and the *burqua*-clad women that are the subject of their articles. This is not to deny the existence of empathy. Rather it is to temper over-optimistic readings of cross-dressing by recognising its built-in elements of voyeuristic theatricality, its tangible demonstration of having ‘boldly gone where no reader has ever gone before’ (Fowler 2004: 213). Empathy, therefore, does not necessarily lead to insight. As is so often the case, Benson’s manipulation of the clothing register is not accompanied by self-reflection on the part of the journalist on his article’s acts of narrative exclusion. Despite the claim that Afghan women ‘are allowed no voice’, Benson’s account of his ‘several hours’ as a woman receives absolute primacy, while the implied experiences of his fellow *burqua* wearers are ventriloquised through his commentary.<sup>14</sup>

Caroline Wyatt’s report for ‘From Our Own Correspondent’ on BBC *Radio 4* points to a common self-image of British journalists as agents of, or advocates for, Afghan women’s liberation. This is conveyed by a metaphor of Afghan women as ‘silent shadows’: ‘Their husbands insist they wear the burqua. Not to, they tell me, would bring shame on their family and insults on the streets [...] They give me a last wry smile and then the veil comes down on their faces and the lively women I’ve spent the day with turn back into silent shadows’ (‘Afghan women’s life in the shadows’, Tuesday 16 October 2001). This symbolism clearly pertains not merely to the women’s social eclipse but to the power of the correspondent to rescue them from obscurity by bathing them in the light of non-Afghan attention and concern before they slip back once more into Afghan gloom. In this sense the narrative cannot shake off the connotations of Afghan damnation and western (possibly feminist) redemption.

The *voiceless women* claim falls in easily with the myth of universal male dominance and female subordination with little regard to important variations in experience from man to man, woman to woman, region to region and historical moment to historical moment. As Saba argues, Afghan women were ‘the first to [...] work for democracy’ in Afghanistan.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, coverage of war tends to heighten an already well-established sense of female victimhood. War reporting tends to exacerbate women’s portrayal as victims since, as DelZotto found with coverage of Kosovo, women’s commentary is sought only within restricted roles denoting passivity: women tend to feature as ‘passive refugee[s]’ and ‘waiting wi[ves]’ (where – contrary to all statistical evidence – ‘men die and women mourn’) (145-146).<sup>16</sup> News professionals’ sustained

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<sup>14</sup> In a similar act of identification, Rebecca Milligan describes her experience of tripping downstairs while dressed in a *burqua*: ‘I had a sense of what it must be like for Afghan women to wear them. They are claustrophobic and isolating. In them you lose all sense of yourself’ (‘Afghanistan – Through Veiled Eyes’, ‘From Our Own Correspondent’, Saturday 8 January, 2000).

<sup>15</sup> Comment made during panel of a session convened by Women Against Fundamentalism and for Equality, Paris, 25-26 February, 2005.

<sup>16</sup> Of course, Afghan women are not the sole recipients of this treatment. There is a clear correlation not merely between gender and exclusion, but between exclusion and people’s status as unofficial actors of war, whether female or male. Nowhere is this principle more apparent than in news reports about refugees. Matt Frei’s report for BBC1’s the ‘Six O’ Clock News’ during the refugee crisis at the beginning of the conflict is a case in point. Standing near the border, he describes the refugees as ‘a swarming throng of humanity’ and then, combining a close-up shot of an Afghan mother’s face with his commentary, narrates her thoughts: ‘you can see the will to live draining away’. This is followed by a broader claim: ‘everyone fears [the conflict’s]

focus on the *burqua* tended to be narrowly confined to the oversimplified and restrictive dichotomy of victimhood and liberation. As Amanda Cornwall and Nancy Lindisfarne point out, however, throughout Central Asia and the Middle East, there is an entire spectrum of male responses to ideals of male honour, a spectrum along which 'many nuanced masculinities are created' and to which women respond differently according to personality, class and a range of political and economic circumstances. Like femininity, masculinity is plural and negotiable (1994: 86 & 10). Moreover, it is subject to all sorts of variable social conditions. As Rashid points out, by contrast with even the most conservative of Pashtuns where male and female relatives mixed relatively freely, segregation was the norm for youthful Taliban brought up in *madrassas*. Indeed, so diverse a nation has never had a 'universal standard' for women's social role (2000: 33 & 110). However, there was no sustained, internal critique of Afghan women's portrayal as helpless victims. Moreover, Sima Wali calls for journalists to resist demonising Afghan men, pointing out that many have supported Afghan women and advocated their rights. Wali advises that Afghan men also be regarded as part of the solution (2002: 5). President-elect of the Iranian Council for Resistance, Maryam Rajavi even calls for 'male emancipation'.<sup>17</sup>

This leads me to another major consequence of this mode of reporting on Afghan women. There is a clear correlation between assumptions of Afghan women's subordination and the exclusion, or muting, of their voices. The commonly applied descriptor 'invisible' is at least as performative as it is descriptive. The danger is that the metaphor of invisibility executes its own form of exclusory agency, providing a pretext for conjuring women off the news scene. This is apparent in Robert Kaplan's claim that Pashtun women 'simply don't exist' to the extent that, after some time as a journalist near the North West Frontier, 'you forg[e]t about Pathan women altogether' (2001: 50). During Operation Enduring Freedom, Afghan women were commonly portrayed as literally unreachable, removed to another century, be it the Middle Ages or 'the dark ages' (Jonathan Miller, Channel Four website, 2004).

