Rescuing the Women of Afghanistan: Gender, Agency and the Politics of Intelligibility

A Thesis Submitted to the University of Manchester for the degree of Doctor of Social Science in the Faculty of Humanities

2011

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Word Count: 80,306
Abstract

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The purpose of this thesis is to examine the performances of gender that permeated the justifications for Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan, focusing on the representational practices that dominated the Bush administration’s narratives of rescue and circumscribed our understanding of the actors involved. In particular, I will argue that the image of Afghan women as the helpless victim of Taliban oppression not only allowed the United States and its coalition allies to cast themselves as heroic masculine warriors but also helped to reinforce the idea that Afghan women were little more than mere symbols of helplessness, placing them in a position of absolute inferiority and dependency. Crucially, I will claim that this image of Afghan women as the passive prisoners of the Taliban was contingent upon the suppression of a series of alternative perspectives that could not be accommodated within the parameters established by the prevailing frames of war. On the one hand, I argue that the dominant representations of Afghan women tended to show them in decidedly monolithic and one-dimensional terms, with the Bush administration and its coalition allies defining them almost entirely by the suffering they experienced. Absent from these accounts, however, was any mention of women’s resistance to Taliban rule or their criticisms of the military intervention. On the other hand, I will show how the international community relied upon a particular historical narrative that allowed them to present Afghanistan as a barbaric aberration in the modern world whilst allowing them to dismiss the period of Taliban rule as a terrifying oddity in the country’s history, destroying many of the freedoms that were said to exist under previous regimes. As well as ignoring the myriad of interactions between Afghanistan and the outside world and the complex social, economic and political forces that helped to precipitate the rise of the Taliban, I will argue that this historical narrative reinforced the idea that the lives of Afghan women were in a state of suspense during this period, their very existence as human beings held in abeyance until coalition troops could intervene to redeem them. What distinguishes my argument from the work of other feminists is my attention to the way in which these representational practices are contingent upon an uneasy process of repetition and reiteration, leaving them vulnerable to the possibility for subversion and resignification. Drawing on Judith Butler’s work on performativity, normative violence and the politics of intelligibility along with Gayatri C. Spivak’s work on the subaltern subject, I show how the activities of organisations such as the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) and the voices of individuals such as Malalai Joya help to expose the limits of the dominant norms of intelligibility, opening up the possibility for a less violent and less exclusionary re-imagining.
Declaration

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Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible were it not for the help and support of my colleagues. During the early stages of my research I benefited from the guidance of Caroline Kennedy-Pipe, Nick Vaughan-Williams, Robin Redhead, Veronique Pin-Fat, Elaheh Rostami-Povey, Karen Clarke, Cynthia Enloe, Martin Burch and V. Spike Peterson. My fellow PhD students at the University of Manchester have not only helped to keep me (relatively) sane during this process but have also provided constructive criticism on various aspects of my research. In particular, Tom Houseman, Patrick Pinkerton, Wei Yin, Julia Welland, Jamie Johnson, Ronan O’Callaghan, Astrid Nordin, Kathryn Starnes, Aggie Hirst, Omayma Al-Khaffaf and Andrew Slack all helped me to formulate my ideas in a more coherent manner, whilst Oliver Turner’s constant goading was essential to its completion. Outside of Manchester Andreja Zevnik, Linda Åhall, Marjanna Jauhola and Megan Daigle have all provided enormous intellectual support. I would also like to express my gratitude to all those who gave up their time to be interviewed as part of my research, including Malalai Joya, Orzala Ashraf, Nasrine Gross, Suraya Sadeed, Shaima Khinjani, Zieba Shorish-Shamley and Eman Mansour from RAWA. Particular thanks go to Glyn Strong for helping to arrange the interview with Malalai and for allowing me to accompany them on her trip to London. This PhD was generously funded by the School of Social Science at the University of Manchester.

Throughout this process my family and friends have been a constant source of support, helping me when times were tough and ensuring that I never gave up. My mum, Katharine Gregory, has patiently read and re-read various drafts of different chapters – often with very little notice – whilst my father, Paul Gregory, has always been there to listen to me moan. Donna Roberts and Larry Roberts have been wonderful in-laws, opening up their home so I could escape for short breaks when the stress became too much. I have also benefited from the love and support of my grandparents, Betty and Peter Gregory, Dr. Anthony Horsfield and my late grandmother Jean Horsfield. Friends such as Ben Hazell, Myriam Jacqueline Gomez Mendez, Pavan Bains, Esther Watson, Rhian Fisher, Erla Thrandardottir, Rebecca Reilly-Cooper, Anna Zimdars, Ailz O’Sullivan, Bennet Jones, Amardeep Sandhu, Helen Phillips, Suzanna Pathmanathan and Ed Williams have all provided a welcome distraction from the toils of work life. Three people deserve a particular mention for going above and beyond the call of duty. My supervisors Maja Zehfuss and Cristina Masters have been incredible throughout this project, providing invaluable feedback on my chapters and helping to reassure me when my confidence was at its lowest. My wife Mandy has had to put up with all my mood swings and late nights while all the time living away from her beloved home of Bremerton, WA. Nothing could ever compensate her for the sacrifices that she has made and for this I am truly grateful.
This thesis is dedicated to the memory of Lawrence W. Roberts (1930-2011).
Abbreviations

AIHRC  Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission
AWN  Afghan Women’s Network
EU  European Union
FMF  Feminist Majority Foundation
HAWCA  Humanitarian Assistance for the Women and Children of Afghanistan
HRW  Human Rights Watch
ISAF  International Security Assistance Force
KhAD  *Khudamat-e Etela‘at-e Dawlati* (Afghan equivalent of KGB)
MOWA  Ministry of Women’s Affairs
NATO  North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NGO  Non-governmental Organisation
OEF  Operation Enduring Freedom (briefly known as Operation Infinite Justice)
PDPA  People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan
PHR  Physician’s for Human Rights
PRT  Provincial Reconstruction Team
RAWA  Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan
RefWID  Refugee Women in Development
UN  United Nations
UNAMA  United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNDP  UN Human Development Program
UNHCR  UN High Commissioner for Refugees
UNIFEM  United Nations Development Fund for Women
WAPHA  Women’s Alliance for Peace and Human Rights in Afghanistan
WAW  Women for Afghan Women
WFP  World Food Program
WLUML  Women Living Under Muslim Laws
Introduction

On the morning of the 27th of September 1996, the residents of the Afghan capital of Kabul awoke to find two mutilated bodies hanging from a concrete pylon in Aryana Square, close to the city centre. The previous day, Taliban fighters had swept into the city, forcing members of the country’s interim government, including President Burhanuddin Rabbani, to abandon the capital and seek refuge in the surrounding hillside. Although he had been offered the chance to escape, one of those who refused to leave the city was the former Soviet-backed president Mohammad Najibullah, who had ruled Afghanistan as leader of the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) between 1987 and 1992. Risking his own safety, Najibullah stayed in Kabul mistakenly believing that the Taliban would spare his life because he was a fellow Pashtun. This proved to be a costly decision. Upon entering Kabul, Taliban troops quickly discovered Najibullah in his hiding place at the UN compound, where he had taken refuge following the collapse of the PDPA a few years earlier. According to eyewitness reports, Najibullah and his younger brother, Shahpur Ahmedzai, were dragged from the compound and taken to the presidential palace where they were subjected to hours of torture. After beating the two men with the butts of their rifles and castrating them, the Taliban carried their limp bodies through the streets of Kabul and suspended them from a concrete pylon with metal wire. The brutal murder of the former president not only sent a powerful message to the crowd of shocked onlookers who had gathered to watch the grisly spectacle but provided the international community with a glimpse of what was yet to come.

As the world looked on in horror, the country’s new leaders took to the airwaves to announce a series of measures that were designed to regulate almost every aspect of life in Afghanistan. Music was one of the first things to be banned by the Taliban, who threatened to close down any businesses that continued to play music and imprison anyone who was caught with cassette tapes in their home. Men were expected to grow a full-length beard within six weeks of the Taliban takeover, whilst children were prohibited from flying kites. The Taliban also believed that it had a particular obligation to protect the dignity of women by preserving the country’s more traditional gender roles. As a result, the regime prohibited Afghan women from seeking paid employment in all sectors except healthcare, banned them from going out in public unless they were
accompanied by a male relative (known as a *mahram*) and forbid them from leaving the house without wearing the burqa, which covered them from head to toe. In addition, girls were denied access to education beyond primary school whilst thousands of female students at the university were forced to abandon their studies. Indeed, Ahmed Rashid notes that ‘within three months of the capture of Kabul, the Taliban closed 63 schools in the city, affecting 103,000 girls, 148,000 boys and 11,200 teachers, of whom 7,800 were women’ (2002: 108). These measures were often brutally enforced by the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (known in Afghanistan as the *Amr bil-Marof wa Nabi An il-Munkir*), which the Taliban inherited from the previous administration. Women were, according to various human rights reports, beaten and publicly humiliated if they were caught transgressing the strict dress code by officials working for the Taliban (HRW, 2001a: 2; Amnesty International, 1996). As one human rights organisation argued, ‘thousands of women have been physically restricted to their homes under Taliban edicts – which ban women from going to work or leave home unaccompanied by a close male relative and girls from going to school – fearing physically assault by the Taliban guards if they leave home without a reason acceptable to them’ (Amnesty International, 1996: 1).

The suffering of Afghan women under the Taliban was, however, soon forgotten by the international community, who did little to address the problems that women faced. The Clinton administration, as I argue in Chapter 2, was initially quite optimistic about the rise of the Taliban, believing that the new regime would be able to impose some sense of normality on a country that had been torn apart by almost two decades of civil war. Although they expressed some reservations about the Taliban’s attitudes towards women, they argued that the regime could provide the necessary security that was required for the reconstruction of Afghanistan, allowing American firms to operate in the region unhindered. Despite opposition from a number of human rights groups and mainstream feminist organisations, the Clinton administration continued to back the proposed UNOCAL pipeline until the attacks on the US embassies in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi in 1998 by terrorists operating from inside Afghanistan (Rashid, 2002: 157-182; see chapter 2). The various non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working in Afghanistan also faced a number of difficulties during this period, as the restrictions on Afghan women made it difficult for them to continue with their operations. In 1998, for

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1 For a full list of the edicts enacted by the Taliban see Rashid (2002: 217-219).
example, the Taliban directed all NGOs to relocate their offices to the newly-refurbished Kabul Polytechnic, claiming that this would enable them to provide better security for their staff. After a number of NGOs refused to move on operation grounds, the Taliban simply closed down their offices and expelled them from the country (Rashid, 2002: 72). A few years earlier, a number of agencies, including Save the Children and UNICEF, suspended their health and education programs after the Taliban took control of the western city of Herat and banned girls from attending school (Johnson and Leslie, 2008: 84-85). For many, however, the response of the aid community to the demands of the Taliban was undermined by its failure to negotiate a common platform between the different NGOs and its reluctance to compromise with the regime on certain issues (Rashid, 2002: 113; Johnson and Leslie, 2008: 85-86).

When the Bush administration and its coalition allies declared war on the Taliban following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, attention turned once again to the situation in Afghanistan. Although Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), which began on the 7th October 2001, was primarily concerned with destroying the terrorist networks that were operating from within the Afghan state, the Bush administration went to great lengths to frame the conflict as a humanitarian endeavour designed to rescue the victims of Taliban oppression (see chapters 1 and 2). Almost immediately, the plight of Afghan women came to dominate the international agenda, as politicians from across the political spectrum came out to denounce the Taliban’s treatment of women. At the same time, the ubiquitous image of the veiled Afghan woman dominated our television screens, whilst newspapers published a series of articles describing the violence that they experienced on an almost daily basis. As I watched these events unfold, I remember feeling uncomfortable about the way the Bush administration had been able to appropriate the lives of Afghan women in this way and use them to authorise the bombing of a country that had already been torn apart by decades of civil war. Like many other opponents of the war, I was sceptical about the Bush administration’s sudden interest in the lives of ordinary Afghans, viewing it as a convenient ploy to justify military action rather than a genuine commitment to protecting women’s rights (Eisenstein, 2004a: 148). As Arundhati Roy quipped, ‘it’s being made out that the whole point of the war was to topple the Taliban regime and liberate Afghan women from their burqas, we are being asked to believe that the U.S. marines are actually on a feminist mission’ (2003: 51).
I also remember feeling a profound sense of unease about the way in which Afghan women were constituted within the dominant discourses of war, which tended to portray them as nothing more than the passive victims of Taliban oppression. Whilst there can be little doubt that the Taliban was responsible for creating untold misery in Afghanistan, I began to wonder whether or not these representations were able to convey adequately the complexity of the situation there. On the one hand, I was concerned that the lives of Afghan women were being shown in the most one-dimensional and monolithic of terms, erasing the specificities of their individual circumstances as well as the diversity of their experiences under the Taliban. On the other hand, I was convinced that attempts to define the lives of Afghan women by the suffering that they were forced to endure risked transforming them into mere objects of pity, lacking both agency and voice. As a result of these anxieties, my attention soon turned to the margins of the political discourse in the hope that I would be able to find some examples that might complicate our understanding of the situation, challenging the simplistic accounts that had been produced by the Bush administration and its coalition allies. As I delved deeper into my research, I soon discovered that the images of Afghan women as helpless victims were contingent upon a series of radical erasures that masked the various ways in which these women had been able to subvert the edicts enacted by the regime. Although it was rarely acknowledged within the prevailing frames of war, Afghan women had managed to carve out a space for resistance, challenging the restrictions that were imposed upon them by the regime (see chapters 5 and 6).

The purpose of this thesis, therefore, is to show how the lives of Afghan women under the Taliban were much more complex than the dominant narratives of war would allow, exposing the limits of the Bush administration’s representational practices by drawing attention to the necessary exclusions upon which they depend. In the chapters that follow, I argue that the images of Afghan women that circulated within the justifications for war can be seen as an example of what Christine Sylvester has described as ‘stick figures’, appearing as inchoate mass of indistinct bodies which have been completely stripped of their fleshy substance (1994: 13). In an effort to add some texture to these representations of Afghan women, I focus on aspects of their lives that tend to be neglected and ignored within the prevailing political framework. Drawing on my
interviews with representatives of a range of women’s organisations based in Afghanistan, such as the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), Humanitarian Assistance for the Women and Children of Afghanistan (HAWCA) and the Afghan Women’s Network (AWN), I outline some of the ways that Afghan women were able to subvert the harsh restrictions that were imposed upon them by the Taliban regime, transforming some of the most repressive restrictions into tools of resistance (see chapter 6). In addition, I draw on my interviews with Afghan women working for American-based groups such as Help the Afghan Children (HTAC) and the Women’s Alliance for Peace and Human Rights in Afghanistan (WAPHA), describing some of the problems they encountered when they tried to challenge the assumption that Afghan women were nothing more than the silent victims of Taliban rule. Not only do these examples allow me to highlight the ways in which our prevailing representational practices fail to capture the complexity of the situation in Afghanistan but they also allow me to show how these representations can be undone, creating the possibility for previously unauthorised accounts.

**Chapter Breakdown**

This thesis is organised into six chapters that show how the lives of Afghan women were stripped of their complexity and scripted into a narrative of rescue that constituted them as mere symbols of helplessness, whilst remaining attentive to the ways in which these representations ultimately fail. In chapter 1, I explain how the Bush administration and its coalition allies tried to appropriate the suffering of women under the Taliban in the justifications for OEF, allowing them to frame the conflict as a humanitarian war waged on behalf of ordinary Afghans. In order to achieve this, I perform a critical reading of the key speeches, statements and policy documents that were produced by the administration in the months that followed 9/11, focusing on the performances of race and gender that shaped how the situation in Afghanistan could be seen and understood. As well as examining the rhetoric emanating from the political establishment, I argue that it is also important to look at how these representations of Afghan women were reproduced by others in the public eye. In the second section, therefore, I show how Afghan women were represented by mainstream media outlets such as the Guardian, Washington Post and New York Times during the early stages of OEF. In particular, I argue that the tendency to treat Afghan women as an entirely
homogenous group whilst conflating their suffering with a number of unrelated problems around the world served only to obfuscate the specificities of their individual experiences under the Taliban. Finally, in the third section, I show how these images of Afghan women were reproduced by prominent feminist organisations such as the Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF), whose Campaign to Stop Gender Apartheid helped reinforce the idea that the war in Afghanistan was designed to rescue the downtrodden victims of Taliban cruelty.

To help understand how these representations of Afghan women functioned in the justifications for war, it is important to situate them within the broader discursive framework that emerged following the events of 9/11. In chapter 2, therefore, I explore the ways in which the situation in Afghanistan was represented within the prevailing frames of war, showing how the image of the Taliban as a backward and barbaric “other” determined how the suffering of Afghan women could be seen and understood. Based on my readings of statements made by the Bush administration, along with various media reports and academic commentaries, I identify two distinct – and, at times, conflicting – historical narratives that were used to explain the problems affecting ordinary Afghans and which served to determine the nature of any possible response. On the one hand, I show how Afghanistan tended to be seen as a terrifying anachronism in the modern world, appearing as one of the few places on earth untouched by the civilising influences of the international community. On the other hand, I argue that the period of Taliban rule was often seen as an aberration in Afghan history that stood in stark contrast to the relatively tolerant and open society that existed before they took charge, reinforcing the idea that the lives of Afghan women were somehow in a state of suspense. Drawing on the work of Edward Said, however, I explain how this understanding of the situation in Afghanistan depends upon excluding those things that would disrupt and disturb such a coherent historical account, such as the role of the international community during the country’s civil war and the support that the US State Department offered the regime during the early stages of Taliban rule.

As well as focusing on the narratives of rescue that were constructed by the Bush administration and reproduced by much of the mainstream media, it is also important
to consider the responses of leading feminist scholars to the “war of/on terror”. In chapter 3, then, I examine how Afghan women were represented in the work of theorists such as Iris Marion Young, Lila Abu-Lughod and Zillah Eisenstein, focusing particular attention on the importance of the protector/protected dichotomy to their work. On the one hand, I argue that their attention to the hierarchical relationship between the protector and the protected has helped to illustrate the ways in which Afghan women were denied access to a culturally intelligible subject position within the dominant discourses of war, ensuring that they could only be seen in terms of the suffering they experienced at the hands of the Taliban. This is something that was particularly useful for exposing the radical disjuncture between the Bush administration’s rhetoric of humanitarianism and their willingness to rely on decidedly inhumane tactics to achieve their military goals, as evidenced by the high number of civilian casualties caused by coalition airstrikes. On the other hand, however, I argue that these particular feminist thinkers fail to contest the prevailing representational practices, often reinforcing the view that these women were helpless victims rather than agents in their own right. In order to illustrate this further, I turn my attention to Judith Butler’s work on the politics of intelligibility in chapter 4, showing how her concept of performativity can help trace the constitutive exclusions that mark the formation of the subject as well as the possibilities for subversion and re-signification. In contrast to those who view identity in fixed and essential terms, Butler argues that it is contingent upon a process of repetition and reiteration, whereby the subject is compelled to repeat those norms which determine the limits of intelligibility. Importantly, this process cannot be seen as an entirely innocuous affair but occur within a tightly regulatory

2 Following Eisenstein, I will refer to the Bush administration’s “war on terrorism” as the “war of/on terror” because war itself is terror-filled; because the US creates more terror than it receives; because the word “terrorism” has become a reactionary tool for mobilising blind patriotism, smothering dissent, and enforcing silence’ (2004a: xvi).

3 The problems that Afghan women have encountered since the fall of the Taliban regime have only been compounded by the effects of continued conflict, particularly since the start of counter-insurgency operations a few years ago. As well as disrupting food distribution networks, destroying local communities and undermining efforts at reconstruction, the ongoing violence has resulted in a number of civilian casualties. In its mid-year report, for example, UNAMA recorded approximately 1,462 civilian deaths in the first six months of 2011, arguing that ‘the armed conflict in Afghanistan brought increasingly grim impacts and a bleak outlook for Afghan civilians’ (2011: 1-3). In their annual report for 2010, the organisation argues that some 8,832 non-combatants have been killed over the last four years as a direct result of the conflict, with the numbers increasing year-on-year (2010: i). Although it notes that the majority of deaths are caused by the actions of the insurgents, it has criticised the international community’s reliance on the use of airstrikes to achieve its military objectives, describing the anger that has been generated amongst ordinary Afghans as a result of the death and destruction that has been caused (2010: 23).
framework which effectively decides who will appear as a recognisable subject whilst ensuring that certain lives are denied the same degree of recognition. Crucially, however, Butler’s performative understanding of the subject reveals the ways in which these norms of intelligibility are forever haunted by those lives that cannot be accommodated within its terms and are, as such, liable to failure. This is something that is particularly pertinent for the task at hand, as it provides a way of thinking about Afghan women that does not depend upon dismissing them as helpless victims or trying to affirm their status as agents without any regard for their particular circumstances.

In chapters 5 and 6, I apply these theoretical insights to the situation in Afghanistan by looking at the way in which Afghan women were able to disrupt and disturb the prevailing representational practices, contesting the idea that they were mere symbols of helplessness. Although the voices of Afghan women were rarely heard within the prevailing frames of war, I argue that it would be a mistake to assume that they were somehow voiceless. Drawing on the experiences of organisations such as RAWA, who were often called upon by politicians and media pundits to testify about the Taliban’s treatment of women, I outline some the ways that Afghan women have been able to articulate their opposition to both the Taliban and the ongoing occupation of Afghanistan. What interests me about these moments is the way in which they not only challenge the justifications that were offered for the invasion of Afghanistan but also undermine the image of Afghan women as passive victims, adding an additional layer of complexity to the Bush administration’s narratives of rescue. At the same time, however, I also argue that it is important to remain attentive to the ways in which their voices were often marginalised within the dominant political landscape, particularly in those instances when they tried to speak beyond their ascribed status of victim. In the final chapter, I continue with these efforts to acknowledge the complexity of the situation in Afghanistan, rejecting the idea that the lives of Afghan women were effectively in a state of suspense during the five years of Taliban rule. Based upon my interviews with various women’s groups, I describe some the ways in which Afghan women were able to defy the restrictions that were imposed upon their lives, taking advantage of cracks within the regime in order to exercise their agency. By drawing attention to these hidden acts of agency the limitations of our representational practices start to become more visible, opening up the possibility for thinking about Afghan women in ways that are not defined solely by their suffering.
A Note on Methodology

Before proceeding it is necessary to provide a brief overview of the methods I used in order to explore how Afghan women were represented in the justifications for Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). I began my investigation by looking through the speeches and statements made by President George W. Bush in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, examining the ways in which he spoke about the situation in Afghanistan and the lives of Afghan women. I decided to focus my investigations on the first six months of OEF as my research is primarily concerned with the way in which Afghan women were represented during the justifications for military intervention rather than the subsequent occupation. Although the majority of these statements are catalogued in the archived edition of the White House website, the rather basic search function meant that it was necessary to read through all the documents published in a much more systematic fashion (there were approximately 781 texts published between 11th September 2001 and the 1st March 2002). From these I was able to identify the most relevant documents, reducing my sample to 25. These included his historic address to the Joint Session of Congress on 20th September 2001, his radio address to the nation on the 6th October 2001 and his statement announcing the start of military action on the 7th October 2001. Using these texts as the basis for my case-study, I was able to explore common themes that dominated the discourses that were constructed around the intervention in Afghanistan. This enabled me to identify the imagery that was used by the Bush administration in its depictions of Afghan women and the treatment they endured at the hands of the Taliban. In addition to the 25 statements made by President Bush, my sample also included statements made by other members of the administration, including First Lady Laura Bush, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Secretary of State Colin Powell.

As well as looking at texts produced by senior officials, I also wanted to see how the image of Afghan women was reproduced by other parts of the political establishment, including Congress. In order to see how Afghan women were portrayed in Congressional debates, I conducted a search for the term “Afghan Women” on the online version of the Congressional Record between the 11th September 2001 and the 1st March 2002, which revealed 58 matches. After reviewing these results, it became apparent that there were three major debates in Congress during this period, as well as a
series of written statements extending or revising the statements made during these debates. The first of these was held on the 16th October 2001 under the title of “Suppression of Women in Afghanistan”, the second on the 31st October 2001 under the title of “Abuses Suffered by Afghan Women” and the final one was held on the 27th November 2001, focusing on the Afghan Women and Children Relief Act of 2001. In addition, I also examined the evidence presented at Congressional hearings about the situation in Afghanistan along with reports published by various departments in the Bush administration, such as the Department of State and the Department of Defense. These documents, along with transcripts of various speeches and press statements, are available on the individual departmental websites. One text that was particularly useful for the purposes of my research was a report entitled “The Taliban’s War on Women” that was published by the State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, as the information contained in this document appeared to be the main source of information for both the Bush administration and various members of Congress.