While the quest for any single, 'authentic' female Afghan voice is by definition doomed to failure, I have found that, despite the prominence of women's liberation in the British news agenda during the 2001 conflict, the prevailing norm of coverage was to deny Afghan women access to media spaces during Operation Enduring Freedom. In the case of reporting on Afghan women, I would also add that, aside from professional careers, what is at stake in reporting on Afghan women is British reporters' self-image as neither oppressors nor oppressed which, I have argued, has a clear bearing on correspondents' approaches. The overwhelming tendency was to exclude them as commentators on their own 'plight'; for example, I found only two television news reports where an Afghan woman was asked directly about the *burqua* ('Channel Four News', 13 November 2001; ITV evening news, 13 November 2001). Most markedly, however, Afghan women were typically excluded as commentators on the conceptual and ethical premises of Operation Enduring Freedom and the War on Terror. They were commonly portrayed as 'non-people' (The *Daily Mail*, 29 September 2001) or referred to as possessions by female and male reporters alike ('their women' or 'mere chattels',

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repercussions' (27 September 2001). The implicit anti-war stance of the piece in no way obviates the exclusions of those same refugees as commentators on their own fortunes.

<sup>17</sup> Speech given at Women Against Fundamentalism and for Equality conference, Paris, 26 February, 2005.

Kevin Toolis, *The Daily Mirror*, September 13 2001). This supports Hannerz's suggestion that, while women journalists have frequently commented on the *machismo* of male colleagues, a range of professional constraints mean that there is often little real difference in terms of men and women's tone and mode of reporting (2004: 94). Ultimately, however, since women make up sixty percent of Afghanistan's total population and represent one of the world's highest concentrations of female-headed households, the practice of privileging minority male voices over the explanatory narratives of their female counterparts in newspapers, radio and television news reports alike reveals the profoundly antidemocratic tendencies of British news coverage during Operation Enduring Freedom.<sup>18</sup> Celebratory coverage of the Taliban's fall from power was thus rarely countered by critiques, such as the following by Waeda Mansoor:

Yes, music has returned to Kabul. Yes, men are shaving, cinemas are reopening, and women can be seen on television. [...But] these [the Northern Alliance] are the same people who closed the cinemas, banned women from appearing on television, forced women into *burquas*, called schools "gateways to hell" and the television a "devil's box" [...] the Taliban's place has been taken by a group of fundamentalists of a similar, if not the same, mind-set (2002: 82).

Furthermore, during this period of reporting, women's persistent under representation clearly restricted audiences' exposure to, and Afghan women's critical intervention in, the range of viable 'solutions' pursued, whether these be economic, military or social.

There remains a strong ethical imperative to scrutinise exceptional or unrepresentative reporting that disrupts or negotiates representational trends and exclusory practices during Operation Enduring Freedom. Given the desirability of academic work providing some constructive conclusions, it seems fruitful to identify those conceptual or methodological features of news coverage that suggest journalists can and do exercise a degree of agency, working creatively and self-reflexively with an eye to the inherent dangers of reporting on Afghan women. The examples set out below typically attempt, at the very least, to foreground the limitations of insight imposed by reporting restrictions such as lack of access to local women, which was a genuine, and persistent, cause of exclusory reporting practices. This led a small proportion of journalists to foreground this absence as a way of acknowledging its significance, as occasionally happened, such as with Sean Langan's remark in a documentary that his gender represents a serious impediment to understanding since women's experiences are effaced due to his lack of access to them ('Langan Behind the Lines: Tea with the Taliban', BBC2, 27 February 2001).