These texts were supplemented with a detailed analysis of various speeches and statements made by the British Prime Minister Tony Blair and his cabinet colleagues during the same period. In contrast to the United States, government speeches are not stored in a centralised archive but dispersed across multiple sites, making it much more difficult to collate them in a systematic fashion. In order to ensure that I had identified all the relevant documents, I trawled through the transcripts available on both the Guardian and BBC websites, cross-referencing them with the records of parliamentary debates in Hansard. From this initial survey, I was able to identify the three most relevant texts – Blair’s statement to Parliament on the 7th October 2001 announcing the start of military action, his speech to the Labour Party Conference on the 2nd of October 2001 in Brighton and his speech to the Welsh Assembly on the 30th October 2001 – whilst remaining attentive to the broader themes reproduced across various other sources. What is significant about these three statements is that they helped to set the tone for the government’s attitude towards the conflict in Afghanistan, establishing the discursive framework through which the war in Afghanistan could be perceived. Firstly, they reveal just how central the rhetoric of humanitarianism was to the case for war, dispelling myths that the suffering of Afghan women was something used retrospectively to justify the ongoing occupation. Secondly, they contain clear examples of the rhetorical tropes that were used by the political establishment in both Britain and
the United States to describe the Taliban’s treatment of Afghan women. And finally, these statements clearly show how identity was produced and reproduced within the prevailing frames of war, establishing how certain actors could be seen and understood whilst simultaneously circumscribing the appearance of others.

An important component of this study is to show how the production of these narratives was not limited to the Bush administration and its coalition allies but was actively reinforced by those working outside the political establishment, including the mainstream media. It was necessary, therefore, to perform a detailed survey of newspaper articles published during the first few months of the war. In the first instance, I conducted a keyword search for “Afghan women” on Factiva, turning up 1,162 articles in the British and American press. Due to the size of this sample it was necessary to reduce the number of sources to a more manageable quantity, so I decided to focus specifically on articles printed in the New York Times, Washington Post and San Francisco Chronicle in the United States and in the Guardian, Telegraph and Independent in the United Kingdom. The rationale for examining these particular newspapers is that they are all considered to be quality broadsheets with large circulation figures and popular online editions. In the month of October 2001, for example, the Guardian had a circulation of 439,029, the Independent 236,584 and the Telegraph 1,024,135 (Guardian, 2012). Currently, the New York Times has a readership of 1,150,589, the Washington Post 507,465 and the San Francisco Chronicle 220,515 (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2012). I also wanted to avoid focusing solely on the more conservative papers that would most likely support military intervention as this could be seen as preying on rather easy and predictable targets. Instead, I decided to include a number of liberal and broadly left-leaning papers, such as the Guardian, New York Times and Independent in my sample, whilst still remaining attentive to what was being said in more conservative papers like the Washington Post and the Telegraph. I have also tried to ensure that my sample provides a representative cross-section of the mainstream media by including examples gleaned from the pages of newspapers and magazines such as the Sun, Newsweek and the Economist, as well as popular news programmes like 60 Minutes, Larry King Live and the BBC’s Panorama. In the thesis I use the term “mainstream media” as shorthand for these texts, not the media in general.
As well as examining the ways in which Afghan women were represented in various sections of the mainstream media, I also wanted to look at the role of the Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF) in legitimising the Bush administration’s narratives of rescue. Although the FMF cannot boast the same level of support as much larger feminist groups like the National Organization for Women, its Campaign to Stop Gender Apartheid in Afghanistan established itself as a kind of umbrella organisation coordinating feminist opposition to Taliban rule. The campaign was launched by the FMF shortly after the Taliban seized power in 1996 and quickly attracted the attention of celebrities like Sidney Poitier, Gillian Anderson and Renee Zellweger, transforming the suffering of Afghan women into Hollywood’s latest cause célèbre. One of the organisation’s most important successes came in 1998 when it managed to persuade the Californian-based oil giant UNOCAL to abandon its proposals to build a pipeline across Afghanistan. Concerned that the proposed pipeline would provide the Taliban with the international legitimacy that it so desperately craved, the FMF organised demonstrations outside the company’s offices and petitioned the State of California to revoke UNOCAL’s charter, forcing the company into an embarrassing retreat (see chapter 2). Alongside these more high-profile events, however, the FMF also organised a series of campus-based initiatives at colleges across America to promote their back to school campaign for Afghan women and raise awareness about the situation in Afghanistan, encouraging students to wear a swatch of the burqa ‘so that we do not forget the women and girls of Afghanistan until they are free once again’ (Feminist Daily Newswire, 2000).

What makes the Campaign to Stop Gender Apartheid particularly interesting for the purposes of my research is the alleged synchronicity between the FMF and the Bush administration’s justifications for intervention in Afghanistan (Russo, 2006). Indeed, one article published by the FMF recognised the fact that the Bush administration was using language associated with the Campaign to Stop Gender Apartheid to justify military intervention in Afghanistan, citing it as an example of the campaign’s success (Brown, 2002). It is also worth noting that, at various points between 1996 and 2001, representatives of the FMF were called upon by Congress to give evidence about the suffering of Afghan women, including one appearance in front of the Joint Hearing of the Subcommittee on International Organisations and Terrorism and the Subcommittee on Near Eastern and South Asia Affairs on the 10th October 2001. As well as looking at
how Afghan women were represented in this evidence, I have also looked at various other publications released by the FMF. The two main sources for my data were the FMF’s quarterly journal *Ms. Magazine* and its Feminist Daily Newswire service, which is accessible through the organisation’s website. To find the relevant articles, I conducted a keyword search for the terms “Afghanistan” between 1996 and March 2002 (I decided to use a much wider time frame for the FMF as the organisation has been active on the issue for so long), which uncovered a total of 614 articles. Reading through these articles in order to identify common themes, it was possible to focus on particular images of Afghan women that the FMF used in its discussions about the situation in Afghanistan, as well as the organisation’s attitude towards military action against the Taliban.

As part of my research I was keen to interview a representative of the FMF to discuss their representational practices, but I was told that they would be unable to acquiesce due to the high volume of interview requests they had received since the start of military action. I did, however, manage to secure interviews with representatives from various other feminist groups based in the United States who had worked closely with both the Campaign to Stop Gender Apartheid and the Bush administration, including the Women’s Alliance Peace and Human Rights in Afghanistan (WAPHA), Kabultec and Help the Afghan Children. Many of these groups were headed by Afghan expatriates who fled the country following the Soviet invasion in 1979 and have campaigned tirelessly for Afghan women ever since. The rationale for focusing on these particular groups was that they would all be able to provide an inside perspective on their experiences working with the Bush administration and other feminist groups. In particular, I was keen to hear about how they negotiated their position as Afghan women even though they were far removed from the realities on the ground, geographically, economically and politically. Although these women were often expected to speak as Afghan women – and many of them were happy to embrace this subject position – their status as wealthy expatriates begs a number of questions about who can speak, what can be said and what was left unheard. I was also keen to discuss their interactions with the Bush administration and organisations like the FMF, as I was interested to hear about whether or not they encountered any difficulties and if they felt that their views were given appropriate consideration. Although parts of our interviews were “off the record”, these women were still able to provide an interesting account of their
relationship with organisations like the FMF and the State Department that informed my analysis.

I was also able to interview representatives from a number of women’s groups based in Afghanistan. These interviews were particularly important to the project as they allowed me to investigate whether or not the representations of Afghan women as abject victims chimed with the experiences of those living in Afghanistan. Due to Foreign Office travel restrictions, the ethics committee at the University of Manchester would not allow me to travel to either Afghanistan or Pakistan to conduct these interviews in person, so I arranged to speak with these groups by telephone and email. I was also able to interview the outspoken MP and women’s right activist Malalai Joya during a visit to London in July 2009. One of the problems that I encountered with this method was my reliance on information ascertained from the Internet rather than through contacts made in the field, which meant that I spoke mainly with groups seeking an international audience. Therefore, it is important to stress from the outset that the groups I interviewed – Humanitarian Assistance for the Women and Children of Afghanistan (HAWCA), the Afghan Women’s Network (AWN) and the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) – do not represent a cross-section of Afghan society (see chapter 5). That said, these groups were a vital source of information about women’s agency under the Taliban, providing me with an opportunity to ask them about the everyday forms of resistance that occurred during the five years of Taliban rule (such as the network of secret schools that operated in defiance of the edicts prohibiting women’s education). I was also keen to hear about their interactions with members of the international community, including other feminist organisations.

Throughout my research I was mindful about the dangers of setting up a false dichotomy between mainstream American feminist organisations and Afghan women’s groups. By comparing and contrasting the rhetoric espoused by groups like the FMF with what was said in my interviews I do not mean to suggest that the American feminists can be accused of simply misrepresenting the lives of Afghan women or that groups like RAWA can be seen as a more “authentic” voice. There is already a quite complex discussion about the problem of speaking for others within the existing literature, focusing on power relations that circumscribe who can speak, what can be said and what can be heard (see chapter 5; Alcoff, 1991; Roof and Weigman, 1995).
Others, like Gayatri C. Spivak, have criticised those who have sought to bypass the problem of representation by appealing to the concrete experiences of the oppressed, accusing them of an ‘unexamined nativism’ that ignores the epistemic framework within which these experiences are articulated (Scott, 1995; Spivak, 1988; 1990; 1996a; 1996b). The purpose of this thesis, then, is not to condemn those speaking out on the suffering of Afghan women but to emphasise the complexity of the situation under the Taliban, resisting attempts to present Afghan women in monolithic and one-dimensional terms. It is important that scholars not only embrace the plurality of voices that have emerged out of the situation in Afghanistan but remain attentive to the normative violence that has ensured that so many of these voices went unheard. In contrast to the image of Afghan women as the passive prisoners of the Taliban, I argue that it is important to recognise the ways in which women continued to speak and act against both the oppressive edicts initiated by the Taliban and the military intervention organised by the United States and its coalition allies. It is for this reason that I try to develop a way of reading otherwise that is able to accommodate the multiplicity of ways in which Afghan women were able to confound the dominant representational practices that have constituted them as mere symbols of helplessness.

In order to achieve this, I turn my attention to Judith Butler’s concept of performativity (see chapter 4), which refers to the processes of repetition and reiteration that establish who or what can appear as a politically qualified and culturally intelligible subject. This idea of performativity is central to my methodological approach as it allows me to examine how particular normative assumptions about Afghan women were produced and reproduced in the justifications for OEF, radically circumscribing their appearance within the prevailing frames of war. As I explain in chapter 4, the performative process is underpinned by a series of violent exclusions that effectively decide who or what counts as recognisably human. By drawing attention to this normative violence, Butler’s concept of performativity can help to provide the analytical tools capable of explaining how the lives of Afghan women were rendered largely unintelligible beyond their perceived status as victims. It has, however, been suggested that Butler’s methodological approach is limited by her reliance on a series of dichotomies between the intelligible and the unintelligible, the human and the nonhuman, the included and the excluded. Responding to Butler’s Antigone’s Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death (2002), John E. Seery argues that a series of binary oppositions lurk beneath the surface of Butler’s
reading of Sophocles’ play, claiming that Butler ‘soon starts reverting to a dichotomous analysis overall – deploying and reinforcing rather than contesting and re-describing certain operative binaries’ (2008: 74). Similarly, Maja Zehfuss has challenged Butler’s work on the politics of grief by criticising what she believes to be an untenable distinction between ‘grievable’ and ‘ungrievable’ lives, drawing attention to the peculiar position occupied by soldiers ‘whose lives are grievable and yet put at risk in order, apparently, to protect other lives’ (2009: 419).

Although these are valid criticisms of her work, I believe that it is possible to view the relationship between the human and the nonhuman as a gradation rather than as a simple opposition, allowing certain groups – like Afghan women – to appear as potential humans or humans-yet-to-be. In her most recent book Frames of War: When is Life Grievable (2009), for example, Butler provides a much more nuanced account of her work on intelligibility by emphasising the extent to which particular populations are more recognisable as human beings than others. Using the term “apprehension”, Butler describes a mode of knowing that is not yet recognition, stating that ‘not all acts of knowing are acts of recognition, although the inverse claim would not hold: a life has to be intelligible as a life, has to conform to certain conceptions of what life is, in order to become recognisable’ (2009: 6-7). For Butler, then, it is possible to conceive of subjects that enjoy some degree of recognition even though they never quite appear as fully human, undermining suggestions that her work is constrained by its reliance upon a series of binary oppositions. It is for this reason that Butler’s work on performativity and the politics of intelligibility is particularly useful for thinking about the representations of Afghan women, as it helps to explain how these women could be both hyper-visible in the justifications for war yet almost unrecognisable as political agents in their own right. In addition, by highlighting the contingency of these frames, Butler’s work on performativity can also be used to draw attention to those moments of disruption, showing how the voices of organisations like RAWA and figures like Malalai Joya undermined the dominant modes of representation.

It is worth mentioning that, on the surface, there are a number of parallels between the methodological approaches that I use to investigate the representations of Afghan women in the justifications for OEF and what can be broadly described as discourse analysis. Within the social sciences, discourse analysis is a method that is most closely
associated with the work of Norman Fairclough (1992; 1995; 2001), who rejects the idea that language can be seen as a transparent tool used to communicate a pre-existing reality in a neutral and impartial manner. Instead, Fairclough argues that discourse should be seen as a social practice that works to produce and reproduce our understanding of the world around us (1992: 63; 2001: 18-19). In *Discourse and Social Change*, for example, he argues that ‘[d]iscourses do not just reflect or represent social entities and relations, they construct or ‘constitute’ them; different discourses constitute key entities (be they ‘mental illness’, ‘citizenship’ or ‘literacy’) in different ways, and position people in different ways as social subjects (e.g. as doctors or patients)’ (1992: 3-4). In other words, discourse is a practice that not only represents the social world but actively creates it, constituting particular social identities whilst ensuring that others are simultaneously marginalised, disqualified or excluded. The task for discourse analysts, then, is to explore how these social identities are constructed by performing a systematic analysis of the discourse that has been constructed around a particular issue, drawing attention to the subtle and, at times, hidden relations that shape our understanding of reality (2001: 18-19).

Despite these obvious similarities, there are a number of crucial differences that need to be explained; the most obvious being the conflicting ontological assumptions that underpin our respective research. Although Fairclough readily acknowledges that discourse does not simply represent a pre-existing social reality, he continues to rely upon a problematic distinction between the ‘discursive’ and the ‘non-discursive’ world that fails to address adequately the processes through which ‘reality’ is constructed. Distinguishing himself from the work of Michel Foucault, Fairclough insists that our discursive practices are constrained by the fact that they take place within a ‘constituted, material reality, with preconstituted “objects” and preconstituted social subjects’ (1992: 60). According to Fairclough, then, discourse exists in a dialectical relationship with social structure, with the latter as serving as both a condition for and an effect of the former. It is, he argues, ‘important that the relationship between discourse and social structure should be seen dialectically if we are to avoid the pitfalls of overemphasising on the one hand the social determination of discourse, and on the other hand the construction of the social in discourse’ (1992: 65). Other discourse analysts, such as Marianna Jørgensen and Louise Phillips, have also relied upon this distinction between the discursive and the extra-discursive, claiming that ‘reality is only accessible to us
through categories, so our knowledge and representations of the world are not reflections of the reality ‘out there’, but rather products of our ways of categorising the world’ (2002: 5). In this sense, my methodological approach is much more closely aligned with various other feminists writing in the field, such as Laura J. Shepherd’s (2008) work on UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which draws on Butler to look at the violent reproduction of gender within the dominant discourses of international security, and Lene Hansen’s (2006) work on the war in Bosnia, which draws on a range of poststructuralist thinkers to show how the identities of the various groups involved in the conflict were produced and reproduced through particular foreign policy formulations.
1 Symbols of Helplessness: Afghan Women and the Narrative of Rescue

On the 7th October 2001 the United States and its allies launched a bombing raid on the already dilapidated city of Kabul, along with a number of other targets in the Taliban stronghold of Kandahar, signalling the start of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). While there can be little doubt that the war was waged primarily in response to the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, it would be a mistake to assume that this is the only way the conflict can be understood. From the moment the “war of/on terror” was declared and Afghanistan identified as the principal target, the suffering of Afghan women became so central to the justifications for the invasion that it has become almost impossible to distinguish humanitarian objectives from strategic ones. As I will show below, the Bush administration and their allies constructed an elaborate narrative of rescue around the intervention in an attempt to legitimise their violence, appealing to the Taliban’s appalling record on human rights to secure wider popular support and further undermine the credibility of the ruling regime. Within these narratives, the plight of Afghan women soon came to occupy a prominent position, used to highlight both the barbaric character of the Taliban and the cruel and degrading punishments they meted out to those who failed to comply with their draconian demands. The ubiquitous figure of the veiled woman became an iconic image of the “war of/on terror” and was used to convey not only the horrors of life under the Taliban but also wider assumptions about the battle between civilisation and barbarism, freedom and fear that supposedly defined the global political order after 9/11.

Although there is no doubt that women suffered enormously under the Taliban it is important to take into account the significant effects of representing them only as victims, focusing particular attention on how this representation might circumscribe our ability to recognise them as political subjects. By examining the narratives of rescue used to justify the war, this chapter considers how identity was produced within the prevailing frames of war and how this, in turn, imposed a series of limitations upon our understanding of those involved, preventing us from appreciating the messy complexity of the situation in Afghanistan or the role of Afghan women in the resistance to Taliban rule. In her work on the imperial encounter, Roxanne L. Doty has emphasised the
importance of such inquiries, arguing that ‘thinking in terms of representational practices highlights the arbitrary, constructed, and political nature… [of the categories] through which we have come to “know” the world and its inhabitants and that have enabled and justified certain practices and policies’ (1996: 3). Rather than assume that they pre-exist their inscription into discourse, it is necessary to take into account the representational practices through which we have come to “know” Afghan women and explore how these practices ‘produce what they claim [only] to name’ (Zehfuss, 2007: 58). Drawing on the speeches of the Bush administration, reports in various British and American newspapers and the campaigns of mainstream feminist organisations, I argue that the image of Afghan women as weak and helpless victims prevented us from understanding the complex reality of life in Afghanistan or from recognising the agency of Afghan women’s groups such as the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA). As a result, the plurality of women’s voices in Afghanistan often went unheard within the dominant discourses of the “war of/on terrorism”, leaving us with a very narrow understanding of their lives under the Taliban.

The chapter will begin by exploring the narratives of rescue that were constructed by the Bush administration after 9/11 in order to show how important the rhetoric of humanitarianism was in framing the conflict as well as the gendered assumptions that underpinned the representations of Afghan women. In the final two sections, I examine the role of media outlets such as the Guardian, New York Times and Washington Post, as well as mainstream feminist organisations such as the Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF), in reproducing these images of Afghan women, addressing accusations that they were complicit in the legitimisation of the Bush administration’s narratives of rescue (Russo, 2006). By dividing the chapter in this manner I do not mean to suggest that the representations produced by US policymakers, the mainstream media and liberal feminists should be viewed as three separate discourses that exist in isolation from each other. Rather, it is important to recognise that, whilst the groups behind these different discourses might be motivated by their own individual agendas, they all share similar representational strategies that serve to produce and reproduce the figure of the Afghan woman as a helpless victim in need of salvation.
1.1 The Bush Administration’s Narratives of Rescue

Almost immediately after the events of 9/11, Afghanistan was identified and secured as the initial target in the Bush administration’s “war of/on terror”, with the Taliban standing accused of providing shelter to Osama bin Laden and allowing al-Qaeda to train terrorists in camps along the border with Pakistan. The clash of civilisations rhetoric that was seized upon by the Bush administration served to construct the “war of/on terror” as an all-encompassing battle between good and evil, pitting the forces of freedom and justice against the barbaric underside of the Muslim world. Within the terms established by this crude moral geography, according to which ‘either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists’, the Taliban quickly found themselves to be implicated in the threat posed by global terrorism (G.W. Bush, 2001a), despite it being unlikely that they derived any real benefit from their arrangement with al-Qaeda (Gregory, 2004: 43-44). In a statement a few days after the terrorist attacks, President Bush made it clear that those ‘who helped or harboured terrorists [would] be punished – and punished severely’, whilst British Prime Minister Tony Blair insisted that the international community must bring to ‘account those who have organised, aided, abetted and incited this act of infamy’ (G.W. Bush, 2001b; Blair, 2001a). Although most commentators agree that the regime’s reluctance to surrender the al-Qaeda leadership probably owed more to traditional Pashtun social codes about hospitality rather than any genuine ideological commitment to their cause, the presence of terrorists within the country provided the Bush administration and its coalition allies with an excuse to declare war (Maley, 2009: 213-214).

What is remarkable about the justifications provided for the war in Afghanistan is that, from the outset, the invasion was portrayed not only as a strategic strike against terrorism but also as a humanitarian endeavour designed to liberate the Afghan people from the tyranny of the Taliban regime. Although the main aims of OEF were to undermine the capacity of al-Qaeda to launch another attack on the United States, the Bush administration framed the conflict as a rescue mission to save women from their subjugation. Not surprisingly, the primary focus of Bush’s historic address to the Joint Session of Congress and the American People was the exceptional nature of the war. Despite the emphasis he placed on the Taliban’s refusal to handover bin Laden to face justice, Bush did not limit his criticism solely to their alleged collusion with al-Qaeda but
also spoke extensively about the regime’s appalling record on human rights, arguing that ‘Afghanistan’s people have been brutalized; many are starving and many have fled [and] women are not allowed to attend school’ (G.W. Bush, 2001a). The Taliban, he argued, were ‘not only repressing its own people, [but...] threatening people everywhere by sponsoring and sheltering and supplying terrorists’ (G.W. Bush, 2001a). Likewise, in a presidential radio address delivered the day before the start of bombing, Bush described how Afghanistan had been transformed into a place of enormous suffering, arguing that the Taliban ‘promotes terror abroad, and practices terror against its people, oppressing women and persecuting all who dissent’ (G.W. Bush, 2001c). The experiences of Afghan women soon became a prominent motif that provided a chilling reminder of ‘al-Qaeda’s vision for the world’ (G.W. Bush, 2001a). By constituting women in this manner, the Bush administration was able to use their suffering to frame the OEF as a rescue mission, portraying itself as a just warrior in the fight to liberate the victims of terror whilst further de-legitimising the Taliban regime (Denike, 2008).

In order to sustain this view, the Bush administration was careful to ensure that it was not seen as a war against the civilian population by repeatedly assuring the international community that the effects of the conflict would be tempered by a commitment to alleviating the food crisis and ending the abuse of women. In his speech announcing the start of airstrikes, for example, Bush promised that food and medicine would be dropped in addition to the bombs and mortar so that the ‘oppressed people of Afghanistan will know the generosity of America and our allies’ (G.W. Bush, 2001d). Only a few days before, Bush had pledged a further $320m in aid to Afghanistan in an effort to alleviate the anticipated effects of the coming winter and address the widespread shortage of food that, according to many NGOs, the coming conflict was expected to exacerbate, allowing him to portray the war as a virtuous enterprise against the world’s ‘evildoers’ (G.W. Bush, 2001e). Despite his aversion to nation-building, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld also echoed these assurances in a speech announcing the start of airstrikes. As well as seeking to ‘raise the cost of doing business for foreign terrorists’, Rumsfeld was keen to stress the need to challenge the ‘oppressive Taliban’, arguing that the ‘effect we hope to achieve through the raids […] is to create

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4 Many considered the figure of $320m to be insufficient for addressing humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, including the then Chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations Sen. Joseph Biden (see Kahn, 2001; Riddell, 2001).
conditions for sustained anti-terrorist and humanitarian relief operations in Afghanistan (Rumsfeld, 2001 emphasis added). As David Chandler notes,

Far from stressing [its] national interests in responding to an attack on its major symbol of economic and military dominance, the US establishment and the coalition of supporting states stressed the ethical and humanitarian nature of the military response, which included the dropping of food and medical provisions (2006: 1).

What is significant about these comments for the purposes of understanding the narratives of rescue used to frame the war is how deeply entwined the stated military objectives were with a supposedly humanitarian agenda, becoming so integral to the overriding rationale for OEF that it was almost impossible to fully dissociate them. This conflation of military and humanitarian aims was even evident in the way war itself was waged as revealed by the reliance on the controversial Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), an assemblage of civilian and military personnel created to implement what Bush described as the Marshall Plan for Afghanistan (G.W. Bush, 2002; Dziedzic & Seidl, 2005).

Understandably, many critics have been tempted to dismiss this professed humanitarianism as little more than a convenient guise in which cruel and inhumane effects of the invasion could be cloaked, masking the violent consequences of war for those civilians involved. Simon Chesterman, for example, argued that a ‘notable aspect of the conflict was the way in which humanitarian concerns came to be attributed to the action as it played out in Afghanistan’, whilst Richard Falk suggested that, “after September 11, the American approach to humanitarian intervention morphed into post hoc rationalizations for uses of force otherwise difficult to reconcile with international law” (Chesterman, 2003: 163 emphasis added; Falk quoted in The Nation, 2003). In doing so, these critics risk underestimating the performative power of discourse and overlooking how the rhetoric of humanitarianism helped decide how the “war of/on terror” could be both fought and thought, as well as rendering violence against ordinary Afghans permissible within the prevailing frames of war. It is important, therefore, to situate the justifications for OEF within the context of the military humanism that emerged in the 1990s and the international community’s readiness to intervene coercively in the affairs of other states for the expressed purpose of upholding human rights (see Weiss, 2007; Wheeler, 2002). By remaining attentive to the broader political context, it is possible to
understand how the Bush administration was able to mobilise the language of human rights in order to construct its narratives of rescue, relying on the image of the United States as the benevolent saviour whilst constituting the objects of the intervention, in this case Afghan women, as being fully dependent on those charged with ensuring their salvation.