### **News media coverage that is more supportive of Afghan women's agency**

Peter Beaumont's article for *The Observer* entitled 'Tyranny of veil is slow to lift' (30 December 2001), is fairly typical in its conception of the *burqua*, which adheres to established tendencies to under historicise and under theorise the garment by overemphasising its Taliban-esque association and equating *burqua*-shedding with women's liberation. The opening sentence complies with the metaphorical over-

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<sup>18</sup> This gender imbalance is due to war, famine, landmines and economic migration. For more on this see [www.fao.org/News/2002/020105-e.htm](http://www.fao.org/News/2002/020105-e.htm).

simplification of the article's title: 'Nouria Anwari took off her burqua yesterday [...and now] she will no longer wear the all-encompassing veil the Taliban prescribed for all women' (1). However, because Beaumont gains access to the headquarters of Anwari's organisation, the article's rare inclusion of women's voices allows some attention to be paid to the psychological aspects of shedding *burquas* from three women's points of view. Beaumont's account of the meeting is relatively self-reflexive about the limitations of the 'encounter', conveying a sense of its 'awkward[ness]': 'most of the women are embarrassed to make eye-contact with the male journalists who have intruded on their meeting' (1). In this sense, anxiety is expressed about male journalists' voyeurism, and there is an oblique confession at their attempts to make eye-contact, which 'most of the women' try hard to avoid. The following passage quotes the words of three women interviewees:

'If women remove it, men stare at them and the women feel somehow exotic. NO one wants to be the first.'

It is the same answer that we get from all the women that we interview. They would like to take off the veil, they tell us, but five years of the Taliban make them too self-conscious to do it.

[...] Rezaye tells us she tried to take off the burqua last week, but felt too intimidated to continue with the experiment [...] 'I took off the burqua and put it in my purse. But then after ten minutes I felt that people were looking at me and I felt too exotic, so I had to put on the burqua again.'

[...] But [...Wahib] draws a social distinction. 'It is more difficult for women who do not have access to a car to take off the burqua. If you are forced to walk about the city, you feel more exposed' (Sunday, 15 December 2001).

While the article only partly addresses the question it sets out to answer (if the Taliban are gone why are women still wearing their *burquas*?), women's voices nevertheless permeate the article, drawing attention to the psychological experiences of wearing the garment and making distinctions between the experiences of women from differing socio-economic backgrounds.

A radio report for 'From Our Own Correspondent' by Andrew Harding takes Afghan women as its central theme by way of a discussion with some young male Afghans. As Harding describes walking along a path with his male interviewees towards the end of the piece, the commentary draws attention to the 'absent presence' of Afghan women: 'Almost hidden behind their second floor balcony, three teenage girls watch our progress silently' (Saturday 27 April 2002). It is not that the report's attention to the non-verbal utterances of three teenage girls can be read as a straightforward renunciation of narrative authority. In a similar manner to Mary Kingsley's (1992 description of the silent audience at the edge of an African verandah in *Travels in West Africa* ('if you stole out onto the verandah, you would often see it crowded with a silent, black audience listening intently'), Harding conjures the teenagers out of thin air, producing himself – as did Caroline Wyatt – as a keen observer capable of directing the listener's attention to

alternative sources for seeking insight into female experiences of life in Afghanistan. In this sense he positions himself at the edge of patriarchal perception, foregrounding his empathy with Afghan women and indicating his desire to mediate between male and female experience. Crucially, however, he does not presume to understand the observing consciousness of the three teenagers, the silent narratives that parallel those spoken, and the existence of these parallel narratives is acknowledged and given priority placement in report's final sentence. He is unable to read or interpret their thoughts yet he does not render them invisible. The report is thus sensitive to notions of untranslatableability, suggesting that this seemingly insurmountable problem need not impede good reporting. In the end, foregrounding the limitations of the correspondent's ability to understand is preferable to retailing an illusion of understanding.

### **Conclusion**

The 'veil' debate still rages. Muslim women throughout Europe and the US have come under increasing pressure to remove their veils as, once more the garment has been viewed as synonymous with women's oppression, cultural isolationism or—most recently in Britain—as a threat to national security.<sup>19</sup> The 2001 coverage of Afghanistan was an important precursor to these current debates, not least because it highlights the contradictions and hypocrisies that have long been housed within western public discourses on women's rights. Despite its prevalence on international news agendas, the theme of women's liberation did nothing to alter the prevailing norm of coverage, which denied Afghan women access to media spaces during Operation Enduring Freedom. Afghan women were invariably the subjects rather than the agents of such debates. Moreover, regardless of their gender, the vast majority of journalists reporting the 2001 conflict failed to recognise and confront the co-option of women's rights for the purpose of justifying military aggression on humanitarian grounds. There was no sustained critical commentary in mainstream news media coverage on the pseudo-feminist discourse of chief political players and their associates.

I ended this article with some examples of a small minority of correspondents who at least managed to foreground the limitations of their ability to understand Afghan women. While this is not equivalent to promoting the agency of Afghan women, such a tactic seems preferable to the range of unexamined assumptions underlying the standard pseudo-feminist tone of most news media coverage on the issue.

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<sup>19</sup> This last point refers to Mustaf Jamma, who was rumoured to have assumed the identity of his sister, using her passport and wearing a veil to evade security checks at Heathrow Airport in December 2006.

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