In contrast to those who warned that the “war of/on terror” marked a definitive break with the previous decade, it is necessary to trace how the language of humanitarianism continued to define the discursive landscape and delimit the identities of those involved. As Costas Douzinas argued, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan need to be seen as ‘a darker continuation of the “Kosovo spirit” in which the West displayed a new willingness to spread human rights, freedom and democracy around the world’ (2007: 6). Blair even went as far as comparing the war in Afghanistan to Operation Allied Force against Slobodan Milošević, using a speech in Parliament to argue that the invasion was as much a fight for justice as it was a fight against terrorism (Blair, 2001b). Like Bush, he made a point of framing OEF as a rescue mission by emphasising the experiences of those living under the Taliban, especially the restrictions placed upon women. Indeed, his speech to the Labour party conference was so steeped in the language of human rights that one commentator remarked that it was effectively advocating ‘world domination by the third way’ (Glover, 2001). During the speech, which was delivered only a few days before airstrikes began, Blair described how the Taliban had outlawed sport, banned photography and prohibited many other forms of cultural expression (Blair, 2001c). He focused particular attention on the gendered nature of the abuse perpetrated by the Taliban, arguing that ‘women are treated in a way almost too revolting to be credible’ (Blair, 2001c).

As the initial phase of OEF progressed and the Taliban were driven from Kabul, the rhetoric around the oppression of women intensified markedly. Although it had always been a key feature of the justifications for war, by late October suffering of women had become a powerful symbol of the Bush administration’s fight against evil. A noticeable feature of these descriptions was the way women were shown as being so thoroughly overwhelmed by the repressive dictates imposed upon them that they could only be understood as abject victims whose lives were devoid of any meaning or substance. One example of this is the Afghan Women and Children Relief Act of 2001 that authorised
Bush to provide additional aid with the purpose of counteracting the obstacles erected by the Taliban to prevent women from participating in the public sphere. In his remarks to the press announcing the enactment of the bill, Bush reproduced the view that Afghan women were the lifeless prisoners of fundamentalism, describing how they were prevented from speaking and laughing loudly, banned from riding bicycles or attending school. America, he warned, was ‘beginning to realise that dreams of the terrorists and the Taliban were a walking nightmare for Afghan women and their children’ (G.W. Bush, 2001f).

By drawing attention to these representations of Afghan women, I do not mean to suggest that the Bush administration was deliberately exaggerating the suffering of Afghan women in order to justify military action. Rather, my purpose is to show how these representations of often ignored the complexity of the situation in Afghanistan, erasing the myriad of ways in which Afghan women had worked tirelessly to carve out a meaningful life in the face of such enormous hardship (see chapters 5 and 6). Various feminist activists and scholars have sought to draw attention to the gendered assumptions permeating the justifications for war, showing them to be dependent upon a myth of protection that positions the United States as the heroic warrior fighting to save Afghan women from their wretched existence. In an article focusing on what she termed the ‘logic of masculinist protection’, Iris Marion Young identified two distinct yet interrelated narratives used by the Bush administration to legitimise its security practices both at home and abroad, both of which were steeped in gendered assumptions about the role of the United States in the “war of/ on terror”. The first, she argued, referred to the administration’s reliance upon the language of fear and threat to win support for the curtailment of civil liberties and the criminalisation of dissent (2003: 2-3), positioning the government in the role of the protective father figure. The second, Young argued, was the cynical attempt to cast the war in Afghanistan as a humanitarian endeavour in order to make the invasion more palatable to the wider public, using the suffering of Afghan women to further de-legitimise the Taliban regime (2003: 17).  

One of the most notable examples of this logic at work can be found in the national radio address by First Lady Laura Bush, broadcast less than a week after the Taliban

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3 The analysis offered by Young can be easily situated within a broader feminist challenge to the patriarchal logic used to justify war, including Judith Stiehm’s (1982) critique of the protector/protected dichotomy and Jean Bethke Elshtain’s (1995) efforts to debunk it (see chapter 3).
were driven from Kabul, in which she praised the liberation of Afghanistan by the United States and its coalition allies as well as their efforts in rescuing Afghan women from their plight under the Taliban. Describing how Afghan women had been denied access to healthcare, banned from the classroom and prevented from leaving their homes alone, Laura Bush argued that, ‘civilised people throughout the world are speaking out in horror – not only because our hearts break for the women and children in Afghanistan, but also because in Afghanistan we see the world the terrorists would like to impose on the rest of us’ (L. Bush, 2001). Central to this account of the liberation was a dichotomous opposition between the protector and the protected within which Afghan women were depicted as ‘symbols of helplessness’ (Orford, 2003: 171). Life under the Taliban, Laura Bush argued, was ‘so hard and repressive, even small displays of joy are outlawed – children aren’t allowed to fly kites; their mothers face beatings for laughing out loud’ (L. Bush, 2001).

The tenor of the First Lady’s radio address, although praised by organisations such as the Feminist Majority Foundation, was widely criticised by other feminists who were concerned about this portrayal of Afghan women. Laura J. Shepherd, for example, argues that Afghan women had been ‘reduced to a snap-shot image that was ultimately unsustainable, as was the denial of female agency that was again central to this construction’ (2006: 25-26). Specifically, she expressed concern about effects of repeatedly categorising women and children together in a way that serves to ‘infantilise’ Afghan women, ‘denying them both adulthood and agency, affording them only pity and a certain voyeuristic attraction’ (2006: 20). This infantilisation of women was also noted by Meghana Nayak who had linked the Bush administration’s efforts to resurrect the image of the United States as a powerful, hyper-masculine figure after the devastating blow to its identity caused by the terrorist attacks (2006: 43-48). According to these narratives of rescue, Afghan women could only be expected to perform one of two equally unsatisfactory roles: either that of the eternal victim of the Taliban’s fundamentalism or the grateful recipient of the protection promised by the United States and its coalition allies. Despite their obvious differences, both are dependent upon a patriarchal logic that effaces any sense of their own agency by producing them as pawns in a game controlled by others. At no point did the Bush administration make

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6 In response to this all-too-common use of this image of victimhood, Cynthia Enloe has coined a new neologism ‘womenandchildren’ that encapsulates the refusal to recognise them as possessing the attributes of a full human (1993: 166).
any effort to highlight the covert forms of resistance that had become commonplace in recent years, including the secret schools for girls operated by women frustrated by the lack of education available (see chapter 6).

The purpose of this section has been to show how Afghan women were constituted as mere symbols of helplessness as part of the Bush administration’s efforts to frame the war in Afghanistan as a humanitarian intervention. It is important to recognise, however, that the narratives of rescue surrounding the war were not authored solely by those in the administration but were told and re-told by an assortment of actors across a variety of different formats. It is also important to recognise that prevailing representations were not created from nowhere but were rooted in wider normative assumptions about women in the non-Western world as well as depictions of the political turmoil in Afghanistan circulating long before the terrorist attacks on the United States. The purpose of the following section is to situate this portrait of Afghan women within the broader discursive framework from which it emerged, taking into account how many media commentaries served to reaffirm them as the passive victims of the Taliban. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to begin with an analysis of newspaper reports published during the five years of Taliban rule before proceeding to explore how women were portrayed by certain sections of the media after the events of 9/11. As I will demonstrate below, the prevailing representational practices did little to disrupt the protector/protected dichotomy that pervaded the justifications for war, often supplementing it with colonial sentiments about the need to rescue non-Western women from the traditions of their society.

1.2 The Mainstream Media and the Justifications for War

Prior to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the problems affecting women in Afghanistan were seldom seen as newsworthy in and of themselves, only making an appearance when other events in the region attracted the attention of the world’s media. After Kabul was captured by the Taliban and grisly photographs of the badly beaten body of the former president were shown across the world, initial reports from the region expressed serious concern about the prospects facing the population. Writing in the New York Times a few weeks after the Taliban seized power, John F. Burns described how cinemas were
closed, television banned and women forced to cover themselves in public (Burns, 1996). It was not until the end of 1997, after two unrelated incidents drew their attention, that newspapers such as the *Guardian*, *New York Times* and *Washington Post* really began to take notice of the events unfolding in the Central Asian state and, in particular, to the stringent measures imposed by the Taliban. In late September 1997, the European Commissioner for Humanitarian Affairs Emma Bonino was dispatched to Afghanistan to investigate the treatment of women accompanied by a delegation of officials, aid workers and journalists. On a visit to a hospital, the Commissioner and her colleagues were arrested and held for over three hours by armed guards for filming female patients (*New York Times*, 1997). Amongst those arrested was CNN correspondent Christiane Amanpour, who published an article in *Time* magazine discussing her ordeal as well as the wider problems affecting women. Describing the deteriorating security situation and the ‘extraordinary hardship’ they faced, Amanpour suggested that the incident at the hospital was further proof that the ‘Taliban has no intention of easing the stern commandments that have virtually locked women away in a modern purdah’ (Amanpour, 1997). From the moment they seized power, she argued, the Taliban had sought to ‘eradicate women from the public life’, denying them the opportunity to work, throwing them out of schools and banning aid agencies from employing them (Amanpour, 1997). It should be noted, however, that although this episode was widely seen as a heroic confrontation, the decision to film inside the hospital was regarded by many in the aid community to be a ‘crude self-serving stunt that served only to obscure the real story, which was about the need to improve health facilities for women’ (Johnson & Leslie, 2008: 114).

The second incident that drew the attention of the world’s media to the problems faced by women in Afghanistan was the visit by the Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright to a refugee camp twenty-five miles across the border in Pakistan. Until this point, the Clinton administration had been relatively silent on the issue of women’s rights, preferring instead to quietly engage with the Taliban in the hope that they would bring some stability to the country, reduce opium production and look favourably upon American proposals to construct an oil pipeline across the country (see chapter 2). In a speech that signalled a considerable shift in American policy, Albright described the Taliban’s treatment of women and children as being utterly ‘despicable’ (quoted in Erlanger, 1997). Visiting the Bibi Mariam School for girls located amongst the camp’s...
mud huts, Albright listened to a number of women speak about their experiences and urged them to continue their fight for equality. Afterwards she told journalists that the United States was ‘opposed to [the Taliban’s...] approach to human rights, to their despicable treatment of women and children and their lack of respect for human dignity, in a way more reminiscent of the past than the future’ (quoted in Erlanger, 1997). Over the following weeks a number of newspapers once again turned their attention, albeit briefly, to the experiences of women living under the Taliban, who were often shown as little more than hostages of their culture. Writing in the Guardian, for example, Maggie O’Kane described how women had quite literally disappeared from Afghan society as a result of ‘the “ethnic cleansing” of an entire gender from a country’, describing in detail the repressive edicts imposed on women (1997: 38). As well as mentioning that the Taliban had restricted access to education and healthcare, O’Kane also recounted one story about a couple who were stopped for riding a bicycle together. As punishment for violating decrees forbidding such activity, the husband was shot in the foot and the wife murdered after being shot through the heart (1997: 38). Columnist Jonathan Steele supplemented O’Kane’s concern for the ‘ethnic cleansing’ of women with a focus on the ‘ethnically motivated harassment’ of the Hazara minority who had been the targets of Taliban oppression and who, shortly after Steele’s piece appeared, were the victims of two bloody massacres in Mazar-e-Sharif and Yakaolang (1997: 15; Maley, 2009: 200-201).

It was not until after the embassy bombings on the 7th August 1998 that the news reporters really started to take an interest in the Taliban’s abuse of human rights. In coordinated attacks within the Tanzanian city of Dar es Salaam and the Kenyan capital Nairobi, terrorists linked to al-Qaeda detonated trucks loaded with explosives parked outside diplomatic offices belonging to the United States, killing 224 and injuring another 5,000. In retaliation for the attacks, the Clinton administration launched Operation Infinite Reach and unleashed a series of cruise missile strikes on targets in both Afghanistan and Sudan. In the months following the bombings, the media became increasingly curious about the extraordinary character of the Taliban and their violence against women. Around the same time, the Boston-based Physicians’ for Human Rights

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7 O’Kane is especially critical of the foreign oil companies willing to turn a blind eye to the crimes of the Taliban in order to win lucrative contracts to build a pipeline. She quotes one official who argued that, ‘what do you want me to do - tell them to stop beating their wives? That’s their business - if I beat my wife, that is my business. We are here to make money - we have nothing to do with the political situation’ (quoted in 1997: 38).
(PHR) published their report on the situation in Afghanistan, focusing specifically on the health problems arising from the edicts issued by the ruling regime. Based on a survey of 160 women, they claimed that 71% had noticed a decline in their physical health as a result of the restrictions they faced, whilst 97% of women reported that they were suffering from some form of depression (1998: 6-9). The report concludes that the abuse witnessed and experienced by the people of Afghanistan was so terrible that it has ‘traumatise[d] and re-traumatise[d] Afghan women, who have already experienced the horrors of war, rocketing, ever-present landmines and unexploded ordnance, and the loss of friends and immediate family’ (1998: 13).

Following the publication of the report, a flurry of articles about the experiences of women appeared in the press including an article in the New York Times which described how the Taliban had effectively declared a ‘war on women’, throwing a ‘blanket of absolute oppression over the lives of all females’ (Herbert, 1998). The level of interest is best exemplified by a series of articles in the Washington Post by Pamela Constable, who had been given permission to enter Afghanistan, in which she argued that the once cosmopolitan city of Kabul had become an ‘Orwellian ghost town where no woman’s face is ever seen and no man dares appear beardless’ (1998a: A01). Women, she notes, are ‘rarely seen and never heard; on brief shopping excursions they scurry quietly along the sidewalks, anonymous behind billowing sky-blue or pine-green burqas’ (1998a: A01). Whilst these depictions of life under the Taliban provide a powerful snap-shot of the repression experienced by those living under the Taliban, they do little to convey the way women struggled to cope in the face of such hardship.

The media storm surrounding the abuse of Afghan women soon subsided despite the best efforts of groups such as the FMF to keep the issue in the public eye. Their suffering was, however, quickly catapulted back on to the political agenda in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks when journalists around the world turned their attention to the long-neglected abuse of women. As it became increasingly apparent that Afghanistan would be the first target in the “war of/ on terror”, the Bush administration sought to portray the conflict as a rescue mission that would not only undermine the activities of terrorists operating from the region but would also help liberate the Afghan people. Although there were many critical voices, such as writers such as Arundhati Roy and Madeleine Bunting, who were vocal in their condemnation of the war, many other
commentators simply echoed the Bush administration’s narratives of rescue. Perhaps not surprisingly, the protector/protected logic that was so central to the justifications for war was also reiterated throughout much of the mainstream media. According to research on the American media by Carol A. Stabile and Deepa Kumar, only 15 articles were published about Afghan women in the 18 months prior to the 9/11 terrorist attacks compared with 113 that focused on the destruction of the two Buddhist statues in the province of Bamyan. Similarly, they found there were only 33 programmes containing segments about women living under the Taliban shown over the same period in contrast to the 628 programmes broadcast in the four months immediately after the collapse of the World Trade Center, prompting them to conclude that ‘until Afghan women proved rhetorically useful, their tragic circumstances merited little coverage in the mainstream media’ (2005: 771-772). As well as helping to justify the war, the emphasis on the exploitation of women performed a vital role in shaping how the invasion could be perceived and understood. Not only did it provide the Bush administration with a means of discrediting the Taliban, it also allowed them to reposition themselves as the heroic warriors riding to the rescue of those still trapped in the dark ages.

Common to all of these narratives of rescue was the depiction of women as people devoid of any sense of political agency, consciousness or personhood. Rather than presenting them as complex human beings who had been thrown together by the tragedy of their circumstances, the prevailing representations of Afghan women produced them as an anonymous collective of veiled bodies who were defined entirely by the suffering they endured. An example of this can be found in an article written by Katha Pollitt for The Nation magazine in which she asked whether there were ‘any people on earth more wretched than the women of Afghanistan’ (Pollitt, 2001). In order to illustrate this point she provides a long list of restrictions imposed by the Taliban that prevented women from working, learning and acquiring appropriate medical attention, as well as highlighting the poverty, disease and starvation affecting ordinary Afghans (Pollitt, 2001). In contrast to many others, however, Pollitt does briefly acknowledge the role of groups such as the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) who defied the Taliban by organising secret schools for girls, documenting the regime’s abuse of human rights and delivering some form of medical care to those in need. Despite realising this, Pollitt does little to challenge the representation of Afghan
women as anonymous avatars for the crimes of the Taliban because she continues to rely on presenting them as a nameless and faceless multitude defined only by their plight. This refusal to recognise women as anything other than hapless victims of fundamentalism was also apparent in an influential article by Jan Goodwin and Jessica Neuwirth, which was even cited in Congress in support of OEF. Rather than attempt to convey the heterogeneity of women’s lives, the authors offer little more than a crude timeline of oppression, starting with the violence of mujahedeen in the 1980s and finishing with the Taliban who ‘institutionalised the total oppression of women’ (Goodwin & Neuwirth, 2001 emphasis added).

The representations that were produced and circulated by parts of the mainstream media in the aftermath of 9/11 reiterated the narratives of rescue articulated by the Bush administration, invariably portraying OEF as a humanitarian endeavour with the aim of liberating those persecuted by the Taliban. What is interesting about these representations, however, is that they often relied upon a racial grammar that served to firmly establish Afghan women in a position of inferiority. Postcolonial feminists, such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty, have been particularly critical of the tendency amongst certain feminists in the West to homogenise the experiences of non-Western women and portray them in a singular and uniform manner (1988: 62). Certain forms of feminism, Mohanty argues, act to ‘discursively colonise the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world, thereby producing/representing a composite, singular, ‘third world women’ – an image which appears arbitrarily constructed but nevertheless carries with it the authorising signature of western humanist discourse’ (1988: 62-63). This willingness to homogenise the experiences of non-Western women is not, however, limited to these feminist scholars but was a common feature in coverage of the “war of/on terror”. One example of this refusal to acknowledge the particularities of these women’s lives can be seen in an opinion piece written by Boris Johnson for the Daily Telegraph where he collapses criticism of the Taliban into a sweeping denunciation of oppression in the “Muslim world”, listing a number of examples whose relevance to the situation in Afghanistan is not immediately obvious (such as Kuwait’s refusal to extend voting rights to women, the ban on women footballers in the Nigerian city of Kano and the Iranian media’s reluctance to show images of Monica Lewinsky) (Johnson, 2001: 29). Rather than attempt to understand the particularities of the situation in Afghanistan, Johnson resorts
to a series of misleading generalisations about women in the Muslim world and suggests a ‘concerted cultural imperialism’ as the solution, seemingly oblivious to the role of colonialism in creating many of the region’s problems (Johnson, 2001: 29).

Sonali Kolhatkar, the co-founder of the US-based Afghan Women’s Mission, also witnessed firsthand the reliance on arbitrary constructions of non-Western women. Describing a radio interview with Helen Caldicott, Kolhatkar recalls her frustration with attempts by the host to steer the discussion in a seemingly predetermined direction. What aggravated her the most, however, was the suggestion that Afghan women were victims of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) despite there being no reported cases in Afghanistan, describing how she left ‘angry and frustrated with Helen ranting about the barbarity of women’s vaginas being sewn up and that Afghan men did not want women to be able to have orgasms’ (Kolhatkar, 2002). As these examples show, the Taliban’s record on human rights was quickly accommodated within pre-formed scripts that relied upon misleading generalisations and confusing simplifications all of which served to ensure that women could only be seen as the anonymous victims of a monolithic Islamic fundamentalism. The reliance upon these homogenising and ultimately dehumanising depictions increased even further after the initial success of coalition forces in driving the Taliban from Kabul. By the beginning of November 2001, a number of articles had appeared celebrating the successful liberation of women in Afghanistan, with the image of the unveiled women emerging from the shadows providing the dénouement to the Bush administration’s narratives of rescue. In an editorial in the New York Times, for example, the Taliban’s attempt to ‘erase the dignity of women’ was contrasted with their lives immediately after the defeat of the regime, prompting the editors of the paper to argue that, ‘America did not go to war in Afghanistan so that women there could once again feel the sun on their faces, but the reclaimed freedom of Afghan women is a collateral benefit that Americans celebrate’ (New York Times, 2001). Similar sentiments were echoed by Hillary Clinton in an article published in Time magazine in which she argued that the intervention had enabled women in Afghanistan to unveiled themselves in public and even allowed them to appear on the television sets that had been previously banned by the Taliban (Clinton, 2001). Expressing her gratitude to the brave and courageous American forces who restored hope to many, Clinton argued that the United States had been able to plant the seeds of a new democratic Afghanistan that would respect human rights and ‘allow all people of
that nation to dream of a better life for their children – girls and boys alike’ (Clinton, 2001).

Far from challenging the Bush administration’s narratives of rescue, a number of media commentators merely reproduced the idea that the war in Afghanistan was a humanitarian aid operation aimed at alleviating the inhuman conditions that had festered under the Taliban. The suffering of women often figured even more prominently in mainstream media accounts than it did in the justifications provided by the coalition, providing a powerful icon symbolising both the evils of Islamic fundamentalism and the terror experienced by those living within its reach. Even before the events of 9/11, many media commentators relied upon a series of crude us/them binaries that showed the Bush administration to be pursuing an irrefutably just campaign against the tyranny of the Taliban, seemingly oblivious to the broader social, political and historical context from which the problems facing the country emerged. As the examples outlined above demonstrate, newspapers such as the New York Times, Washington Post and Guardian tended to focus on heroic confrontations between the enlightened West, represented by powerful women such as Emma Bonino, Christiane Amanpour and Madeleine Albright, and a medieval regime desperate to banish women from the public sphere. After the terrorist attacks on the United States, the mainstream media became even more fixated on the efforts to liberate ordinary Afghans from their subjugation, often resorting to images of women discarding their veils as evidence of their new-found freedom. Underpinning all of these representations, however, was a series of gendered and racial assumptions that placed women in a position of inferiority, which depicted them as being entirely dependent upon the help of others. As Anila Daulatzai has explained, ‘[i]nstead of being portrayed as complex individuals with varying sensibilities, affects, as well as abilities and inabilities to remake their selves and others, Afghan women are frequently reduced to the uni-dimensional figure of a passive, oppressed woman who is forced to wear a veil’ (Daulatzai, 2008: 425).

1.3 Imperial Feminisms and the Appropriation of Women’s Rights

This reliance on this figure of the average “third world woman” as evidence of the uncivilised character of Afghanistan was not altogether unexpected, providing media
commentators with a convenient visual motif used to express the barbaric nature of the Taliban. More worryingly, was the readiness of certain feminist organisations to add their support, offering some much needed legitimacy to the Bush administration’s professed humanitarianism, as well as helping to reproduce the image of Afghan women as mere symbols of helplessness. One of the most visible efforts to raise awareness about the situation affecting women in Afghanistan was organised by the US-based Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF), which launched a Campaign to Stop Gender Apartheid soon after the Taliban seized power in 1996. The success of the FMF in drawing attention to the issue was due in a large part to the support of Mavis Leno, wife of talk show host Jay Leno, who not only contributed $100,000 to the cause but also agreed to chair the campaign, transforming it into a *cause célèbre* amongst the Hollywood glitterati (Feminist Daily Newswire, 1999a; Waxman, 1999). As well as using her celebrity status to attract publicity, Leno lobbied politicians and even testified at a Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1998, calling upon the United States to do more to protect Afghan women who ‘are being beaten, shot at, and even killed for violating these draconian decrees – for merely trying to go to work, leaving their homes alone, or violating the Taliban’s extreme dress orders’ (quoted in Feminist Daily Newswire, 1998a). She was, however, particularly instrumental in drawing attention to the issue amongst the general public, speaking at numerous events across the country and appearing on various television shows including *Larry King Live* and the *Tonight Show*, whilst her “Dear Abby” letter in the nationally syndicated column by the same name was so successful that it prompted tens of thousands of calls from people concerned about women in Afghanistan imprisoned ‘for the crime of being female’ (Dear Abby, 1999).

Although the Campaign to Stop Gender Apartheid attracted a lot of criticism from other feminists, as noted below, it would be a mistake to underestimate the success of the FMF in getting the issue of women’s rights back on the political agenda. Prior to the terrorist attacks on 9/11, there was widespread reluctance on the part of the United States to address the humanitarian crisis affecting Afghanistan, as states preferred to overlook the crimes of the Taliban in the hope that the regime would improve security to enable financial investment in the region, including the proposed oil pipeline. The pipeline, which would have connected oil reserves in the Caspian Sea to the lucrative Pakistani market, had long been the focus of a fierce bidding war between the Californian-based company UNOCAL and Argentinean oil giant Bridas (Rashid, 2002: 43).
Despite the regime’s appalling record on human rights, both companies preferred to engage with the Taliban in the hope that they would bring some much needed stability to the region that would enable construction to proceed (Sciolino, 1996). In response, the FMF petitioned the State of California to revoke UNOCAL’s charter and organised a protest in Washington D.C. that was attended by a coalition of other prominent organisations (Feminist Daily Newswire, 1998b). At the same time, Mavis Leno addressed a meeting of shareholders in which she raised concern at the treatment of women under the Taliban, eventually forcing the company to abandon its plans for the project (Feminist Daily Newswire, 1998c). As well as forcing executives at UNOCAL to distance the company from the Taliban, the FMF also helped shape political opinion during a time when the Clinton administration seemed content to abandon the Afghan people in the formal setting whilst maintaining unofficial relations with the Taliban (Mackenzine, 2001: 90-103; see chapter 2). Indeed, many commentators have suggested that the Campaign to Stop Gender Apartheid was a decisive factor in the Clinton administration’s abrupt change in policy towards Kabul, as evidenced by denunciation of the Taliban by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright as well as Hillary Clinton’s repeated condemnation of the erosion of women’s rights in the country (Rashid, 2002: 182). Leno’s testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee was particularly influential, prompting Congress to pass a resolution condemning the Taliban’s restrictive dress codes and refusal to allow women to work and study.

Despite these achievements, the actions of the FMF in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 were seen by many to be complicit in supporting US imperialism, helping to reinforce the idea that OEF was a humanitarian intervention designed to liberate the women and children of Afghanistan. In a statement released on the 18th September 2001, for example, FMF President Eleanor Smeal reiterated moves by the Bush administration to connect the Taliban to the threat posed by global terrorism by suggesting that bin Laden was inextricably linked with the campaigns of terror that the Taliban were waging against women’s rights in Afghanistan (Feminist Daily Newswire, 2001a). Arguing that the United States had a unique obligation to end the Taliban’s atrocities against women, Smeal insisted that the FMF has ‘worked tirelessly to bring to the attention of US policymakers that the Taliban must be stopped and that the war they are waging against women and ethnic minorities in Afghanistan poses a real threat to global security and
our national security’ (Feminist Daily Newswire, 2001a). Following the initial success of OEF in destroying the Taliban, Smeal praised the efforts made by the United States to save Afghan women and argued that ‘the defeat of the Taliban means the liberation of women from the regime’s draconian decrees’ (Feminist Daily Newswire 2001b). The high degree of synchronicity between the Bush administration’s narratives of rescue and the FMF’s criticism of the Taliban regime prompted some scholars to accuse the organisation of reproducing a number of imperialist assumptions. Ann Russo, for example, accused the FMF of operating within a framework of ‘imperial feminism’ by mobilising the suffering of Afghan women in order to bolster the dominance of the United States in global politics (2006: 558). By reiterating the prevailing narratives of rescue that had been constructed around the intervention, Russo argued that the FMF was not only lending legitimacy to the policies of the Bush administration but also complicit in perpetuating colonial assumptions about the average “third world woman” in need of salvation from the uncivilised societies in which she was trapped. She suggested that, ‘despite its counter-hegemonic policies against gender violence, [the FMF] reaffirmed, rather than rejected, the project of US imperialism and retaliatory violence as a method of maintaining US power’ (2006: 558).

One problem identified by Russo and many others was that the issue of gender apartheid was contingent upon suppressing the wider political, social and historical context from which it materialised. The emphasis placed on Afghan women by the FMF failed to account for how the Taliban were able to emerge as a political force or to situate the oppression of women within the context of a bloody civil war that was caused, in part, by the escapades of the United States, as I suggest in the following chapter. Instead, the FMF promoted the same clash of civilisations rhetoric favoured by the Bush administration, relying on an ahistorical vision of the conflict that constituted the United States as the embodiment of freedom and gender equality whilst portraying the Taliban as the degenerate and barbaric other (Russo, 2006: 558-559). Likewise, Charles Hirschkind and Saba Mahmood have criticised the ‘studied silence about the crucial role the United States played in creating the miserable conditions under which Afghan women were living’ (2002: 340-341). This refusal to transcend the one-dimensional snap-shots of the problems facing Afghanistan is clearly evident in a statement Mavis Leno made to a journalist from the Washington Post, in which she argued that ‘the Taliban are spectacularly villainous. They are so uneducated, they don't
have the wit to disguise their villainy. That's a rarity. You can't write it off to culture or religion. It's so inhumane. So unaccepted. This is not a decent way to treat human beings' (quoted in Waxman, 1999). What is noticeably absent from these accounts, however, is the role that the international community played in establishing the conditions from which the Taliban grew, as I argue in the following chapter. This refusal to acknowledge the historical complexity of the situation also enabled the FMF to reaffirm the narratives of rescue constructed by the Bush administration, placing Afghan women in a position of dependency as they awaited their liberation. As Russo explains, ‘by not incorporating history into its campaign, the FMF constructs the USA as a neutral and benevolent bystander’ (2006: 567-568).

As well as supporting the view that OEF was a humanitarian mission, the members of the FMF also acted to reaffirm the status of Afghan women as passive symbols of helplessness who were unable to survive without the support of external actors. This interpretation was clearly apparent in Smeal’s response to the terrorist attacks, in which she claimed that wherever the Taliban came to power women were banned from working, prohibited from attending school and prevented from leaving home without being shrouded in their burqa and accompanied by a male relative (Feminist Daily Newswire, 2001a). As Smeal argues, ‘women and girls have pleaded with the world to free them from the grips of the brutal Taliban militia’ (Feminist Daily Newswire, 2001a). Similarly, in her testimony before the Joint Hearing of the Subcommittee on International Organizations and Terrorism and the Subcommittee on Near Eastern and South Asia Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Relations held on the 10th October 2001, Smeal argued that ‘people are outraged about the Taliban’s brutal treatment of women’ and warned that women were being beaten and executed for violating government decrees (Feminist Daily Newswire, 2001c; 2001d; 2001e). What is surprising about both these statements was the absence of any direct reference to the activities of Afghan women, who appeared only on rare occasions and in a peculiarly one-dimensional form. Much of Smeal’s testimony focused on celebrating the efforts made by her organisation in publicising the plight of women in Afghanistan, praising the FMF’s commitment to its letter writing campaigns, petitions and educational initiatives (Feminist Daily Newswire, 2001c). Similar efforts to erase the role played by Afghan women themselves were evident in an article entitled “A Coalition of Hope” that was published in Ms. Magazine in 2002 and celebrated the role of the FMF in
helping to secure the liberation of women in Afghanistan but made no mention of the work of women themselves (Brown, 2002). In response, one activist wrote an open letter to the editors in which she argued the article had confirmed her worst ‘fears that Ms. Magazine is now the mere mouthpiece of hegemonic, US-centric, ego driven, corporate feminism’, promoting the efforts of the FMF at the expense of women’s organisations in Afghanistan, such as RAWA, that had been active in fighting for human rights and resisting the terms of their oppression (RAWA, 2002a). Despite claiming to make the plight of Afghan women visible, the FMF found itself complicit in effacing the very people they claimed to be helping, reducing them to the status of mere victims.

The reliance on the same protector/protected dichotomy favoured by the Bush administration was not, however, limited to associates of the FMF, but was also evident by other high profile feminist leaders, including members of the Women’s Caucus in Congress. One notable example was the Congressional debate on the “Suppression of Women in Afghanistan” held on the 16th October 2001, little more than a week after the bombing campaign had commenced. In common with the FMF, the contributors to the debate expressed their continued support for OEF, insisting that, as well as ridding the country of terrorists, the United States had an obligation to address the humanitarian crisis affecting the Afghan population. Opening the debate, Rep. Hilda Solis provided a detailed account of the experiences of ordinary Afghans after the Taliban seized power, describing how the Taliban had plunged the nation ‘into a pit of oppressiveness’ by removing many of the freedoms that women in the West take for granted (2001: H6892). In a blink of an eye, she argued, ‘the millions of women and girls who live in this desert nation in Central Asia were relegated to second class citizenship’ (Holis, 2001: H6892). Similar sentiments were expressed by Rep. Carolyn Maloney, who argued that the Taliban had ‘unilaterally declared an end to women’s basic human rights’ by imposing a series of restrictions that were almost ‘unfathomable’ to the majority of ordinary Americans (2001: H6893). Throughout the debate, women were consistently portrayed as helpless victims who were entirely dependent upon the efforts of coalition troops, with members of Congress resorting to the same protector/protected dichotomy that Young identified in the rhetoric of the Bush administration. Indeed, many of the statements made followed an almost identical format, cataloguing the Taliban’s crimes against women and insisting that the United States act to rescue them
from their plight. Rep. Juanita Millender-McDonald, for example, spoke at great length about the horrifying sanctions imposed, arguing that ‘women have been brutally beaten, flogged, and killed for violating Taliban decrees, decrees that they have imposed on no one else’ (2001: H6893). Along with other congresswomen, she listed a number of examples, including a woman who was stoned to death for adultery after she appeared in public with a non-relation, an elderly woman was beaten with a metal cable until her leg was broken for accidentally exposing her ankle after tripping in the road, and a teacher who executed in front of her family for running a secret school (2001: H6893).

As this section has shown, there was high degree of synchronicity between the images used by the Bush administration to justify OEF and the rhetoric emanating from organisations such as the FMF, adding legitimacy to the idea that the invasion was a humanitarian intervention designed to liberate the women and children of Afghanistan. Although organisations such as the FMF had done much to raise awareness about the crimes of the Taliban prior to the terrorist attacks in September 2001, they stand accused of facilitating the imperialist agenda of the Bush administration by allowing the suffering of Afghan women to be so easily co-opted in support of war. More importantly, these organisations have been accused of reproducing the same protector/protected logic that underpinned the narratives of rescue, constituting Afghan women as mere symbols of helplessness (Russo, 2006). Although it is true that they suffered under the Taliban, the depiction of Afghan women as passive victims relies on the same gendered and racial assumptions that not only place them in a position of inferiority but effaces the various ways women have sought to create a meaningful existence in the face of such enormous hardship. In particular, it conceals the myriad of examples that show how Afghan women actively defied the terms of their oppression by organising their own educational programs, distributing anti-Taliban propaganda and making use of the small amount of aid on offer to support their families, as I will argue in chapter six. Rather than disrupt the paternalism of the Bush administration, groups such as the FMF relied upon a representational strategy that wrenched Afghan women from their social context, denied the messy complexity of their lives and stripped them of their humanity. As Young argued in her criticism of the logic of masculinist protection, feminists are not necessarily immune from identifying with the position of the masculine protector and the ‘protector-protected relation is no more egalitarian […] when between women than between men and women’ (2003: 20).
1.4 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to trace how Afghan women have come to be “known” in the “war of/on terror”, exploring the representational strategies through which they were discursively produced. In order to legitimise the war in Afghanistan, the Bush administration appropriated the experiences of women under the Taliban in order to frame the conflict as a humanitarian affair rather than a purely military concern. However, as well as providing a convenient justification for war, the emphasis placed on the suffering of women also determined how they could be understood, transforming them into objects of pity whose lives had become so monotonous under the Taliban that they could do little more than simply wait for the intervention of coalition troops. Far from challenging these representations, these particular feminist voices were complicit in reproducing this image of Afghan women as mere symbols of helplessness, incapable of resisting the terms of their repression without the assistance of external actors. This reliance on what Christine Sylvester might refer to as ‘stick figure’ representations of Afghan women has served to erase the human complexity of their daily lives, effacing the specificities of their individual circumstances by resorting to homogenising depictions of life under the Taliban and generalised denunciations of a uniform fundamentalism that has apparently saturated the Muslim world (1994: 13). Apart from perpetuating a series of problematic stereotypes about non-Western women, these representations preclude any consideration of the multiple ways ordinary Afghans have actively worked to make their lives liveable in the face of such adversity along with various acts of resistance that were witnessed during the five years of Taliban rule. However, even on the rare occasions when the agency of Afghan women was alluded to, such as the example of teachers running secret schools, it was usually followed by a description of the punishments resulted. Rather than recognise the audacity of Afghan women, any mention of their defiance was invariably used as a tool to reaffirm their victimhood.

Although many mainstream feminists were complicit in reproducing this image of Afghan women, the gendered assumptions that were perpetuated by the Bush administration in support of war should make those of us concerned about the position of women in global politics very uncomfortable indeed. As noted above, a number of commentators have shown that the narratives of rescue scripted in support of OEF
were dependent upon a patriarchal logic that cast the United States in the role of the benevolent protector whilst Afghan women were expected to play the part of the anonymous victims in need of protection. As scholars such as Iris Marion Young, Laura J. Shepherd and Meghana Nayak all argued, the dichotomous opposition between the protector and the protected placed women in a position of inferiority by showing them to be fully reliant upon the coalition troops to guarantee their security. In later chapters, however, I will argue that thinking about the representational practices of the “war of/on terror” in terms of a hierarchy, as the protector/protected structure presupposes, might overlook the normative violence that precludes Afghan women from appearing as culturally intelligible subjects. In order to overcome the limitations inherent to this form of thinking, I will argue that it is important to reframe the debate in terms of the politics of recognition, exploring the cultural assumptions that establish the parameters of intelligibility and decide what can be seen, heard and known. Before doing so, it is necessary to situate these representations of Afghan women within the context of the wider historical narratives that emerged following the events of 9/11.
2 (Mis-)Representing Afghanistan: An Aberration in Time and Space

Not so long ago, the Afghan capital of Kabul was the destination of choice for a number of quite different social groups from Europe and the United States. In 1969, the Intercontinental Hotel opened its doors to the public, attracting investors, diplomats and tourists from across the world with its stunning views of the city. The hotel, which was managed by the American aviation company Pan American, also attracted members of the city’s political and economic elite, who would regularly attend functions at the Intercontinental (Curtis, 2009). At the other end of the social spectrum, the cheap hostels in the vicinity of Chicken Street were often occupied by European hippies who had travelled to Afghanistan to escape the trappings of capitalism at home (Curtis, 2009). By 1975, Kabul University was even holding rock festivals for both students and tourists, headlined by Afghanistan’s two “prog-rock” bands. This image of Kabul as a bustling cosmopolitan city seems very different from the images of Afghanistan that were used to justify the invasion, which tended to portray the country as if it were a backward, pre-modern and uncivilised place that existed outside of the modern world. However, I will argue that the narratives that underpinned the justifications for war were not quite as straightforward as they first appeared but rather relied upon a series of contrasts and comparisons between different ruling regimes and their attitude towards women’s rights, which allowed the Bush administration to portray the Taliban as an unwelcome interruption in an otherwise progressive period of history. Not only was Afghanistan portrayed as an aberration in the modern world, the Taliban were also viewed as an aberration in Afghan history.

In order to fully appreciate how it was that Afghan women were constituted as little more than passive victims in the justifications for war it is necessary to consider more general representations of Afghanistan as a country, drawing attention to the complex historical narratives that were constructed to legitimise military action. The chapter will begin, therefore, with an examination of moves by the Bush administration and mainstream media to distinguish the Taliban’s treatment of women from previous governments, focusing specifically on the importance attributed to female education and employment in Kabul prior to 1996. Opposing such neat chronological distinctions,
I will argue that the narrow understanding of women’s rights underpinning these comparisons produced a misleading view of Afghan women masking many of the more entrenched forms of suffering that were affecting their everyday lives, such as poverty, famine and war. The second section, in contrast, will highlight the crude processes of othering that served to constitute Afghanistan as an anachronism in global politics, analysing the claim that the suffering of Afghan women was defined by the absence of the international community. Countering this image, the chapter will conclude with a series of examples that undermine the notion that the situation in Afghanistan was defined by the Taliban’s rejection of modernity. By emphasising the contribution of others to the devastation of Afghan society, I will argue that the plight of ordinary Afghans was precipitated in part by Afghanistan's interactions with others. As Barnett R. Rubin argues, far from being an aberration in global politics, the situation in Afghanistan has ‘been thoroughly shaped by its interactions with the modern state system’ (Rubin, 2002: ix).

2.1 An Aberration in Afghan History

An integral part of the prevailing narratives of rescue was the suggestion that the Taliban’s treatment of women was at odds with the relatively progressive period of politics that had existed prior to their rise to power. One strategy that was particularly effective was to contrast the regime’s restrictions on the role of women against the commitment to formal gender equality that was enshrined within the Afghan Constitution of 1964, as well as the prominent position that was occupied by women before the Taliban seized power in 1996. According to this view, “pre-Taliban” Afghanistan was shown as pursuing a slow but steady path towards modernisation as successive leaders fought to overcome conservative opposition to a range of social, political and economic reforms. The edicts enacted by the Taliban were seen, therefore, as a radical departure from the progress that had been achieved. However, the picture that was painted by the Bush administration was dependent upon a highly fractured understanding of Afghan history that privileged certain fragments over and above others, such as the devastating impact of over two decades of civil war on the lives of women.
A notable example of this attempt to impose a clear distinction between the Taliban and previous regimes can be found in a report by the US State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor entitled “The Taliban’s War Against Women”. Published to coincide with the radio address by First Lady Laura Bush (see chapter 1), this report formed an essential part of efforts by the Bush administration to frame OEF as a humanitarian endeavour, claiming that the United States had an obligation to stop the ‘systematic repression’ of the Afghan people and prevent the ‘egregious acts of violence against women, including rape, abduction, and forced marriage’ that had become so prevalent under the Taliban (US Department of State, 2001a). The report goes on to argue that, ‘despite […] claims that it is acting in the best interests of women, the truth is that the Taliban regime has cruelly reduced women and girls to poverty, poor health, and illiteracy – conditions that are not in conformity with the treatment of women in the Muslim world or the tenets of Islam’ (US Department of State, 2001a). This criticism of the regime was frequently underscored by a series of stark contrasts with the opportunities that were afforded to women by previous leaders, including the commitment to formal gender equality that was codified in the Afghan Constitution of 1964. The State Department was particularly keen to highlight the prominent role of women in the public sphere immediately before the Taliban seized power, arguing that the ‘mood of tolerance and openness’ had reached such a point that an estimated 70% of schoolteachers, 50% of government officials and 40% of doctors in Kabul were women (US Department of State, 2001a). By framing the plight of Afghan women in this manner, the prevailing narratives of rescue not only served to reiterate the tragedy of the situation but also served a vital function in the justifications for war, allowing them to hold the Taliban directly responsible for all of Afghanistan’s ills.

The State Department’s claim that the ‘assault on women began immediately after the Taliban took power in Kabul’ was also echoed in Congressional debates about the proposed Afghan Women and Children Relief Act of 2001, which authorised a package of humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan in addition to the military campaign (US Department of State, 2001a). Not surprisingly, the main focus of the debate was the Taliban’s treatment of women as successive members of Congress rose to condemn the barbarity of the situation and highlight the abject conditions that had been forced upon the Afghan people (see chapter 1). Indeed, this focus on the suffering of Afghan women was often underpinned by the same rhetorical strategies used by the State
Department, reproducing the notion that the Taliban were an aberration in Afghan history. In her speech to the Upper House, for example, Sen. Olympia Snowe argued that,

Talk about going backwards, what’s happened in Afghanistan hasn’t just turned back the clock, it’s turned back the centuries. While calendars tell us it’s a new millennium, you’d never know it from the graphic and disturbing footage we see from the Taliban-occupied regions of Afghanistan, which paint a very different picture of Afghanistan than even five years ago (2001: S1110).

Similar sentiments were also expressed in the House of Representatives as successive speakers sought to highlight the large percentage of female teachers, doctors and students immediately before the Taliban seized power. Describing the opportunities available to women during this period, Rep. Deborah D. Pryce argued that the edicts enacted by the Taliban were utterly inconsistent with the relatively tolerant attitude that had existed only a few years earlier, concluding that the rights of ordinary Afghans ‘suffered a major setback’ under the Taliban (2001: H8348). According to this view, therefore, the brutal measures imposed by the Taliban were solely responsible for undoing many of the reforms that had been implemented by previous regimes, dragging the women of Afghanistan back into the Dark Ages. As Rep. Jackson-Lee argued, ‘the oppression of Afghan women began when the regressive and repressive Taliban took control’ (2001a: H8346 emphasis added).

Although it helped illustrate the plight of Afghan women, the imposition of such an artificial boundary actually served to distract attention away from the more protracted forms of suffering, masking the fact that many of the problems affecting ordinary Afghans were already well-entrenched before the Taliban came to power. According to the data published in the Human Development Report 1995, for example, life expectancy in Afghanistan stood at only 43.5 years compared to an average of 61.5 for the rest of the developing world, whilst the country’s infant mortality rate of 163 deaths per 1,000 births was exceeded only by Sierra Leone (1995: 157; 163). Blurring the rigid historical boundaries that were imposed within the justifications for war, the information contained within this report undermines the view that Afghan society was a relatively stable and secure environment before the Taliban took charge, revealing that many of the problems affecting ordinary Afghans were much more deeply entrenched than it first appeared. The suggestion, therefore, that the plight of Afghan women could be
attributed solely to the actions of the Taliban not only fails to resonate with the everyday experience of these women but also masks the underlying causes of the crisis. As Anila Daulatzai has argued, ‘not only are the various modes of suffering reduced by simply limiting the scope of concern to the restrictions put in place by the Taliban, but the duration of the suffering is also misrepresented by being contained within the five year Taliban rule’ (2008: 425).

Something else that was noticeably absent from the Bush administration’s narratives of rescue and largely neglected by much of the mainstream media was the effect of over two decades of conflict upon the lives of ordinary Afghans, particularly women. In 1978, the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) seized power from President Mohammed Daoud after he was assassinated during a bloody military coup but the new regime was immediately saddled with a number of gruelling political challenges. As well as falling victim to internal divisions within the party, the PDPA also faced widespread resistance from opposition groups known as the mujahedeen who were angered by attempts to curtail the role of religion in society and ban traditional social practices. In an effort to shore-up support for the fledging regime, the Soviet Union dispatched some 75,000 troops to Afghanistan, plunging the country into a long and protracted civil war that took the lives of approximately 1.8 million people and left a further 1.5 million physically disabled. In addition, an estimated 724 million square metres of the country’s landscape was contaminated by unexploded landmines (HRW, 2001b).

The effects of violence were not limited to the warring factions but were felt by the entire population. In a report published in 1984, for example, Human Rights Watch (HRW) described how ‘the crimes of indiscriminate warfare are combined with the worst excesses of unbridled state-sanctioned violence against civilians’, arguing that ‘just about every conceivable human rights violation is occurring in Afghanistan, and on an enormous scale’ (1984: 4-5). The humanitarian crisis that accompanied the conflict also caused a large-scale displacement of the population, with some 3.9m people forced to take refuge abroad (at the height of the conflict, Afghans accounted for 60% of the

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8 It is not possible to provide a detailed overview of the Soviet invasion and subsequent civil war within such a small space. However, a considerable body of literature focusing on the conflict does already exist, with notable contributions from Maley (2009), Cordovez and Harrison (1995) and Rubin (2002). Olivier Roy’s book *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan* (1986) offers a detailed account of the social, political and religious composition of the mujahedeen.
world’s refugee population) (Schmeidl, 2002: 10; UNHCR, 2001). In contrast to claims that Afghanistan was a relatively stable and secure environment prior to Taliban rule, it is important to recognise that this period was characterised by widespread bloodshed. Blurring the historical boundaries imposed in the justifications for OEF, the violence witnessed during the civil war demonstrates that the suffering that existed under the Taliban cannot be attributed solely to the policies enacted by the regime. As Ahmed Rashid argued, the ‘plight of Afghan women and Afghan society as a whole began well before the Taliban arrived’ (Rashid, 2002: 107).

As well as failing to account for the effects of civil war on the wider population, the Bush administration also relied upon a misleading account of the circumstances experienced by women in the years immediately before Taliban rule. Although the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan formally ended with the signing of the Geneva Accords in 1988, the conflict continued unabated into the early nineties as competing political factions vied to fill the vacuum left by the collapse of the PDPA. Initially, it was agreed that an interim government headed by Burhanuddin Rabbani would be established to help facilitate the transition, but this agreement was scuppered by the withdrawal of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar in an attempt to overthrow the new administration. Unable to muster the necessary strength to capture Kabul, Hekmatyar’s *Hesb-e-Islami* launched a series of rocket attacks on the capital in an attempt to weaken the symbolic authority of the interim government, destroying whole swathes of the city in the process. In August 1992, for example, he unleashed a barrage of artillery that killed over 1,000 Kabulis, whilst in January 1994 he ‘reduced large tracts of the city to rubble’ and killed an estimated 25,000 civilians in an attack supported by Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostum (Maley, 2009: 165-170; Amnesty International, 1995a: 13). Not surprisingly, the willingness of commanders such as Hekmatyar to deliberately target residential areas had a devastating impact on those living in Kabul (Amnesty International 1995b, 1996). References to the effects of this bombing on the civilian population were noticeably absent from the Bush administration’s narratives of rescue, which focused solely on the high percentage of female education and employment in Kabul.

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9 Again, a more detailed overview of this period can be found in Maley (2009) and Saikal (2004).
During this period, a number of human rights organizations reported that Afghan women were suffering particular hardships as a result of the civil war, often bearing the brunt of the conflict between the different factions. In 1995, for example, Amnesty International published a report entitled “Women in Afghanistan: A Human Rights Catastrophe” in which they argued that the ‘lives of hundreds of thousands of Afghan women and children have been shattered in the human rights catastrophe that has devastated Afghanistan in the past three years’ (1995b: 2). In addition to the devastating effects of the bombing campaign against Kabul, the organisation also found that armed groups had raped, beaten and ‘massacred defenceless women in their homes’, leaving many ‘traumatised by the horrific abuses they have suffered or witnessed’ (Amnesty International, 1995b: 2). Of particular concern was the fact that women related to members of rival factions were targeted deliberately by groups of armed men hoping to send a message to the rest of their family (1995b: 5-6). The report also notes that rape was being used as a weapon of war and ‘appears to be condoned by leaders as a method of intimidating vanquished populations and of rewarding soldiers’ (1995b: 8-10). The country’s constitution, the report concludes, has been all-but suspended, its laws rendered utterly meaningless and the juridical structure left in tatters (1995b: 2; see also 1996). Despite this, however, the Bush administration and a various media commentators continued to portray the period of Taliban rule as an aberration in an otherwise progressive period of history.

Attempts to distinguish the suffering of women under the Taliban from their experiences under previous regimes not only produced a fragmented understanding of Afghanistan’s recent past that painted the regime as an exception rather than a continuation of the norm but also relied upon a crude caricature of Afghan society that ignored a series of social, economic and cultural differences within the country itself. A notable example of this was the tendency to treat historically cosmopolitan cities such as Kabul and Herat as if they were representative of the entire country, downplaying the importance of internal divisions between different sections of the population. In discussions about the role of women, a number of commentators noted that prior to the period of Taliban rule almost three-quarters of teachers and half of all university students in Kabul were women (cf. US State Department, 2001a). In Congress, for example, Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen argued that ‘the same women who once made up 50 percent of Afghanistan’s doctors, nurses, teachers, college students, and diplomats, have
been made destitute, sick, and marginalised’, whilst the Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF) claimed that ‘before the Taliban took over Kabul, education had been gender integrated for decades in Afghanistan’s major cities, and both girls and women had education opportunities’ (Ros-Lehtinen, 2001: H8346; Feminist Daily Newswire, 1999b; see also Feminist Daily Newswire, 2001e). However, absent from these discussions was any mention of the wider relevance of these statistics for those living outside Kabul or the various other problems that were affecting the participation of women in public life. It is worth noting, for example, that the adult literacy rate for Afghanistan in 1995 was only 28.9%, whilst 60% of schools were without a suitable building as a result of the destruction caused by the civil war (UNDP, 1995: 157; Maley, 2009: 129).

This failure to recognise the complexity of Afghan society was also evident in discussions about the provisions for formal gender equality contained within the Afghan Constitution of 1964, which was often invoked as evidence of Afghanistan’s progressive past (cf. US State Department, 2001a; Feminist Daily Newswire, 2001e). According to FMF President Eleanor Smeal, for example, the Afghan Constitution of 1964 ‘included full universal suffrage, an equal rights amendment for women that even included equal pay provisions, and a separation of powers with an independent judiciary’ (Feminist Daily Newswire, 2001e). Similar views were put forward by Rep. Stephanie Tubbs Jones, who told Congress that the constitution ‘provided for gender equality and [ensured that] women were fully vested in the political process’ (Feminist Daily Newswire, 2001e; Jones, 2001: H8530). However, although it is true that the Afghan Constitution of 1964 made clear that the government had an obligation to protect the rights of women whilst ensuring greater gender equality, it would be a mistake to assume that the principles enshrined in the document made any real difference to the lives of ordinary Afghan women, particularly those living in rural communities (Saikal, 2004: 148-149). Amin Saikal, for example, argued that the decision to produce a constitution for the country was driven more by the political aspirations of the king and his Western-educated advisors rather than the political realities on the ground (2004: 148-149). The fact that it was ‘hastily approved by a largely hand-picked Loya Jirga by no means signified that a satisfactory compromise had been achieved between Islamic, traditional and customary values on the one hand, and modern liberal codes on the other’ (2004: 149). Likewise, Louis Dupree noted that the voter turnout in the subsequent election was pretty dismal, arguing that the ‘bulk of the 95% non-literate
Afghans living in villages and nomadic camps knew little and cared less about the new constitution’ (L. Dupree, 1973: 587-589).

Similar arguments were also made about the introduction of universal suffrage by King Amanullah Khan in the 1920s, along with various other initiatives designed to transform the lives of women. Under the auspices of Queen Soraya Tarzai, for example, the king embarked upon a series of educational reforms that made it possible for women to enter into education, opening a series of schools and colleges across the capital. At the same time, Amanullah also introduced legislation that granted women greater freedom of choice over their husbands whilst ensuring that they were given the same right to inheritance as men. Most controversial were his attempts to get women to replace their traditional dress with a more Western style of clothing, even requiring them to forgo the veil when in his presence (Saikal, 2004: 73-76). In common with discussions about the constitution, these reforms were often lauded as evidence of the country’s relatively progressive past, with various commentators using them to reinforce the idea that the Taliban were an unwelcome interruption in the country’s path towards democracy (cf. State Department, 2001a; Jones, 2001: H8350). Rarely was it mentioned, however, that these reforms were not only alien to many Afghans but provoked outright opposition from the more conservative elements of Afghan society, who organised a number of uprisings against the king. The most notable of these was the Khost Rebellion in 1924, which lasted for around nine months before it was eventually defeated by government forces. Although the rebellion was unsuccessful in the short-term, the discontent that it fostered eventually culminated in the abdication of the king (L. Dupree, 1973: 441-453). As his closest advisor admitted at the time, ‘Amanullah has built a beautiful monument without a foundation’ (Tarzai quoted in L. Dupree, 1973: 452).

The purpose of this section has been to challenge attempts by the Bush administration and parts of the mainstream media to constitute the Taliban as an aberration in Afghan’s history. Many of these images were organised around a series of stark contrasts between the suffering of women under the Taliban and the freedoms that previously existed, emphasising both the tragedy of the situation and the barbarity of the regime. Missing from these accounts, however, was any mention of the devastating effects of over two decades of civil war, which destroyed much of the country’s
infrastructure and had a lasting impact upon the lives of the civilian population. Rather than addressing the underlying causes to the humanitarian crisis, the Bush administration simply blamed the Taliban, ignoring the fact that many of these problems were already well-entrenched before their rise to power. As well as suppressing alternative accounts of Afghanistan’s recent past, these narratives also portrayed the lives of Afghan women in a deceptively uniform and one-dimensional manner, silencing the perspectives of those whose experiences did not conform to the dominant assumptions about the plight of women in Afghanistan. By focusing only on the experiences of women in Kabul, for example, the lives of rural women were almost entirely neglected in the dominant discourses of war.

2.2. An Aberration in the Modern World

At the same time that the Taliban’s treatment of women was viewed as an aberration in Afghan history, Afghanistan under the Taliban was also portrayed as an aberration in global politics. As I noted in the previous chapter, the suffering of women was an integral part of the boundary-producing practices used to distinguish between good and evil, civilisation and barbarism within the justifications for the “war of/on terror”, allowing the Bush administration to further undermine the Taliban’s authority. However, in order to sustain this image of the Taliban as the barbaric other of the international community, Afghanistan had to be constituted as what Anne McClintock has described as an ‘anachronistic space’, existing in a clearly distinct spatio-temporal domain that was both anterior to and outside of the modern world (1995: 30). It was not uncommon, therefore, for both politicians and pundits to rely on terms such as “medieval” and “backward” in their descriptions of the situation in Afghanistan, reproducing the view that Afghan society was still trapped in the traditionalism of its past. Drawing on Edward W. Said’s concept of “imaginative geographies”, this section will explore how this image of Afghanistan as an aberration served to circumscribe our understanding of the situation in Afghanistan, deciding in advance what kinds of questions could be asked whilst simultaneously disallowing other lines of inquiry (2003: 49-73). By focusing on the silences in the Bush administration’s narratives of rescue, I will argue that the international community was rendered entirely absent from the scene of the crime, ignoring the long history of Western interference within the region. As a result, the suffering of Afghan women could only be explained in crude cultural terms,
reaffirming the idea that they were the abject victims of a regime that was irredeemably evil.

An interesting example of this attempt to constitute Afghanistan as an aberration in the modern world can be found in an article published by the *New York Times*, in which the country was described as a ‘wasteland’ (Filkins, 2001). Reminiscing on his experiences reporting from the region, the paper’s foreign correspondent Dexter Filkins paints a vivid portrait of the Taliban’s treatment of women and the punishments meted out to those who disobeyed, describing how the regime had transformed Afghanistan into a ‘lurid place’ where one can go to ‘explore the bleakest chasms in the human way’ (Filkins, 2001). In order to illustrate this point, Filkins recalls witnessing the execution of a man on the halfway of the football stadium in Kabul, describing how the man’s desperate mother was forced to watch as her son was shot at point-blank range in front of a crowd of excited onlookers. What disturbed him the most, however, was not the incident itself but the fact that the spectacle of death had become so banal that not a single spectator recoiled in horror. In Afghanistan, he argued, ‘it is as if someone had reached down to the bottom of human nature and pulled open a trap door, loosing a stream of black bats. The brutality one can witness here in the course of a working day is astonishing, the casualness of it more so’ (Filkins, 2001).

Similar sentiments were also expressed in an episode of *Panorama* that was presented by veteran correspondent John Simpson. Broadcast to coincide with the start of military action, the program opened with a series of graphic scenes taken from footage that had been smuggled out of Kabul of a government official attacking a veiled woman, as Simpson described the Taliban’s systematic abuse of human rights. Reiterating the idea that Afghanistan is an anachronism in global politics, he argued that it was ‘one of the wild places of the earth, a black hole in the world’s consciousness, inhabited by people we once mythologised and then abandoned, a country full of victims’ (BBC, 2001). Afghanistan, he claimed, was ‘scarcely a country anyway, [just…] a blank spot on the map’ (BBC, 2001). What was remarkable about the *Panorama* documentary, however, was the attempt to situate the suffering of Afghan women within the wider political context, taking account of the devastation caused during the Cold War as well as the political vacuum that was left as a result of the conflict. Focusing particular attention on the role of the international community, Simpson argued that ‘no one cared that many
of the groups wanted to stamp out every manifestation of modernism from shaving to the education of women’, concluding that it ‘was enough for the West that they were our enemy’s enemy’ (BBC, 2001).

Despite offering a more nuanced account of the wider historical circumstances, the documentary shared many of the assumptions that were implicit within the prevailing imaginative geographies, reproducing the idea that Afghanistan was ‘locked […] into a time warp’ as the Taliban sought to ‘stop the clock of history and restart it at a very different and earlier time’ (BBC, 2001). However, in order to constitute Afghanistan as an aberration in the modern world, it was necessary for the Bush administration and media commentators to mask the various ways that the United States and its coalition allies were already implicated in the suffering of Afghan women, rendering them entirely absent from the region’s recent history. In order to understand the significance of this, it is helpful to turn to the work of the late Edward W. Said and his attempts to trace how the Orient was produced as an object of knowledge within the colonial archives and the imaginative geographies that underpinned them. Focusing on the productive power of discourse, Said argued that ‘neither the term Orient nor the concept of the West has any ontological stability; each is made up of human effort, partly affirmation, partly identification of the Other’ (2003: xii). The appearance of stability is, he argued, merely an effect of the cartographic performances through which the non-western world has been rendered intelligible and the representational practices that serve to delineate between us and them, self and other, civilisation and barbarism.10

It is important to recognise that these imaginative geographies were not innocent reflections of the material reality of the world, but served a particular ideological function, allowing the West to distinguish itself from those places and people it considered to be inferior. This was something clearly visible in attempts to portray Afghanistan as a pariah state in global politics, clearly distinct from the standards expected of the civilised elite in the international community. Writing in the Asian edition of Time magazine, for example, Michael Fathers echoed the assumption that Afghanistan was anterior to the modern world, describing it as being a place ‘frozen in

10 It should be noted that these imaginative geographies do not refer to some pre-existing reality but produces the effects it claims only to name, thereby creating only the appearance of ontological stability (Said, 2003: xii). Indeed, Said himself suggested that these imaginative geographies should be viewed more as a ‘set of constraints upon the limitations of thought than […] a positive doctrine’ (2003: 42).
time’ (Fathers, 2000). Despite the semblance of a functioning government in Kabul, he argued, the exodus of the country’s educated elite and continuing civil war had left it in a state of paralysis, slowly ‘coming to a halt, cut off from most of the world’ (Fathers, 2000 emphasis added). Similarly, Kim Willsher argued in an article for The Times that the ‘pitiless’ Taliban had dragged the population back into the ‘Dark Ages’, leaving them ‘virtually sealed off … from the outside world’ (Willsher, 2001). However, as Said argued in his reflections of the post-9/11 political landscape, only by purging ‘the myriad of currents and countercurrents that animate human history, and that over centuries have made it possible for that history not only to contain wars of religion and imperial conquest but also to be one of exchange, cross-fertilisation and sharing’ can countries such as Afghanistan be constituted as anachronisms in global politics (Said, 2001).

As well as privileging a particular historical narrative whilst suppressing other alternative narratives, the suggestion that Afghanistan was anterior to the modern world also imposed a series of limitations on how the suffering of Afghan women could be seen and understood, effectively deciding what kinds of questions could be asked and the answers that could be given in response. Rather than acknowledging the complexity of the situation, many commentators simply resorted to crude cultural generalisations in their explanations for the rise of the Taliban, propagating the view that their treatment of women was somehow inherent to Afghan society. As Lila Abu-Lughod argued,

Instead of political and historical explanations, experts were being asked to give religio-cultural ones. Instead of questions that might lead to the exploration of global interconnectedness, we were offered ones that worked to artificially divide the world into separate spheres – recreating an imaginative geography of West versus East, us versus Muslim, cultures in which First Ladies give speeches versus others who shuffle around silently in burqas (2002: 784).

This evisceration of politics and history was clearly evident in the kinds of explanations offered for the suffering of women, which invariably fell into one of three categories. First of all, it was often suggested that the Taliban’s treatment of women could be attributed to religion, as if Islam – or some perversion of Islam – could provide sufficient explanation for the crimes committed by the regime. Although the Bush administration was careful to differentiate between what Mahmood Mamdani wryly described as “good Muslims” and “bad Muslims”, it was not uncommon for terms such
as “fundamentalist warriors”, “religious fanatics” or “Muslim zealots” to be used by both the mainstream media and parts of the political establishment (Mamdani, 2002). Speaking at the Welsh Assembly, for example, Tony Blair argued that the Taliban were ‘at war with anyone, whatever faith, who did not share their maniacal, fanatical view of the world’ (Blair, 2001d emphasis added), whilst an article that was published in The Boston Globe a few days before the start of OEF described the Taliban as a ‘barbaric band of theocratic thugs, who treat their people with a medieval brutality’ (Lehigh, 2001: A19). Another example that shows this tendency to use religion as an explanatory factor can be found in an op-ed by Francis Fukuyama in the Wall Street Journal in which he sought to defend the relevance of his “end of history” thesis. Claiming that the ‘powerful freight train [to neo-liberal ascendency] would not be derailed by recent events, however painful and unprecedented’, he nevertheless conceded that there was ‘something about Islam, or at least the fundamentalist versions of Islam that have been dominant in recent years, that makes Muslim societies particularly resistant to modernity’ (Fukuyama, 2001). Reiterating the view that the Taliban were a symptom of something inherent to the Muslim world, he claimed that Islam was ‘the only cultural system that seems regularly to produce people, such as Osama bin Laden or the Taliban, who reject modernity lock, stock and barrel’ (Fukuyama, 2001). At no point did Fukuyama mention the responsibility of the United States for creating the conditions from which the Taliban emerged, as I argue below.

A second reason offered to explain the Taliban’s systematic abuse of women’s rights was the suggestion that the regime was incorrigibly corrupt, whilst their treatment of women was seen as the manifestation of an underlying malevolence that was essential to their very nature. They were, as Bush asserted, ‘evil-doers’, plain and simple (G.W. Bush, 2001g). In his address to the Welsh Assembly, for example, Tony Blair argued that, in Afghanistan, ‘we have a group of people […] who are the sworn enemies of everything the civilised world stands for, who have killed once on a vast scale and will kill again unless stopped. They can’t be negotiated with. They refuse to yield to justice’

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11 Sara Ahmed has been particularly attentive to the ways through which these repeated denials actually served to reaffirm the link, noting that “utterances like “this is not a war against Islam” coexist with descriptions such as “Islamic terrorists”, which work to restick the words together and constitute their coincidence as more than simply temporal” (2004: 76). Certain words, she suggests, stick to some bodies more than they do to others by re-opening histories of naming (Ahmed, 2004: 76-77; see also Mamdani, 2002).
A curious feature of these attempts to constitute the Taliban as the monstrous other of the civilised world was the almost obsessive interest in the physical “monstrosities” of Taliban officials, many of who had been injured during the resistance to Soviet occupation. Indeed, the regime’s spiritual leader, Mullah Mohammed Omar, was rarely mentioned without a lengthy overview of his various physical abnormalities. In an article published in the New York Times, for example, he was described as being ‘so crazed that when shrapnel hit his eye in a battle with the Russians, he simply cut it out with a knife and kept going’ (Dowd, 2001). Likewise, Ahmed Rashid, noted that ‘[t]he Taliban leadership can boast to be the most disabled in the world today’ (2002: 17).

Yet again, however, the international community was rendered entirely absent as a result of the de-politicising gestures that served only to erase the role of external actors in precipitating the suffering of women of Afghanistan and creating the conditions out of which the Taliban were able to emerge.

A final explanation for the Taliban’s repression of women was the suggestion that it could be attributed to the psychological trauma experienced by the regime’s adherents during their time in Pakistani refugee camps, where many were educated and enlisted. Reflecting on the origins of the Taliban movement, Rashid argued that they were ‘literally the orphans of the war, the rootless and the restless, the jobless and the economically deprived with little self-knowledge’ (2002: 32). Having grown up in an environment marked by the absence of women, it was of little surprise to Rashid that, ‘when the Taliban entered Kandahar and confined women to their homes by barring them from working, going to school and even from shopping, the majority of these madrassa boys saw nothing unusual in such measures’ (2002: 33). Similar views were shared by William Maley, who argued that the Taliban’s repression of women was based ‘not [on] the values of the village, but the values of the village as interpreted by refugee camp dwellers of madrassa students most of whom have never known ordinary village life (2001a: 20 emphasis added). What is surprising about these accounts is that, despite having written at great length about the role of the United States in Afghanistan, both Rashid and Maley seem reluctant to portray the Taliban as anything other than a ‘terrifying

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12 Blair was referring here to both al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Moments earlier he had made the point that the two groups were almost indistinguishable, stating that ‘[t]he Taliban regime in Afghanistan protect al-Qaida and help them. That is a fact. Indeed, according to the latest evidence we have, they are virtually a merged organisation’ (Blair, 2001d).

13 In an article published in Social Text, Jasbir K. Puar and Amit S. Rai explore the theme of monstrosity with reference to Foucault’s lectures on the abnormal, noting how it operated as a regulatory construct to normalise certain forms of behaviour whilst de-legitimising others (2002: 117-148).
oddity in the politics of the modern world’ (Maley, 2001b: vi; 2006: 9). Even more bizarre, however, was Michael Griffin’s claim that the Taliban’s treatment of women was a symptom of their ‘repressed homosexuality’. Writing in *The Times*, he claimed that ‘if their gynaeophobia appeared the product of a repressed homosexuality on the march, Taliban cohorts also conjured up echoes of a medieval children’s crusade, with its associated elements of self-flagellation and an innocent trust in the immanence of paradise’ (Griffin, 2001). Far from being seen as the product of a complex web of historical circumstances, the Taliban were dismissed as a curious yet worrying anachronism in global politics, seemingly unaffected by the civilised standards of others. As Jasbir K. Puar explains, these narratives are defined by an ‘over-reliance on a type of heteronormative psychoanalytic explanatory framework of patriarchy that evacuates politics, global capital, even poverty from the range of potential origin narratives’ (2007: 57).

The purpose of this section has been to situate the portrayal of Afghan women within the context of representation of Afghanistan as a bounded community within the international state system. As I argued above, Afghanistan was frequently portrayed as an aberration in the modern world, an anachronistic space that was both anterior to and outside of the normal circuits of global politics. However, these imaginative geographies were dependent upon rendering the United States and its coalition allies entirely absent from the scene of suffering, overlooking the reciprocity of Afghanistan’s relationships with others and erasing the presence of external forces within the region. Rather than acknowledging Afghanistan’s interconnectedness with the global political economy, the causes of the humanitarian crisis were invariably attributed to factors specific to Afghan society, with the emphasis placed on the religious beliefs of the Taliban and their early experiences under the Soviet occupation. In many ways, the prevailing narratives of rescue rehearsed colonial fantasies about the need for the civilised world to intervene in more primitive places such as Afghanistan, saving them from the grip of fundamentalism and restoring them to their rightful place in the international community. A number of commentators even went as far as advocating a new form of liberal-humanitarian imperialism to fill the void left by this absence. One such example was Max Boot, who claimed that places such as Afghanistan were ‘cr[ying] out for the sort of enlightened foreign administration once provided by self-confident Englishmen in jodhpurs and pith helmets’ (Boot, 2001). Yet, as Said observed, ‘what our leaders and
their intellectual lackeys seem incapable of understanding is that history cannot be swept clean like a blackboard, clean so that “we” might inscribe our own future there and impose our forms of life for these lesser people to follow’ (2003: xiii).

2.3 A Mirror of the World

In order to counter the assumptions that permeated the prevailing imaginative geographies of the “war of/on terror”, it is necessary to draw attention to the fact that the West was always already implicated in the suffering of Afghan women. Following Susan Buck-Morss’ observation that ‘Afghanistan’s so-called “backward” condition is precisely an effect of global modernity’, this section will draw attention to the persistent influence of the international community in Afghan affairs, beginning with the role of the British during the colonialism of the nineteenth century before proceeding to examine the impact of the Cold War and its aftermath (2003: 43). Particular attention will be concentrated on the actions of the United States during the later stages of the Cold War and during the initial period of the Taliban rule. As well as examining the role of the United States in supporting the mujahedeen and sponsoring their opposition to the presence of Soviet troops, I will also consider Washington’s decision to remain outwardly silent about the treatment of women during the early stages of Taliban rule. By choosing to prioritise short-term financial gain over long-term stability, the indifference of the United States provided the regime with some much-needed legitimacy, allowing them to consolidate their position both at home and abroad. By focusing on these events, however, my intention is not to produce a more comprehensive account of Afghanistan’s history or to suggest that it is ever possible to fully escape the exclusionary logic that was so evident in the justifications for OEF. Rather, it is to show that any attempt to construct a definitive historical narrative is inevitably haunted by what Lene Hansen described as the ‘blank spots’ in the discourse, which threaten its stability and undermine its coherence (2006: 145). As I argue below, the actions of the United States and others were responsible for precipitating many of the problems that were witnessed under the Taliban, further confounding the image of Afghanistan as an aberration in the modern world.
Something that was noticeably absent from the justifications for OEF was the role of the international community in the creation of Afghanistan. Whilst the formation of the modern Afghan state is often traced back to the Durrani Empire of 1747, it was not until the Great Game of the nineteenth century that Afghanistan began to resemble something more akin to its current political form, 'created partly as a result of imperialism, but never a colony' (L. Dupree, 1973: 1). Reflecting of the colonial history of Afghanistan – a country that was produced by colonialism yet never a colony – Gayatri C. Spivak has highlighted its inability to complete the transition into a postcolonial state, trapped 'in a buffer zone where the masters, masquerading, did not permit the shadow play of native mimicry fully to run its course' (2008a: 153 and passim). Operating as a buffer between the Russian Empire and British India, the Central Asian state provided the stage for the three Anglo-Afghan Wars (1839-1842, 1878-1880 and 1919) and was the target of countless acts of subterfuge and subversion. Successive rulers were also made to make a number of concessions to protect their independence, including the ones specified in the Treaty of Gandamak, which was signed in 1879 and transferred control of Afghan foreign policy to colonial administrators in British India.14 The fact that the treaty was not overturned until after the Third Anglo-Afghan War in 1919 directly contradicts the image of Afghanistan as an aberration in the modern world. It is important to recognise, however, that the legacy of imperialism continues to animate much of the region’s politics, meaning that the impression left by colonialism cannot be so easily confined to the pages of history.

Another good example that undermines the imaginative geographies that were constructed by the Bush administration is the Durrand Line Agreement, which was signed by Indian Foreign Secretary Sir Henry Mortimer Durrand and Afghan Amir Abdur Rahman Khan in 1893. The original purpose of the agreement was to delineate between the two country’s respective spheres of influence, ensuring that neither party interfered in each other’s internal politics. In his autobiography, however, Abdur Rahman made clear that the border was never meant to create a permanent international boundary but merely to distinguish between the different zones of responsibility (L. Dupree, 1973: 425-426). Following the dissolution of the British Empire and the declaration of Pakistani independence in 1947, the Durrand Line was transformed into an international border, despite protests from Kabul. One of the

14 For a more detailed account of the Great Game see Dupree (1973), Hopkirk (1990), Meyer and Brysac (1999) and Saikal (2004).
major problems with the Durrand Line is that it cuts right through areas that are inhabited by the Pashtun tribe, dividing the community in two, and even splitting villages in half (L. Dupree, 1973: 426). Since then, there have been a number of calls from Pashtun leaders to declare an independent Pashtunistan that is separate from both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Not surprisingly, this has caused much tension between the two countries, culminating in a series of cross-border skirmishes in the 1950s and 1960s, along with an attempt by Kabul to block Pakistan’s entry into the UN (L. Dupree, 1973: 485-493; 538-547; Maley, 2006: 24-25). As Paul Fitzgerald and Elizabeth Gould explain,

Intended by the British as a step toward pacifying the Pashtun tribal areas and absorbing them, the artificial line that ignored the topography, demography and even military strategy did exactly the opposite, laying the foundation for bloodshed even as it was being drawn. While inflaming Afghan nationalism, the cross-border conflict resulting from the arbitrary separation of tribes, families and resources would ignite tensions and rivalries that would give way to a constant state of low-intensity warfare, cross-border infiltration and political instability (2009: 51).

Although the agreement was signed over a century ago, it continues to animate much of the region’s political problems. Indeed, a number of commentators have noted that much of Pakistan’s policy towards Afghanistan, including its support for the Taliban, was motivated by its fear of an independent Pashtunistan (Saikal, 2001: 37; Rashid, 2001: 72-89; 2002: 183-195).

The role of the great imperial powers in the formation of the Afghan state contradicts the image of Taliban-controlled Afghanistan as an aberration in global politics, untouched by the outside world and seemingly unaffected by the actions of the international community. The influence of others did not, however, cease with the decline of the British Empire but continued unabated into the twentieth century. During the Cold War, for example, the United States and USSR transformed Afghanistan into an ideological showroom to flaunt their competing models of development, investing over $2bn in foreign aid between 1950 and 1977 (Dorronsoro, 2005: 63; see also Rubin, 1992; 2002). Notwithstanding the enormous levels of investment, the Afghan population received very few tangible benefits. Instead, they were left with an array of glistening white elephants scattered across the landscape, including the Kandahar airport project that was completed in 1962. Originally intended
as a refuelling stop for long-distance flights to Southeast Asia, the airport was rendered obsolete before it was even finished owing to the advent of the commercial jet plane (Dupree, 1973: 512-513; Saikal, 2004: 127).

Similar problems were associated with the US-funded Helmand River Authority’s dam building project in Lashkar Gah that was financed by a series of loans from the Export-Import Bank totalling $80m in addition to the money spent by the Afghan government (Cullather, 2002: 524). Described by Arnold J. Toynbee as “a piece of America inserted into the Afghan landscape”, the project combined a series of infrastructural, educational and agricultural initiatives that removed 1,800 square miles of river valley from local control, displacing thousands of people from their homes (quoted in Cullather, 2002: 512; 524-527; Dupree, 1973: 482-484, 500). Yet, it was soon apparent that the project was becoming an unmitigated disaster as the average crop yield fell below pre-construction levels. Concerned about the damage to the reputation of capitalism, the United States continued to pour money into the project, prompting Nick Cullather to describe it as an ‘economic Vietnam, a quagmire that consumed money and resources without the possibility of success, all to avoid making failure obvious’ (2002: 532-534). Despite its failings, however, the remnants of the dam have been an important feature of both the political and physical landscape, further confounding the notion that Afghanistan was the ‘one spot on earth unmarked by the influence of American culture’ (Cullather, 2002: 512). Not only did it provide shelter to resistance fighters during the Soviet occupation, it also produced the fertile ground needed to grow opium crops, providing the Taliban with its main source of income. Ironically, it was actually the Taliban who finally completed the dam only to see it destroyed by American bombers.

It would, however, be a mistake to assume that ordinary Afghans were at the mercy of the development process during this period, sitting back whilst international community was allowed to reconfigure Afghan society completely unchallenged. Louis Dupree, for example, argued that many of the places that were listed as “developed” by the United States and USSR were never actually re-checked by developers after the initial visit as they wrongly assumed that the local community would implement the proposed reforms. Local villagers, he argued, had become quite adept at duping foreign experts into thinking that they were interested in the various agricultural projects and industrial innovations on offer, using it as a defence mechanism designed to protect their more
traditional way of life. Describing what he called the ‘mud curtain’ that surrounded local communities, Dupree claimed that ‘villagers willingly accept any and all suggestions for technological change because they realise that the sooner they accept, the sooner the “developers” will leave’ (1973: 249). As a result, many of the projects that were recorded as being complete were in fact almost entirely fictional, existing only in the annals of the international community (1973: 249). Another tactic that villagers used to protect their local communities from outside involvement was to hide the tribal elite from the visiting developers, ensuring that direct communication was never a feasible possibility. As Dupree argues, ‘[i]f the central government identifies the village or tribal elite, control becomes much easier as the zones of relative inaccessibility evaporate with the creation of an effective infrastructure’ (1973: 250).

The impact of the international community’s presence in Afghanistan is even more pronounced when the devastating effects of the civil war are considered, something that cannot be blamed solely on the USSR. Sensing an opportunity to drag the Soviets into a long and protracted conflict, President Carter arranged for financial assistance to be supplied to the mujahedeen, using Pakistan’s Directorate of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) to funnel $30m in aid to the resistance in 1980 and a further $50m in 1981 (Rubin, 2002: 180-181). In contrast to the relatively modest sums authorised by Carter, the budget increased substantially under Ronald Reagan to around $630m by 1987, a sum that was being matched dollar for dollar by Saudi Arabia (Rubin, 2002: 180-182; Coll, 2005: 151). Furthermore, the Reagan administration also supplied 2,000 to 2,500 laser-guided surface-to-air missiles to resistance fighters, enabling the mujahedeen to shoot down Soviet helicopters (Coll, 2005; Cooley, 2002). It would, however, be a mistake to assume that the actions of the United States were an unfortunate but inevitable response to Soviet aggression, in other words, a benign intervention motivated by a concern for the lives of ordinary Afghans.

In an interview with Le Nouvel Observateur in 1998, President Carter’s National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski made a number of startling revelations about the sequence of events that precipitated the war, undermining widely-held assumptions about the American intervention. In the interview, he revealed that the operation was not triggered as a response to the Soviet invasion but had begun some five months before Russian troops crossed the border into Afghan territory in an attempt to provoke the
intervention (CounterPunch, n.d.). Asked if he regretted his support for the mujahedeen, he responded by arguing that,

[The] secret operation was an excellent idea. It had the effect of drawing the Russians into the Afghan trap and you want me to regret it? The day that the Soviets officially crossed the border, I wrote to President Carter: We now have the opportunity of giving to the USSR its Vietnam War. Indeed, for almost 10 years, Moscow had to carry on a war unsupportable by the government, a conflict that brought about the demoralization and finally the breakup of the Soviet empire (CounterPunch, n.d.).

Not only do these comments betray a callous disregard for the lives of those affected by the conflict but they show a total indifference to the long-term viability of the Afghan state. Therefore, in contrast to the image of the United States as the heroic liberator of the Afghan people, its actions during the Cold War reveal a willingness to risk the lives of others for its own geopolitical gain. As Amin Saikal argues, ‘Washington’s counter-interventionist policy had all along been guided more by how it could benefit the USA against the Soviet Union rather than by what might be conducive to bringing peace and stability to Afghanistan’ (2004: 204). Against claims that the Taliban emerged in isolation from the international community, it is important to recognise the fact that the destruction caused by the civil war was an overwhelming factor in the formation of the movement (Rashid, 2002; Coll, 2005: 330-335 and passim).

During the early stages of their campaign, the Taliban were aided and abetted by the Pakistani authorities who were concerned about new calls for an independent Pashtunistan. Although Islamabad had initially supported Hekmatyar’s Hezb-e-Islami, they switched allegiances after it failed to overthrow the interim government, allowing the Taliban to capture a weapons dump outside the town of Spin Boldak that contained nearly 20,000 Kalashnikovs (Rashid, 2002: 27-29).15 However, after the collapse of communism and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the United States lost interest in the region and became increasingly disengaged from Afghan affairs, leaving the country to flounder in a state of disarray.16 Nothing was more symbolic of this neglect than the decision of the United States to close its embassy in Kabul, ‘the empty buildings in the Embassy compound […] stood as a cameo of the Afghan people’s involuntary

15 Although Pakistan was often understood to be in control of the Taliban it is important to recognise that they were more ‘clumsy apprentice sorcerer’ than ‘master puppeteer’ (Maley, 2001a: 12).
16 In contrast to the levels of aid lavished upon the country during the eighties, for example, the UN rarely received more than half the requested aid for Afghanistan during the nineties (Rashid, 2002: 108).
transition from Cold War heroes to post-Cold War “failed state” pariahs’ (Maley, 2009: 126). Not surprisingly, there was no criticism of the expulsion of girls from schools in Herat after the city was captured in 1995, prompting Rashid to quip that Washington was happy ‘dipping its fingers into the Afghan quagmire, but wanted no real responsibility’ (2002: 176-181). When the Taliban finally seized power in 1996, the United States was initially quite optimistic that the regime would be in a position to restore the delicate balance of power in the region, mitigating the influence of Iran (Mackenzie, 2001: 90-103). Similarly, officials in Washington were also hopeful that the Taliban would be able to overcome internal divisions within Afghanistan by imposing tighter security measures. Seemingly oblivious to the Taliban’s policies towards women, State Department spokesman Glyn Davis argued that the United States saw “nothing objectionable” about the new Afghan government, expressing his hopes that they would “move quickly to restore order and security and to form a representative interim government that can begin the process of reconciliation nationwide” (quoted in Sciolino, 1996: 14). Yet again, the attitude of the State Department undermines the view that the situation in Afghanistan was an aberration in the modern world, defined by the absence of external actors.17

At the same time that the United States was keen to formally extricate itself from the situation in Afghanistan it was nevertheless actively involved in the background, eager to take advantage of economic opportunities made available by the Taliban. One such opportunity was the lucrative oil pipeline project designed to connect the rich oil reserves in the Caspian Sea to Pakistan that was at the centre of a fierce bidding war between Californian-based UNOCAL and the Argentinean-owned Bridas Corporation. Zalmay Khalilzad, who was a UNOCAL consultant at the time but has since served as Bush’s special envoy to both Afghanistan and Iraq, penned an op-ed for the Washington Post arguing that Americans should not fear engaging with the Taliban as their breed of Islamic fundamentalism was very much distinct from the vitriolic anti-Americanism preached in Iran (1996: 21). Similarly, UNOCAL vice-president Marty Miller dismissed concerns about the Taliban’s record on human rights by claiming that the company was “fanatically neutral when it came to politics”, even hosting a number of Taliban

17 Another example of America’s presence in Afghanistan during this period of supposed absence was the CIA’s attempt to buy back the missing Stinger missiles leftover from the Soviet invasion from various Afghan warlords, including the Taliban. According to research by Washington Post journalist Steve Coll, approximately 600 missiles were still missing and the CIA was willing to pay in the region of $5-8m in order to prevent them falling into the hands of Iran (2005: 336-340).
delegations in the United States (quoted in Sciolino, 1996: 14). One delegation, headed by Foreign Minister Mullah Mohammad Ghaus, was even treated to a tour of the NASA Space Center and a daytrip to the zoo, as well as meetings with State Department officials who had flown in with the specific purpose of holding talks about the oil deal (Rashid, 2002: 174). The Clinton administration took a particular interest in the pipeline as the project was not only financially attractive but also offered important strategic benefits as the route would bypass Iran, further diminishing their influence in the region. Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Robin Raphel was particularly vocal in her support of engagement with the Taliban, fuelling the regime’s hopes that America would join Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in formally recognising their authority. Echoing the sentiment of Glyn Davis, she argued that the United States had “no quarrel with the Taliban in terms of their political legitimacy” (quoted in Maley, 2009: 190). As Rashid notes, the United States ‘conveniently ignored the Taliban’s own Islamic fundamentalist agenda, its suppression of women and the consternation they created in Central Asia largely because Washington was not interested in the larger picture’ (2002: 176). It was only after Secretary of State Madeleine Albright’s visit to Pakistan that the United States started to distance itself from the regime, even then only reluctantly (Coll, 2005: 338; Mackenzie, 2001: 102-103).

As I argued above, the image that Afghanistan was an aberration in the modern world was dependent upon a series of silences and omissions that have masked the presence of others in the region’s recent and distant past. The rise of the Taliban cannot, for example, be fully dissociated from the death and destruction caused by the country’s civil war, which left Afghanistan in a state of disarray and ‘produced a multilayered destructuring of politics, economy, and society, in ways which remain massively apparent at the beginning of [the twenty-first] century’ (Maley, 2009: 127). The fact that the United States played such an important role in sustaining this conflict places the prevailing imaginative geographies in jeopardy, blurring the moral boundaries that were inscribed by the Bush administration to distinguish us from them, good from evil, self from other. Likewise, by choosing to remain outwardly silent about the Taliban’s repression of women in order to pursue its own self-interest in the region, the United States cannot fully absolve itself of responsibility for the very humanitarian crisis that it was so quick to condemn after 9/11. Countering the historical amnesia of the Bush administration, it is important to recognise that the problems affecting ordinary
Afghans did not emerge in isolation from the modern world but were often a product of Afghanistan’s interaction with others. As Barnett R. Rubin once remarked, ‘if the situation in Afghanistan is ugly today, it is not because the people of Afghanistan are ugly. Afghanistan is not only the mirror of Afghans; it is the mirror of the world’ (2002: vi, emphasis added).

2.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that it is necessary to consider the effect of the representational practices used to portray Afghanistan on our ability to perceive Afghan women. According to the prevailing narratives of rescue, the period of Taliban rule was portrayed as an aberration in history whilst Afghanistan itself was constituted as an anachronism in the civilised world, seemingly unaffected by the mitigating influence of modernity. A common tactic used by politicians and pundits in their justifications for OEF was to distinguish the Taliban’s treatment of women from the protections afforded to them by previous governments. The State Department, for example, was particularly keen to emphasise the high percentage of women in education and the workplace before the Taliban seized power, as well as the provisions for formal gender equality that was enshrined in the Afghan Constitution in 1964. However, these attempts to compare and contrast the status of women created a misleading understanding of the situation that ignored many of the more protracted problems faced by the women of Afghanistan, including the devastating effects of the country’s civil war. The failure to appreciate the lives of ordinary Afghans was exacerbated further by a tendency to treat the experiences of women in Kabul as being typical for women everywhere in Afghanistan. This created a distorted understanding of the lives of Afghan women that bore very little relation to the everyday experiences of those living outside the capital. Indeed, Nancy Hatch Dupree has suggested that officials in Kabul were particularly brutal in their enforcement of the Taliban’s edicts against women precisely because the capital was perceived as being so different from the rest of Afghan society (N.H. Dupree, 2001: 146).

18 Arguing that many of the edicts were enforced in a haphazard manner, Nancy Hatch Dupree states that ‘in many provincial areas, central administrative control was and is still indifferently imposed; policies are unclear; and individual attitudes among local authorities reflect a wide spectrum of personal opinion, from ultra-conservative to moderate’ (1999: 146).
A second tactic that was used by the Bush administration and certain elements of the mainstream media to de-legitimise the Taliban was to constitute Afghanistan as an aberration in global politics, portraying it as an anachronistic space that was both anterior to and outside of the civilised standards of the modern world. The imaginative geographies that underpinned the “war of/on terror” were, as I argued above, often predicated upon a crude process of othering that served only to erase the interconnectedness of the modern world and to conceal the reciprocity of Afghanistan’s relationships with others. Within the prevailing narratives of rescue, therefore, the Taliban’s treatment of women was often dismissed as a manifestation of something inherent to Afghan society or the Muslim world, with commentators frequently invoking religio-cultural explanations instead of historical and political ones. Countering the view that the suffering of Afghan women was marked by the absence of outside actors, the final section highlighted a number of instances that show the United States and its coalition allies were profoundly implicated in the humanitarian crisis, contributing to the conditions out of which the Taliban emerged. By drawing attention to these examples, the purpose of this chapter is not to exonerate the regime for their crimes against women but to demonstrate that the complexity of the situation defies the Manichean moral geography that was imposed by the Bush administration in its justifications for OEF. There is, as Derek Gregory made clear, ‘certainly no absolute opposition between “us” and “them” – the lines of filiation and connection are too complicated and too mutable for that’ (2004: 46).
3 The Protector/Protected Dichotomy: Feminist Responses to the “War on/of Terror”

Feminist International Relations (IR) theory has long been concerned with the gendered images and normative assumptions that help to frame our perceptions of conflict and the actors involved. In her book Women and War (1987), for example, Jean Bethke Elshtain argues that we are all heirs to a long and well-established tradition that construes men as avatars of state-sanction violence whilst ensuring that women appear as the collective ‘other’ to this heroic warrior. Unable to be seen as combatants in their own right, Elshtain argues that’s these women are limited to the roles of the ‘militant mother’ or the ‘pacifistic protestor’, embodying a set of gender-specific virtues that prevent them from sacrificing their own lives for the sake of the nation (1987: 3-4). Challenging these traditional narratives of war and peace, however, Elshtain insists that there have always been women – the ‘ferocious few’, as she describes them – who have refused to leave the fighting to men, as well as a number of men who are unwilling to take up arms (1987: 167-180; 202-210). The dominant tropes of war, she argues, ‘do not denote what men and women really are in time of war, but function instead to re-create and secure women’s location as non-combatants and men’s as warriors’ (1987: 4 emphasis in original). This relationship between masculinity and war is something that has also been explored by J. Ann Tickner in her book Gendering World Politics: Issues and Approaches in a Post-Cold War Era, in which she claims that our justifications for war often rely upon an image of a heroic warrior who is willing to sacrifice his own life in order to protect those who are more vulnerable (2001: 57). As Tickner explains, ‘the concept of the “protected” is essential to the legitimation of violence; it has been an important myth that has sustained support for war and its legitimation for both women and men’ (2001: 57). Like Elshtain, however, she also claims that these militarised masculinities are contingent upon rendering women almost entirely invisible within the dominant narratives of war (2001: 57).

More recently, however, certain feminists have tried to build upon these early interventions by tracing the ways in which the relationship between the protector and the protected has evolved since the end of the Cold War. In her work on the discourses of humanitarian intervention, for example, Anne Orford argues that the international
community has sought to repackage the image of the muscular hero in the justifications for wars in Kosovo, Bosnia and East Timor, using it as an alibi for military interventions that would have been unthinkable before (2003: 13-14). What is significant about the more contemporary iterations of the warrior myth is that the muscular hero no longer acts only in the interests of the nation but has been transformed into a global policeman, a white knight in shining armour who ‘ride[s] to the rescue of beleaguered victims, across devastated landscapes of death and destruction’ (Orford, 2003: 170). For Steve Niva, this transformation should be seen as part of an attempt to overcome the inhibitions that have plagued the American military since Vietnam, restoring a sense of American manhood in the process (1998: 110-111). This was clearly evident during the first Gulf War as the military tried to construct a new paradigm of militarised masculinity that combined a sense of toughness with some tenderness and compassion (1998: 111). As well as relying on an image of the helpless victim in need of rescue, however, Niva claims that the articulation of these new forms of manhood were dependent upon casting the enemy as some kind of sexually deviant, hyper-masculine monster (1998: 119; see also Said, 1997: 77).19 Focusing on media representations of Saddam Hussein, for example, he argues that the Iraqi leader ‘was consistently portrayed as the anachronistic hypermacho opponent who [was…] simply not man enough to compete with the new American man, who was tough and highly militarised but also sensitive and compassionate’ (1998: 119).

Up to now, I have largely focused on the gendered constructs that permeated the Bush administration’s narratives of rescue, showing how Afghan women were constituted as mere symbols of helplessness. It would be a mistake, however, to ignore the ways in which many of these assumptions have been reinforced by even the most critical of feminist voices, including those that have sought to unsettle the dominant terms of intelligibility. In this chapter, I will examine some of these critical feminist responses to the war, drawing on the work of thinkers such as Iris Marion Young, Lila Abu-Lughod and Zillah Eisenstein. In particular, I will argue that their reliance on the

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19 Sandra Whitworth (2007) and Sherene H. Razack (2004) have also explored the intersection of gender and race in the construction of the muscular humanitarian, focusing particular attention on role of Canadian peacekeepers in the death a Somali teenager who was beaten, tortured and sexually assaulted by members of the Canadian Airborne Regiment in 1993. Whilst the intervention in Somalia might have appeared like an entirely benevolent gesture, both Whitworth and Razack argue it operated within an imperial framework within which the violence enacted on non-western bodies was seen as being somehow excusable (Razack, 2004: 162-166 and passim).
protector/protected dichotomy has prevented them from adequately interrogating the normative assumptions that underpinned the justifications for war. The chapter will commence with a discussion about the continuing relevance of the protector/protected dichotomy, looking at Laura Sjoberg, Caron E. Gentry and Zillah Eisenstein’s responses to the prisoner abuse scandal at Abu Ghraib and the rescue of Pfc. Jessica Lynch, who was kidnapped during the first few days of Operation Iraqi Freedom. In the second section, I will identify the importance of the protector/protected dichotomy for our understanding of the war in Afghanistan, describing how it helped to expose the so-called ‘myth of protection’ whilst providing a useful analytical framework for understanding the denigration of Afghan women. Finally, I will outline the problems associated with the protector/protected framework, showing how it failed to adequately contest the image of Afghan women as the abject victims of Taliban oppression.

3.1 Feminism and the ‘War of/on Terror’

In recent years, the traditional war story has come under increasing strain. For many feminists writing in the field of IR, the events of 9/11 exposed an unbearable vulnerability at the heart of American foreign policy, finally dispelling the myth that it was somehow impervious to attack and calling into question the government’s ability to protect its own people (cf. Edkins, 2002; Sontag, 2001). As members of the Bush administration tried to rebuild America’s shattered sense of self worth in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks, J. Ann Tickner (2002) noted the massive proliferation in the gendered images circulating within the dominant political discourses, arguing that they were being used to shore-up a traditional masculine identity. Reflecting on this, Anna M. Agathangelou and L.H.M. Ling claimed that both the Bush administration and Osama bin Laden mobilised a series of hyper-masculine and hyper-feminine constructs as they tried to reaffirm their global supremacy in the wake of the terrorist attacks (2004: 519-524; see also Enloe, 2004: 304). Likewise, Hilary Charlesworth and Christine Chinkin claimed that Bush administration officials adopted a decidedly masculine tone in their response to the attacks, berating those who were unwilling to consider a military response (2002: 604-605). As the New York Times argued, ‘the operative word is men.  

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20 This was only reinforced, they argued, by the sudden evacuation of women from the public sphere (Charlesworth and Chinkin, 2002: 600-604; see also Bunting, 2001).
brawny, heroic, manly men. The male hero expresses the new selflessness of masculinism. Physical prowess is back in vogue along with patriotism’ (quote in Eisenstein, 2002: 86). Others have also pointed to the fact that the growing numbers of women in the military has undermined traditional images of the masculinist protector. Whilst it is important to note that the strict separation between the protector and the protected has never been as straightforward as it first appeared, the presence of uniformed women has thrown these tensions into stark relief. As Veronique Pin-Fat and Maria Stern have argued, ‘these hauntings disturb and unsettle the ordering and seemingly stable foundations of aspects of “reality” such as identity and gender by revealing them as essentially unstable’ (Pin-Fat and Stern, 2005: 30).

During the “war of/on terror” there have been two particular incidents that seemed to call into question this traditional distinction between the protector and the protected. Within less than a month of the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom, the world’s media was gripped by news of Jessica Lynch’s dramatic rescue from captivity after she was injured in an attack on the 23rd March 2003 and detained by Iraqi forces. According to the authorised version of events, which was faithfully reproduced by Susan Schmidt and Vernon Loeb in the Washington Post, the 19-year-old supply clerk was part of a military convoy with the Army’s 507th Maintenance Company ambushed after it took a wrong turn near the southern city of Nasiriyah. During the battle that ensued, it was claimed that Lynch ‘continued firing at the Iraqis even after she sustained multiple gunshot wounds and watched several other soldiers in her unit die around her’ (Schmidt and Loeb, 2003). After the fire fight, Lynch was eventually captured by Iraqi troops and taken to the Saddam Hussein Hospital in Nasiriyah, where she received treatment for gunshot and stab wounds in addition to her broken arms and broken leg (Schmidt and Loeb, 2003). During her stay at the hospital, an Iraqi lawyer named Mohammed Odeh al-Rehaief became concerned for her wellbeing after witnessing a guard slap her across the face, prompting him to pass on details of Lynch’s whereabouts to American troops (Branigan, 2003). A few days later, US Special Operations Forces descended on the area

21 Elshtain, for example, has argued repeatedly that it would be a mistake to assume that women always play the part of the helpless victim, pointing to countless examples of women taking up arms at various historical junctures (1987: 171-180). Likewise, Cynthia Enloe has shown how women have also been presented within the dominant discourses of war, even if they are often relegated to the margins or erased from view (2000; 1996). As Enloe explains, ‘if we employ only the conventional, ungendered compass to chart international politics, we are likely to end up mapping a landscape people only by men, mostly elite men’ (2000: 1; see also Moon, 1997).
in what was described as a ‘daring midnight raid’, storming through the hospital building, kicking down doors and arresting everyone in sight (McCarthy, 2003). The US government even released a dramatic five minute version of the grainy night-vision footage that had been captured by a camera mounted on the back of one of the helicopters, apparently showing American soldiers coming under heavy fire during the course of the rescue.

Despite this, doubts about the accuracy of the Bush administration’s narrative of rescue soon began to emerge after witnesses came forward to dispute the official version of events, prompting one commentator to describe the whole affair as ‘one of the most stunning pieces of news management yet conceived’ (Kampfner, 2003). In contrast to the dramatic scenes that were witnessed in the Bush administration’s video footage, doctors working at the hospital claim that the area had already been abandoned by the Fedayeen earlier that day, with one doctor describing the incident as ‘Hollywood dazzle with little need for real action’ (quoted in Richburg, 2003). The New York Times also rejected claims that Lynch had been mistreated during her ordeal, claiming that doctors had provided her with the best possible medical care in the most difficult and challenging of circumstances (Feuer, 2003). Not only did they donate their own blood in order to keep her alive, they also lied to Iraqi intelligence officials sent to investigate the incident and even tried to return her to an American checkpoint in the back of an ambulance, eventually turning back after coming under fire from US troops (Feuer, 2003; Kampfner, 2003). After recovering from her injuries, Lynch also disputed reports that she had continued to fire at Iraqi troops even though she had sustained multiple injuries during the attack, claiming that she had been knocked unconscious by the force of the initial crash and that her rifle had jammed during the course of the battle, preventing her from firing even a single shot (Kirkpatrick, 2003). She even accused the Bush administration of constructing a series of ‘elaborate tales’ about her ordeal (MacAskill, 2007). For many commentators, the whole affair was little more than a carefully constructed propaganda ploy that had been designed to shore-up support for a deeply unpopular and divisive war, providing the public with an all-American hero to distract them from the grim reality of war.

The primary concern for these thinkers, however, was not so much the accuracy of the story but the ways in which it operated to reproduce a particular set of gendered
assumptions about the role of women in the military. At first glance, the presence of women on the frontline of the war of Iraq, despite being barred from combat roles, appears to overturn the traditional protector/protected dichotomy by raising, as one reporter put it, the ‘grim spectre of women combat casualties’ (Brant, 2003). Yet the dominant narratives of rescue actually served to reinforce the idea that the military was the preserve of men by casting Lynch as a helpless victim in need of rescue and emphasising her physical vulnerability. In Newsweek, for example, Jerry Adler described how Lynch’s rescuers had called out to inform her "we’re United States soldiers and we’re here to protect you and take you home", eventually finding her ‘peek[ing] out from under the sheets’ where she had been hiding (quoted in Adler, 2003). Similarly, CNN described the moment when Lynch cried out from her stretcher, telling her rescuers “don’t let anybody leave me” (quoted in CNN, 2003). What is significant about these representations is that they deny the possibility that Lynch might be the hero of the story even though they portray her in heroic terms (Sjoberg, 2007: 85). Reflecting upon this apparent paradox, Deepa Kumar has suggested that her presence in the theatre of battle was ‘tempered by sexist notions of women’s bravery’, ensuring that ‘despite her courage she is still [seen to be] in need of rescue by her male counterparts, the real heroes’ (2004: 301). Similarly, Pin-Fat and Stern have argued that these narratives of rescue reinforce idealised images about the role of women in war by ensuring that Lynch stood symbolically for what the male soldier must die to protect (2005: 42). For them, ‘her presence in the military and the fact of her capture […] need not unsettle the masculinity of the military because at the crucial moment of potential sacrifice, when she might perish at the hands of her captors, her feminine body and soul begged for protection’ (Pin-Fat and Stern, 2005: 36).

These attempts to strip Lynch of her military identity by constituting her as victim in need of protection were only reinforced by the media interest in her physical appearance and rural upbringing. Immediately following her capture, the world’s media descended upon the small town of Palestine, West Virginia in an attempt to discover more about the young American soldier who had been kidnapped by Iraqi forces. Whilst it is not uncommon for reporters to show an interest in the lives of soldiers who have been killed or injured in war, the language that was used when discussing Lynch

\[22\] Her dependency on others was only exacerbated by claims that she was sexually assaulted during her stay at the hospital despite the fact that Lynch has no memory of such an ordeal (Bragg, 2004). The doctors who treated her have also denied these reports (Younge, 2003).
was infused with a series of gendered stereotypes that erased her status as a soldier. In the *Washington Post*, for example, we were told about the ‘pretty 17-year-old who had always dreamed of becoming a schoolteacher’ but had signed up to the military after being promised a free education and a chance to ‘see exotic [foreign] lands’ (Jones, 2003a). After hearing about her capture, children at the local school stayed behind after class to make yellow ribbons whilst ‘several hundred townspeople flocked to the county courthouse – farmers in pickups, children on bicycles, sombre teenagers and tearful mothers – all gathering for a candlelight vigil to raise voices in hymn and bow heads in prayer’ (Jones, 2003a). As news spread about her rescue, the town erupted with joy for the ‘the petite, blonde 19-year-old who'd been named "Miss Congeniality" in the county fair beauty pageant and playfully wore combat boots beneath her senior prom dress’ (Jones, 2003b). This image of Lynch as the ultra-feminine all-American girl was also evident in a report by *Time* magazine, which described how she requested ‘pink casts for her fractured legs and arms, a new hairbrush and a menu of turkey and steamed carrots’ upon her arrival at a German hospital (Morse, 2003). Some commentators even stopped referring to Lynch by her surname and military rank, preferring to use her forename or more affectionate terms such as “Jessi” (cf. Bragg, 2004; Jones, 2003b; Walters, 2003).

Another incident that appears, on the surface, to unsettle the traditional protector/protected dichotomy is the torture and abuse of detainees at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. When the US military first announced that it was investigating allegations of abuse at the Baghdad Correctional Facility in January 2004 the mainstream media showed little interest in the story, failing to anticipate the anger it would cause and the political ramifications that would follow. A few months later, however, the American news program *60 Minutes II* on CBC broadcast the now infamous images of Iraqi detainees being tortured by American service personnel, including the photograph of a hooded man standing on an upturned box with electrodes apparently attached to his genitals. In addition, viewers were also confronted with graphic photographs of

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23 Reflecting on this image of Lynch as the girl-next-door, a number of feminists have noted that the two other women involved in the incident did not receive the same degree of attention. It is interesting, they argue, that both Spc. Shoshana Johnson and Spc. Lori Piestewa (who was killed in the attack) were largely ignored by the mainstream media, prompting some to speculate that it was because they did not resonate with idealised images of small-town, white American women with their Barbie-doll looks (Johnson is black, whilst Piestewa was a Native American) (Takacs, 2005: 301; Kumar, 2004: 302). Naomi Klein has also criticised the way in which the death of Rachel Corrie was ignored by the media after she was crushed by an Israeli bulldozer whilst trying to protect Palestinian homes from demolition. It turns out, she argues, ‘that the lives of some US citizens – even beautiful, young, white women – are valued more than others’ (Klein, 2003).
American soldiers forcing detainees to masturbate, guards posing alongside pyramids of naked bodies and dogs attacking terrified prisoners in full view of prison officials. Following his investigation into the abuse, Major General Antonio Taguba also confirmed the existence of other photographs depicting the rape and sexual assault of detainees, but the US government has resisted calls to publish them (Gardham and Cruickshank, 200; see also Taguba, 2004). Around the same time, the New Yorker published a series of damning reports on the abuse, describing how guards poured phosphoric acid on detainees, threatened them with rape and sodomised detainees with a chemical light (Hersh, 2004a). In two subsequent articles, the New Yorker rejected the suggestion that the abuse could be blamed on a ‘few bad apples’, insisting that the ‘roots of the Abu Ghraib prison scandal lie not in the criminal inclinations of a few Army reservists but in a decision, approved last year by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, to expand a highly secret operation […] to the interrogation of prisoners in Iraq’ (Hersh, 2004b; 2004c). The Economist magazine also insisted that the abuse must be understood in the context of the extra-legal behaviour that had been sanctioned at the highest levels of the Bush administration, calling on Rumsfeld to resign from his position at the head of the military (The Economist, 2004).

Responding to these images of abuse, Barbara Ehrenreich argued that the presence of Pfc. Lynndie England, Spc. Sabrina Harman and Spc. Megan Ambuhl shattered the illusion that greater gender equality in the US military would be sufficient to transform it into a more respectful and compassionate institution by undermining its hyper-masculine culture (Ehrenreich, 2004). Whilst she admits that she was never convinced by those who claim that women are more peaceful than men, Ehrenreich confesses that ‘a certain kind of feminism, or perhaps […] a certain kind of feminist naïveté, died in Abu Ghraib’ (Ehrenreich, 2004). For others, however, this focus on the role of women soldiers in acts of torture and sexual assault distracted attention away from the underlying normative assumptions that allowed this abuse to take place. Zillah Eisenstein, for example, has argued that Ehrenreich is wrong to suggest there was sexual equality at Abu Ghraib, claiming instead that there was only ‘sexual depravity’ on

24 The right-wing press in America, by contrast, did not appear to be that concerned by the abuse. Radio host Rush Limbaugh, for example, likened it to the hazing rituals that happen on university campuses across the United States, arguing that ‘you know, these people are being fired at every day. I’m talking about people having a good time, these people, you ever heard of emotional release?’ (quoted in Sontag, 2004). Similarly, Michael Savage argued that the abuse was not severe enough, claiming that he would have liked to have seen ‘dynamite put in their orifices’ (quoted in MediaMatters, 2004).
offer (Eisenstein, 2004b; see also Richter-Montpetit, 2007: 51-53). Rather than focusing on the role of ‘gender decoys’ such as England, Harman and Ambuhl, Eisenstein argues that feminists ought to be more concerned with the gendered and racialised assumptions that are embedded within the dominant narratives of war, exploring the ways in which they shape our understanding of the other and legitimise contemporary forms of imperialism (Eisenstein, 2004b). In particular, she argues that the choice of words used to describe the sexual assaults on Muslim men was particularly interesting, with both the Bush administration and various media commentators preferring to label them as acts of sexual humiliation rather than rape. As she explains,

Men who are raped and sexually degraded are ‘humiliated’ because they are treated like women; they are forced to be women – sexually dominated and degraded. Men who are naked and exposed remind us of the vulnerability usually associated with being a woman. The brown men at Abu Ghraib are then constructed as effeminate and narrate a subtext of homosexuality’ (Eisenstein, 2004b).

The abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib, Eisenstein concludes, does not provide evidence of greater gender equality but of ‘hyper-imperialist/masculinity run amok’, as both men and women sought to reproduce the racist and heterosexist codes that underpinned the domination and dehumanisation of Muslim men (Eisenstein, 2004b; see also Richter-Montpetit, 2007; Philipose, 2007; Razack, 2007).

Others have expressed particular concern about the disproportionate amount of attention that was given to the women involved in the abuse, along with the gendered imagery that was used to help explain their violent behaviour. One of those who occupied a prominent position in the dominant media narrative was Pfc. Lynndie England, who was seen smirking as she forced detainees to masturbate. Despite the enormous interest in her actions, it soon became apparent that many media commentators were struggling to reconcile her role in the abuse with more conventional assumptions about the status of women as peaceful victims in need of protection. Unlike her male colleagues, whose role in the abuse of detainees was considered to be relatively unremarkable, a number of media commentators went to great lengths to understand what would make a woman act in such a perverse and degrading manner, often resorting to crude stereotypes about her “butch” image and sexual indiscretions. Indeed, for many commentators, England was seen as the polar opposite of Jessica Lynch, fulfilling the role of the ‘mannish misfit’, uncivilised ‘whore’ and ‘ignoble savage’.
The Sun, for example, reported that England was having an affair with Spc. Charles Graner during their time in Abu Ghraib, describing how the ‘depraved’ soldier would disobey ‘orders to sneak off for sex with her lover in the Iraqi jail where they tortured prisoners’ (The Sun, 2004). The Express also suggested that England was having ‘sex with numerous partners’, claiming that the military had uncovered video footage showing her having group sex with a number of soldiers in front of the detainees (The Express, 2004). The hysteria surrounding her sexual indiscretions was only exacerbated by news that she was expecting Graner’s child even though he had gone on to form a relationship with another soldier who was implicated in the abuse scandal. It was even suggested that England’s role in the abuse could be attributed to some kind of psychological problem that prevented her from knowing right from wrong. According to the BBC, for example, doctors had found her to be ‘overly compliant’ as a child, leading them to conclude that she could have been easily led astray by her male superiors (BBC, 2005).

The purpose of this section has been to outline the importance of the protector/protected dichotomy for feminist theories of war, showing how they help to organise our understanding of a particular conflict and the actors involved. Applying these insights to the “war of/on terror”, I have shown how traditional narratives of war have come under increasing pressure due to the presence of female troops on the frontline, which challenges the protector/protected dichotomy in two distinct ways. Firstly, I argued that the spectre of female combat casualties has destabilised the conventional assumptions about the heroic masculine warrior that fights to protect the weak and the vulnerable. Secondly, I explained how the image of women as agents of violence has shattered the idea that women are innately peaceful. It is, however, important not to underestimate the resilience of these more traditional performances of gender. Reflecting on the incident at Abu Ghraib, for example, Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry argue that the disproportionate amount of attention given to the female protagonists reveals the extent to which our understanding of violence continues to be shaped by the protector/protected dichotomy. When a woman acts in a violent manner, they argue, it not only falls outside the scope of these idealised images of womanhood but actively undermines the strict boundaries that separate the protector from the protected, calling into question the gendered stereotypes that underpin our understanding of international politics (2007: 2). As a result, these women are often dismissed as ‘singular mistakes’ or ‘freak accidents’ rather than political agents in their
own right: mothers who are fulfilling their biological destiny, monsters who are pathologically damaged or sexually depraved whores motivated by their sexual dependencies (2007: 12-13). As Sjoberg and Gentry explain, ‘[w]hile the mother, monster and whore narratives other and isolate violent women, they do so on gendered terms, which characterise the women perpetrators as not only aberrant, but aberrant because of their flawed femininity’ (2007: 12-14).

3.2 Feminist Responses to the War in Afghanistan

At first glance, this brief foray into debates about the prisoner abuse scandal at Abu Ghraib and the rescue of Pfc. Jessica Lynch might appear like an unnecessary detour that has little relevance for understanding the representations of Afghan women. However, by identifying the performances of gender that permeated parts of the mainstream media’s response to these two incidents I have been able to describe the key theoretical features of the protector/protected dichotomy whilst emphasising its importance for feminist critiques of the war story. In this section, I will apply these analytical insights to the war in Afghanistan in order to explain how Afghan women were placed in a position of absolute inferiority within the dominant discourses of war. Drawing on the work of feminists such as Iris Marion Young and Lila Abu-Lughod, I will show how the women of Afghanistan were cast as abject victims and depicted as being almost entirely dependent upon the intervention of coalition troops. As well as highlighting the normative violence that circumscribed our understanding of Afghan women, I will also describe how the protector/protected dichotomy can be used to help expose the radical disjuncture between the Bush administration’s rhetoric of humanitarianism and the devastating effects of military action on the lives of Afghan women. In order to illustrate this, I will focus on three specific incidents: the Bush administration’s refusal to pause its bombing raids to allow aid agencies to distribute humanitarian relief, America’s use of cluster munitions and the coalition’s decision to ally itself with the Northern Alliance despite their dismal record on women’s rights.

A peculiar feature of the justifications given for the war in Afghanistan was the importance ascribed to the Taliban’s treatment of Afghan women. Rather than relying solely on the language of retribution and revenge, the Bush administration and its
coalition allies were keen to frame the intervention as a humanitarian endeavour that was designed to rescue the women of Afghanistan from the barbarity of Taliban rule (see chapter 1). Commenting on these seemingly benevolent gestures, Iris Marion Young argued that the Bush administration tried to portray itself as the heroic muscular warrior riding to the rescue of those in distress. What was unique about this ‘logic of masculinist protection’, she argued, was that it was not rooted in an aggressive articulation of militarised masculinity but in more benign ideas about chivalry, responsibility and virtue; rather than acting for personal gain or in the interests of self-enhanced, ‘the gallantly masculine man is loving and self-sacrificing, [facing...] the world’s difficulties and dangers in order to shield women from harm’ (2003a: 4; see also Shepherd, 2006). Central to this logic of masculinist protection, however, is that those seen to be in need of protection – paradigmatically women and children – are placed in a subordinate position of dependency, appearing as helpless victims who are unable to act without the assistance of others. These more chivalrous forms of masculinity, Young explained,

Express and enact a concern for the well being of women but they do so within a structure of superiority and subordination. The male protector confronts evil aggressors in the name of the right and the good, while those under his protection submit to his order and serve as handmaids to his efforts (2003b: 230; see also Stiehm, 1982; Elshtain, 1987).

Applying this to the situation in Afghanistan, Young expressed particular unease at the way in which the Bush administration had been able to repackage the invasion as a humanitarian endeavour, claiming that feminists ought to be concerned about the way in which their voices were appropriated in the service of war (2003a: 17). Not only did it construct Afghan women as ‘exoticised others’ and ‘victims in need of salvation’, it also served to deflect attention away from more intractable problems that already existed in Afghanistan before the Taliban seized power (2003a: 19; see also Khan, 2001; 2008; Shepherd, 2006).

25 Young's suggestion that female subordination does not constitute submission to a violent and overbearing bully but a relationship of love and adoration cannot account for those who have no choice in the matter (2003a: 5). Whilst it might be claimed that those women who happily accept their subordination are labouring under a false consciousness, Young's account cannot accommodate those who have actively opposed their status as victims but continue to be portrayed in this manner. As I will argue in chapters 5 and 6, various Afghan women have tried to challenge the assumption that they are nothing more than passive victims of Taliban rule but often it has been to no avail.
Following Young, a number of postcolonial feminists have emphasised the need to situate these representations of Afghan women within the context of contemporary forms of colonialism, invoking Gayatri C. Spivak’s oft-cited remarks about ‘white men saving brown women from brown men’ in order to illustrate their point (Spivak, 1999: 284; 1988: 296; Rosenberg, 2002; Khan, 2001). Comparing the images used to justify the war in Afghanistan with the importance of *la mission civilisatrice* to the imperialism of the nineteenth century, Miriam Cooke has identified what she describes as a four stage logic of empire, claiming that imperialist powers have always tried to assume the role of the protector in order to legitimise the colonial project (2002: 485). She argues that by (1) asserting the inalienable rights of women within a universal civilisation and (2) insisting that civilised men necessarily recognise and respect these rights, this gendered logic works to associate women’s rights with the supposedly civilised world. At the same time, however, this logic also ensures that (3) uncivilised, non-western men are seen as systematically abrogating the rights of women, (4) thereby making their cultures seem inferior, backward and abhorrent (2002: 485). Returning to the question of Afghanistan, she concludes that Afghan women were to be rescued ‘not because they are more “ours” than “theirs” but rather because they will have become more “ours” through the rescue mission’ (2002: 485-486). Meghana Nayak has also made a number of similar points about the Orientalist attitude that underpinned the Bush administration’s attempts to shore-up its hyper-masculine identity, highlighting the ways in which it tried to ‘infantilise’ Afghan women by portraying them as ‘poor, helpless and backward’ (2006: 43-45; 48). According to Nayak, the justifications for war in Afghanistan were contingent upon the idea that the lives of Afghan women ‘depend on being saved from the vagaries and horrors of their cultures and religions by rational, enlightened, civilised and strong political actors’ (2006: 48; see also Rosenberg, 2002: 458).

Lila Abu-Lughod has also expressed unease at the colonial assumptions that have been reinforced by the Bush administration’s narratives of rescue, warning about the dangers of relying on culture as an explanatory device. Feminists, she argues, ought to be suspicious of attempts to ‘plaster neat cultural icons like the Muslim woman over messy historical and political dynamics’ (2002: 783). According to Abu-Lughod, one of the most striking features of the “war of/on terror” was the assumption that the cultural practices and religious rituals of Islam could provide sufficient explanation for what was
occurring in Afghanistan, as if hundreds of years of history and political intrigue could be understood with reference to a few key points about the role of women within Islamic scripture (2002: 784-785). However, as I argued in the previous chapter, these cultural explanations not only fail to grasp the complex array of social, economic and historical interconnections within which we are all implicated but also serve to blur the boundaries of a number of quite distinct problems that cannot be attributed solely to the belief structure of the Taliban regime (see also Abu-Lughod, 2002: 784; Said, 2003; Gregory, 2004: 30-47). At the same time, Abu-Lughod has also urged feminists to reflect upon the ideological assumptions that are reproduced within the dominant frames of war, stating that ‘I do not think that it would be as easy to mobilise so many of these American and European women if it were not the case of Muslim men oppressing Muslim women – women of cover for whom they can feel sorry and in relation to whom they can feel smugly superior’ (2002: 787). The assumption that the international community were intervening in Afghanistan to save Afghan women, she argued, imposes a number of structural constraints upon our ability to see Afghan women as political agents in their own right, reinforcing the idea that their lives were in a state of suspense during the five years of Taliban rule. It is, Abu-Lughod explains, deeply problematic to construct the Afghan woman as someone in need of saving as ‘projects of saving other women depend on and reinforce a sense of superiority by Westerners, a form of arrogance that deserves to be challenged’ (2002: 789).

This problem became particularly apparent in the treatment of groups such as the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), an organisation that has led the struggle for women’s rights since its formation in 1977. As I argue in chapter 5, the Bush administration and parts of the mainstream media were initially keen to hear from representatives of the organisation as they were able to provide them with graphic accounts of the barbarity of the Taliban regime whilst drawing attention to the suffering that women had experienced at the hands of their security forces. However, after it became increasingly obvious that RAWA was vehemently opposed to the military intervention it was swiftly sidelined by the international community and relegated to the margins of the political discourse (Pettman, 2004: 90; see chapter 5). At the very moment that Afghan women tried to speak beyond their status as victims they quickly discovered that their voices were inaudible within the prevailing frames of war. Reflecting on this apparent paradox, Mary Anne Franks has suggested that there is,
despite their obvious differences, a hidden ideological affinity between the United States and the Taliban as both groups sought to exclude women from the political sphere (albeit in quite different ways for rather different purposes). As Franks explains,

One might be led to think that it is in this “war” that women are finally present, as both sides declare their respective opinions as to women’s treatment, place in society, et cetera. But this impression is illusory. It is precisely in this realm of escalated rhetoric and assured contrasts that women are more absent than ever – instrumentalised within a discourse of evil that masks an ideology of hatred and aggression. Women are invoked, but not present, in this latest international conflict (2003: 137 emphasis in original).

Although their lack of visibility was much more than just a metaphor in Afghanistan, it would be a mistake to assume that they were any less absent from the Bush administration’s narratives of rescue (2003: 141). This was something that was echoed by Kevin J. Ayotte and Mary E. Husain whose work on the epistemic violence show how Afghan women were denied access to a politically qualified voice within the prevailing frames of war (2005: 113).

As well as highlighting the normative violence that underpinned the justifications for war, the protector/protected dichotomy also helped to expose the coalition’s reliance upon a set of decidedly inhumane means to pursue a set of questionable humanitarian ends, drawing attention to what Tickner has described as the ‘myth of protection’ (2001: 49). During the early stages of OEF, for example, a group of international aid agencies, including Oxfam International, Islamic Relief and Christian Aid, raised concerns about the effects of coalition airstrikes on the civilian population, urging the Bush administration to pause its bombing campaign so that relief supplies could be distributed to those in need. According to their figures, approximately 7.5m people were at serious risk of starvation as a direct result of the disruption that had been caused to distribution networks, prompting the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to warn that the situation in Afghanistan was in danger of deteriorating into a ‘Rwanda-style’ humanitarian disaster (Harding, 2001; Waugh, 2001). As Oxfam American President Raymond C. Offenheiser argued, ‘it is now evident that we cannot, in reasonable safety, get food to hungry Afghan people’ (quoted in DeYoung and Kaufman, 2001). Dismissing these concerns, the coalition continued to bomb targets across Afghanistan, claiming that any pause in military action would give the Taliban time to regroup. Indeed, the British International Development Secretary Clare Short
accused aid agencies of being overly ‘emotional’, claiming that the best form of humanitarian relief for ordinary Afghans would be a quick and decisive victory over the Taliban (McCarthy, 2001). Similarly, US National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice argued that the Taliban were ‘an enemy that has to be taken on, and taken on aggressively, and pressed to the end, and we're going to continue to do that’ (quoted in Borger, 2001).

Although the Bush administration went to great lengths to frame the conflict as a humanitarian endeavour, its reluctance to pause its bombing campaign and allow aid agencies to distribute their supplies shows that the coalition was prepared to privilege its own military objectives at the expense of those it was supposed to be protecting. This disjuncture between the rhetoric of humanitarianism and the reality on the ground was also apparent in America’s decision to use cluster bombs against the Taliban, leaving the Afghan countryside littered with yet more unexploded ordnance (HRW, 2001c; 2002a). According to research by Human Rights Watch, for example, the United States dropped around 1,228 cluster bombs containing almost 250,000 bomblets between the start of OEF on the 7th October 2001 and March 2002, representing around five percent of the 26,000 bombs that were dropped during this period (HRW, 2002: 1). The organisation discovered that civilians – predominantly farmers and young children – were at particular risk from cluster bombs due to their imprecise footprint and high failure rate, with some de-miners estimating that up to 22 percent failed to explode upon impact (HRW, 2002: 25-26). To make matters worse, the brightly coloured bomblets resembled the yellow food packages that were also being dropped by US planes, prompting Arundhati Roy to describe the actions of the coalition as ‘brutality smeared in peanut butter’ (Roy, 2001). As Charles Hirschkind and Saba Mahmood have argued,

In the crusade to liberate Afghan women from the tyranny of Taliban rule, there seemed to be no limit of the violence to which Americans were willing to subject the Afghans, women and men alike. Afghanistan, so it appeared, had to bear another devastating war so that, as the New York Times triumphantly noted at the exodus of the Taliban from Kabul, women can now wear burqas “out of choice” rather than compulsion (2002: 341).26

26 The use of cluster bombs and the coalition’s overwhelming reliance on airpower resulted in the deaths of at least 1,000-1,300 civilians during the first few months of conflict, with some estimates putting the figure as high as 20,000 (Conetta, 2002; Steele, 2002a; HRW 2008). In more recent years, there has been renewed debate about the increasing number of non-combatant casualties, with UNAMA estimating that around 8,832 civilians have been killed since 2007 (2011: i). What is surprising, however, is how easily the deaths of Afghan civilians have been reconciled with the supposedly humanitarian justifications for war.
A number of feminist thinkers have also warned that the coalition’s close association with the Northern Alliance – led by the country’s former president, Burhanuddin Rabbani – risked undermining the rights of Afghan women (Abu-Lughod, 2002: 787; Hunt, 2002: 116; Charlesworth and Chinkin, 2002: 602; Kolhatkar and Ingalls, 2006: 85-97). Although the leaders of the Northern Alliance were careful to distance themselves from the crimes that were committed by the Taliban, their own record on women’s rights was far from satisfactory (cf. AI, 1995a; 1995b; 1996; 1999; HRW, 2005). During his tenure in office, for example, Burhanuddin Rabbani was responsible for implementing a series of restrictions on women’s rights, including the ban on women appearing on television and the requirement that all women wear a full-length veil in public (UN, 1994: 18-19). In addition, he also prohibited Afghan women from attending the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. Many of these policies were later adopted by the Taliban, who also took charge of the notorious Ministry for the Prevention of Vice and the Promotion of Virtue that had been set up by the president (Dorronsoro, 2005: 299; Crews and Tarzi, 2008: 46-47; Kolhatkar and Ingalls, 2006: 18-19). Other prominent members of the Northern Alliance have also been criticised for their record on human rights, such as Gen. Abdul Dostum who was responsible for the deaths of ten of thousands of civilians during the country’s civil war (see chapter 2). More recently, Gen. Dostum has been accused of killing some 3,000 Taliban prisoners who were left to suffocate in the back of trucks in the middle of the Dasht-i-Leili desert during the early stages of OEF (Barry and Dehghanpisheh, 2002; Gall, 2001; PHR, 2008). According to survivors, some of the prisoners became so desperate that they were forced to lick the sweat off each other’s bodies whilst some even tried biting the flesh off other prisoners in order to survive (Barry and Dehghanpisheh, 2002).

In this section, I have outlined two ways in which the protector/protected dichotomy can help to make sense of the normative and material violence that underpinned the war in Afghanistan. On the one hand, I have shown how the prevailing representations of Afghan women as abject victims have placed them in a position of dependency, erasing their status as agents in their own right. On the other hand, I have described how the protector/protected dichotomy can help to undermine the Bush

Indeed, *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman has even gone as far as suggesting that ‘many of those Afghan “civilians” were praying for another dose of B-52’s to liberate them from the Taliban, casualties or not’ (Friedman, 2001).
administration’s rhetoric of humanitarianism, revealing its failure to adequately protect the lives of ordinary Afghans. It would, however, be a mistake to assume that it is only men who can occupy the position of the masculine protector, as the Feminist Majority Foundation’s (FMF) support for the war in Afghanistan clearly showed. (Young, 2003a: 3; 2003b: 230). In chapter 1, I argued that the FMF’s Campaign to Stop Gender Apartheid played an important part in the justifications for OEF, providing concrete evidence of the Taliban’s treatment of women and drawing attention to the wider humanitarian disaster that was affecting the lives of so many Afghans. However, the willingness of the FMF to support to the invasion of Afghanistan and legitimise the Bush administration’s narratives of rescue prompted a number of scholars to accuse the organisation of complicity with contemporary forms of colonialism. Krista Hunt, for example, accused the FMF of allowing itself to become ‘embedded’ within the dominant discourses of war, which enabled the international community to present the war as some kind of rescue mission designed to save women from oppression (2006: 51-71; 2002: 116; see also Khan, 2008: 161). Similarly, Ann Russo has accused the FMF campaign of relying upon a gendered and racialised logic that reinforces notions of Western superiority whilst failing to address the legacy of international involvement in Afghanistan. The assumption of superiority, she suggests, ‘is possible because the FMF evades its own implications in the politics of the region and condones the terms of imperialism – the right to control, the right to invade and the right to occupy under the guise of ‘liberating’ women and creating a ‘gender equality’ resonate with so-called Western standards’ (Russo, 2006: 559).

3.3. The Limitations of the Protector/Protected Dichotomy

The hierarchical relationship between the protector and the protected has provided feminists with a useful analytical lens through which they can explore the gendered assumptions that permeated the justifications for war. As well as enabling scholars to draw attention to the normative violence that has circumscribed our understanding of Afghan women as political subjects by constituting them as helpless victims in need of protection, it has also allowed them to highlight the devastating effects of the military intervention on the lives of those the coalition is supposed to be protecting. Whilst it is important not to underestimate its significance, there are a number of problems
associated with this approach that limit its analytical efficacy for understanding the situation in Afghanistan. On the one hand, I will argue that many of those who relied on the protector/protected framework failed to contest the gendered assumptions that underpinned the Bush administration’s narratives of rescue, reproducing the idea that Afghan women were the passive prisoners of Taliban rule. On the other hand, I will argue that when certain thinkers did try to assert the agency of Afghan women, they failed to pay adequate attention to the complex array of social, political and economic forces that circumscribed what could be said and done within the prevailing frames of war. As a result, they tended to treat the voices of certain women’s groups as if they were representative of Afghan women in general.

One of the most outspoken critics of feminist-inspired writings about the war in Afghanistan is Anila Daulatzai, who has accused even the most critical of feminist thinkers of ‘obfuscat[ing] the history of gender, violence and subjectivity in Afghanistan’ (2008: 419). In order to compensate for their lack of knowledge about life under the Taliban, Daulatzai claims that they have allowed ‘a limited set of analytical concepts [to occupy] the respective discursive space’ (2008: 419). This is a problem that was clearly evident in the work of Zillah Eisenstein. In an article entitled “Feminisms in the Aftermath of September 11”, Eisenstein condemns attempts by the Bush administration and its coalition allies to appropriate the rights of Afghan women, claiming that it is unforgivable for the mainstream media and political establishment to use the plight of ordinary Afghans to help justify the use of military force. Bush’s bombs, she argues, ‘should not now be cloaked and legitimised by a defence of women’s rights’ (2002: 83-84; see also Hunt, 2002; 2005). Despite her attempts to undermine the Bush administration’s narratives of rescue, however, Eisenstein remains trapped within the prevailing frames of war, reproducing many of the same ideological assumptions that she is seeking to contest. It is interesting to note, for example, that whilst she is careful to dispute the image of Afghan women as ‘burqa-clad creatures in need of saviours’ she does little to show how these women were able to actively resist the Taliban, ignoring the various ways in which they were able to subvert the edicts enacted by the regime (2002: 80-81; see chapter 6). Indeed, her discussions about the agency are limited to a few largely irrelevant references to the role of women in the Algerian revolution and the importance of organisations such as Women Living Under Islamic Law (WLUML) (2002: 80). At no point does she explain why these organisations have any bearing on
our understanding of the situation in Afghanistan or the experiences of Afghan women under the Taliban.

As well as failing to show how the actions of Afghan women were able to disrupt the dominant representational practices, Eisenstein’s article also relies upon a similar historical narrative to the one that underpinned the justifications for war, reinforcing the idea that the Taliban were an aberration in Afghan history. Using the same set of statistics that were deployed by the Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF) and the US State Department, Eisenstein claims that Afghan women were active participants in government, schools, and other civic institutions in the ‘pre-Taliban’ period, accounting for ‘70 percent of all teachers, 50 percent of civil servants, and 40 percent of medical doctors’ (2002: 95; see also Feminist Daily Newswire, 1998a; US State Department, 2001a). This all changed, she argues, following the ‘takeover by misogynist fundamentalists’, transforming the country into a pit of misery and despair – a situation that was only compounded by the devastating effects of OEF, which brought about ‘new problems of starvation [and] homelessness’ (2002: 84; 95 emphasis added). Yet this failure to adequately contest the crude historical narratives that were favoured by the Bush administration and its coalition allies has led to a number of criticisms. Daulatzai, for example, accuses Eisenstein of ignoring the root causes of the situation in Afghanistan, blaming the Taliban and the United States for problems that have been affecting Afghan women for decades. Focusing particular attention on this rather vague and ambiguous notion of a ‘pre-Taliban’ period, Daulatzai argues that, ‘while Eisenstein acknowledges the misery caused by the US led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, she states that starvation and homelessness brought about by the war on terrorism are ‘new’ problems, and thus denies much of the suffering Afghans endured in the decades of wars, droughts, earthquakes and international neglect prior to the 2001 invasion and intervention’ (2008: 421-422; see chapter 2). By keeping her time frame deliberately ambiguous, Eisenstein was able to ‘posit a clear correlation between the poor health indicators and the miserable social conditions for Afghan women and the Taliban, thus establishing a causal link between the two’ (2008: 422).27 At the same time,

27 Others have also criticised Eisenstein for appearing to endorse Ahmed Rashid’s assertion that the Taliban’s treatment of women could be explained with reference to their childhood experiences in Pakistani refugee camps, where they lived ‘without the love or camaraderie of mothers or sisters’ (Eisenstein, 2002: 93). As I noted in chapter 2, the mainstream media has tended to rely on a combination of crude cultural explanations and simplistic psychological accounts to make sense of the Taliban’s treatment of women, ignoring the various social, economic and political factors that helped precipitate
this failure to adequately interrogate the Bush administration’s historical narratives also reinforces the view that the lives of Afghan women were effectively in a state of suspense, held in abeyance until the international community could intervene to redeem them from the barbarity of Taliban rule (see chapter 2).

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that Eisenstein is the only one who has relied upon these stark contrasts to emphasise the devastating effects of Taliban rule. Valentine M. Moghadam, for example, has focused particular attention on a series of reforms that were implemented by the Soviet-backed People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) during the 1970s and 1980s, which were designed to give women the right to work, eliminate female illiteracy and outlaw forced marriage (2002: 22-23). According to Moghadam, these reforms were ‘clearly an audacious program for social change, one aimed at the rapid transformation of a patriarchal society and a power structure based on tribal and landlord authority’ (2002: 23). Likewise, French sociologist Christine Delphy has also used the achievements of the PDPA to affirm the status of Afghan women, claiming that, between 1978 and 1992, ‘astonishing statistics can be drawn concerning the large number of women doctors, teachers, lawyers’ (2002: 3-5; see also Franks, 2003: 138-139). What is often omitted from these neat comparisons, however, is any mention of the problems associated with the reforms introduced by the Soviet-backed regime. On the one hand, these theorists continue to present Afghan women as a homogenous and undifferentiated mass, wrongly assuming that they are united by a common identity whilst ignoring a number of important social cleavages between the rich and the poor, the educated and the illiterate, and the religious and the secular. This is a problem that became particularly apparent in discussions about attempts by the PDPA to ban the traditional practice of bride price, which was seen by many Afghans as a purely symbolic gesture rather than a realistic reform (Tapper, 1984: 291; 1991; N.H. Dupree, 1984: 317-325). On the other hand, the emphasis that is placed on the differences between the Taliban and previous regimes also reinforces the view that the very existence of Afghan women was compromised by the barbarity of Taliban rule. Whilst the examples outlined above were often used by these thinkers to highlight the agency of Afghan women, they unconsciously reaffirm the image of Afghan women as helpless victims by suggesting that this scope for agency was only possible under previous, less authoritarian regimes (Moghadam, 2002: 22-23 and passim). Mary Anne Rashid, 2002: 111; Puar, 2007: 57; Daulatzai, 2008: 424 and chapter 2).
Frank even went as far as suggesting that the Taliban was so successful in erasing women from within the public sphere that resistance had been rendered impossible (2003: 141; see chapters 5 and 6).

This does not mean, however, that all feminists were indifferent to the role of Afghan women in the resistance to Taliban rule. One group that attracted much attention during the early stages of the “war of/on terror” was the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), an organisation that has been at the forefront of the campaign for greater gender equality in Afghanistan since its formation in 1977. Relying on a variety of non-violent means, RAWA has fought to overturn the exclusionary practices of both the Taliban and the mujahedeen, as well as drawing attention to the devastating effects of Soviet aggression on the Afghan people. In the 1980s, for example, the group held a series of public protests about the problems affecting ordinary Afghans, the repressive measures ushered in by the PDPA and the failure of the mujahedeen to adequately protect the civilian population from their deadly bombing raids (see Chavis, 2003: 85-100). In response, one of the organisation’s founding members, Meena Karmal, was killed by individuals suspected of working for either the Khadamat-e Etela’at-e Dawlati (KhAD) – the Afghan equivalent of the KGB – or the notorious warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who had been criticised for targeting civilian areas (Chavis, 2003: 147-157). Her husband, Dr. Faiz Ahmad, was also killed because of his links with the Afghanistan Liberation Organisation (Brodsky, 2003: 90).

After other members of RAWA were beaten, tortured and imprisoned by the regime, the organisation was forced to operate in a much more clandestine manner, relying on a network of over 2,000 women to organise underground literacy classes and distribute their secret magazine, which contained a potent mix of political polemic, social commentary and various educational materials (Brodsky, 2003: 2-3; 90-81; Chavis, 2003: 97-100). In contrast to the image of Afghan women as the passive victims of their society, one activist argued that ‘Afghan women [were not...] silent victims under their burqas but warriors who have bravely resisted all oppressive regimes [including the PDPA, mujahedeen and Taliban] and have changed their lives and the lives of many others’ (quoted in Brodsky, 2003: ix emphasis added).

During the period of Taliban rule, RAWA was one of only a few Afghan organisations to make any impact upon the international agenda and worked closely with the FMF to
dissuade American oil companies from investing in the region (see chapter 2). Following the events of 9/11, however, the organisation became increasingly frustrated about the way in which their criticisms of the regime were being used to justify the invasion of Afghanistan, insisting that an attack on the ‘thousands of deprived, poor and innocent people of Afghanistan’ would do little to eradicate the root causes of terrorism (RAWA, 2001a). In a statement released on the 14th September 2001, for example, RAWA condemned what it described as a ‘barbaric act of violence and terror’ but warned against the use of force, insisting that ‘[w]hile we once again announce our solidarity and deep sorrow with the people of the US, we also believe that attacking Afghanistan and killing its most ruined and destitute people will not in any way decrease the grief of the American people’ (RAWA, 2001a). The Bush administration, RAWA argued, should be careful to differentiate between the majority of innocent Afghans and a handful of fundamentalists, arguing that ‘indiscriminate military attacks on a country that has been facing permanent disasters for more than two decades will not […] be the expression or the will of the American people’ (RAWA, 2001a). In another statement, issued a few days after the start of airstrikes, RAWA argued that the Taliban ‘should be overthrown by the uprising of [the] Afghan nation’ whilst criticising America’s close relationship with the Northern Alliance, which was still under the control of Rabbani (RAWA, 2001b). Despite this, international attention ‘largely focused on their criticism of the Taliban and their documentation of the Taliban’s human rights abuses, as this could be harnessed for the cause of war’ (Kolhatkar and Ingalls, 2006: 191).

For many feminists, RAWA’s vocal opposition to the “war of/on terror” and their resistance to Taliban rule unsettled the image of Afghan women as passive victims in need of rescue, disrupting the crude and one-dimensional narratives that were constructed by the Bush administration in its justifications for war. Drucilla Cornell, for example, argued that RAWA’s criticism of the war in Afghanistan was able to destabilise the Bush administration’s narratives in three quite specific ways. Firstly, she claimed that it helped to highlight the disjuncture between rhetoric of reality, convincing her that the ‘bombing of the devastated people of Afghanistan would not solve the problem of terrorism; it would only bring more suffering to those who cannot flee to the hills – women, children and the 500,000 disabled orphans’ (2002: 433-434). Secondly, she argued that the decision to exclude RAWA from the reconstruction process, which is discussed in more detail in chapter 5, highlighted the coalition’s failure to keep women’s
rights on the political agenda. The voice of RAWA, she argued, ‘must be heard and given the respect it deserves in the UN effort to establish a humanitarian government in Afghanistan’ (2002: 434). Likewise, Tickner has argued that the United States failed to engage with those groups with a more radical political agenda, ignoring those ‘who wish to empower women in ways that would demand very different political and social relations in Afghanistan’ (2002: 247; see also Buck-Morss, 2003: 32). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Cornell claimed that RAWA’s outspoken opposition to all forms of fundamentalism and their continued commitment to protecting women’s rights undermines the image of Afghan women as helpless victims. The task for feminists, she insisted, is to ‘drum up as much support for RAWA as we can’, challenging the prevailing representational practices that have circumscribed our understanding of the situation in Afghanistan (2003: 171). As Tickner explains, it is ‘crucial that we [as feminists] see these women as agents as well as victims if we are to get beyond the gender stereotyping that we have witnessed since 9/11’ (2002: 342).

One of the problems that many feminist critics of OEF have faced is that they have tended to treat the RAWA as the authentic voice of Afghan women whilst ignoring those who have tried to distance themselves from the organisation. Responding to RAWA’s influence over the international agenda, for example, Sima Wali has argued that Western feminists need to recognise that not all women share the organisation’s overtly secular political beliefs, claiming that they ‘do not represent the Afghan norm’ (Wali quoted in Schmidt, 2001). Noy Thrupkaew has also expressed concern about this ‘radical, lone-wolf organisation garnering so much Western attention’, claiming that ‘with its confrontational and no-holds-barred language and allegiance to secular society, RAWA reflects much of the Western feminist community’s own values’ (Thrupkaew, 2002). Of particular concern, she argued, was the organisation’s aggressive and fiercely judgemental approach to women such as Sima Samar and Fatana Gailani, who RAWA accused of colluding with warlords due to their involvement in the process of reconstruction (Thrupkaew, 2002; see also Enloe, 2004: 277-279; RAWA, 2002b).

28 Others have also stressed the importance of RAWA’s website. Loretta Kensinger, for example, has argued that it ‘can allow us, if we listen carefully, to reach out beyond national and cultural boundaries, to hear the voices of those most directly involved and thus act in ways determined by them to be most useful to their needs’ (2003: 16; see also Dartnell, 2003; Hunt, 2005: 7-9; Fluri, 2009).
29 Responding to these criticisms, RAWA argued that this was part of an international effort to taint the minds of its supporters around the world, claiming that they are not ashamed of their radical and uncompromising attitude (RAWA, 2002).
Others have also accused RAWA of allowing itself to be used by the international community, providing the Bush administration and its coalition allies with an excuse to attack Afghanistan in the aftermath of 9/11. Sippi Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, for example, claims that the organisation relied upon a series of ‘well-publicised and gimmicky charitable acts that fail[ed] to make the slightest dent in the structural bedrock of gender inequality in Afghanistan’ (2003: 100). RAWA, she argues, ‘wholeheartedly milk[ed] rumours about women under the Taliban, cashing in on the naïveté of journalists and researchers content to be hoodwinked and manipulated [into reproducing…] Orientalist notions of veiled Afghan women living in seraglios, jealously guarded by bearded Musulmans wielding scimitars’ (2003: 101).

Although it is essential that we do not underestimate the importance of RAWA’s opposition to Taliban rule, it would be a mistake to assume that the organisation’s openly secular and leftist views are universally endorsed by all Afghan women (see chapter 6). Rather than simply reifying these voices, it is important that we remain attentive to the failures of our representational practices, showing how the heterogeneity of women’s voices cannot be contained within the analytical constructs we have created. One way that this can be done is to think about how it is that organisations such as RAWA were able to penetrate the global public sphere, even if they were only able to occupy a relatively marginal role once inside. Gayatri C. Spivak, for example, has argued that the organisation’s prominence was due in part to the emergence of a strong middle class during the early part of the twentieth century, giving wealthy women greater access to education. For Spivak, however, these women are not representative of Afghan women in general as they are ‘altogether distanced from the subaltern classes in “their culture”, epistemically’ (2004: 89). These social divisions became particularly apparent in regards to RAWA’s website, which allowed the organisation’s members to communicate with various international organisations in a variety of languages. Whilst many commentators cited this as an example of a new form of post-territorial feminism, it is important to remember that many women were unable to access the internet because they lacked the skills and the economic resources (McLaughlin, 2007: 197). Indeed, Jasbir K. Puar even went as far as suggesting that the overwhelming focus on RAWA was ‘complicit with a displacement of other Afghan women’s groups that cannot so easily enter the global feminist stage’ (2007: 7). We ought to be careful, therefore, not to valorise the voices of a few whilst simultaneously
silencing a multitude of others, denying them the possibility of an audible speaking position within the dominant discourses of war.

The purpose of this section has been to highlight some of the weakness with even the most critical of feminist responses to the war, drawing attention to the ways in which they have recycled, reproduced and reinforced the same normative assumptions that underpinned the Bush administration’s narratives of rescue. Firstly, I argued that the hierarchical terms presupposed by the protector/protected dichotomy meant that many of these thinkers remained trapped within the dominant representational practices, failing to adequately contest the image of Afghan women as the helpless victims of the Taliban regime. This was only exacerbated by a tendency amongst certain theorists to reproduce a historical narrative contingent upon the idea that the five years of Taliban rule were an aberration in Afghan history, reinforcing the belief that the lives of Afghan women were effectively in a state of suspense during this time frame (see chapter 2). Secondly, I argued that those who did make an effort to affirm the agency of Afghan women remained trapped within the agent/victim dichotomy, wrongly assuming that it is sufficient simply to invert it. As a result, they failed to adequately acknowledge the complexity of the situation in Afghanistan or recognise the multiplicity of difference experiences under the Taliban. Instead, they continued to present Afghan women in relatively stable and monolithic terms, assuming that the views of groups such as RAWA were representative of women in general. Whilst it might be politically expedient to present these groups in this manner, the blind spots in the Bush administration’s narratives of rescue cannot be corrected simply by adding women into the mix (see chapters 5 and 6).

3.4 Conclusion

The work of feminists such as Iris Marion Young, Lila Abu-Lughod and Zillah Eisenstein has done much to expose the violence – both the material and ideational – that circulated in the Bush administration’s narratives of rescue. By identifying the performances of gender that shaped our understanding of the conflict and tracing the hierarchical relationship between the actors involved, these scholars have shown how the dominant representational practices constituted Afghan women as abject victims in
need of protection. Caught between the self-righteous rhetoric of the Bush administration and the edicts enacted by the Taliban, they argue that the women of Afghanistan were placed in a position of absolute inferiority and shown to be entirely dependent upon the intervention of others. This has been particularly helpful for exposing the coalition’s failure to adequately protect the lives of those they are supposed to be saving, leaving them vulnerable to the most devastating effects of the conflict. However, whilst recognising the political and analytical importance of this work, I have suggested that even some of the most vocal opponents of OEF have remained trapped within the dominant discourses of war, reproducing many of the same ideological assumptions that have permeated the Bush administration’s narratives of rescue. On the one hand, I argued that their reliance upon the protector/protected dichotomy has prevented many of these thinkers from exploring the ways in which women’s resistance to Taliban rule has unsettled the prevailing representational practices, disrupting the image of Afghan women as mere symbols of helplessness. On the other hand, I suggested that a number of feminists have relied upon the same historical narratives that were used by the Bush administration and its coalition allies, presenting the Taliban as a barbaric aberration in Afghan history. As well as effacing the complexity of the situation in Afghanistan, this reinforces the idea that the lives of Afghan women were in a state of suspense during the period of Taliban rule.

What was often absent from these accounts was any mention of the ways in which Afghan women were able to subvert the edicts enacted by the Taliban and carve out a space for resistance (see chapters 5 and 6). Even Daulatzai, who has faulted even of the most critical feminist scholars for relying on under-studied notions of gender to fill the void in their own knowledge, has failed to adequately contest the image of Afghan women as passive victims, claiming that the main problem with many feminist accounts was the analytical ‘impasse prohibiting an investigation of the forms and the extent of suffering endured by Afghans’ (2008: 420 emphasis added). The task for feminists, she argues, is to try and ‘retrieve [the] suffering from the tropes and […] bring it closer to the pain of those who suffer’ (2008: 435). Yet this fails to challenge the assumption that the lives of Afghan women can only be defined by the terms of their suffering.30 This does not mean, however, that feminists ought to resort to what Gayatri C. Spivak has

30 Her work on the World Food Program (WFP) bakery program has gone some way to correcting this oversight. As Daulatzai explains, ‘I do not wish to imply that the only subjectivity Afghans can inhabit is one marked by suffering, and even less do I intend to suggest that Afghans are merely traumatised victims’ (2006: 306; 2008: 420 n1; see chapter 6).
referred to as an ‘unexamined nativism’ in order to compensate for our discursive blind spots (1999: 173). Although it is important to affirm the agency of Afghan women, feminists such as Cornell and Franks have failed to take into account either the structural constraints that limit who has access to the global public sphere or the epistemic violence that circumscribes what can be seen and heard within this sphere. This problem became particularly apparent in moves to privilege the voices of organisations such as RAWA without any regard for the complex social-economic, historical and cultural milieu out of which they emerged. It is important, therefore, to try and find a way of thinking about these forms of violence in a way that does not simply reproduce the Bush administration’s images of victimhood or rely upon a problematic affirmation of agency that does little to address the complexity of the situation in Afghanistan. In the next chapter, I will turn to the work of Judith Butler in order to show how her concept of performativity can help us to think about the normative violence that circumscribes the appearance of Afghan women whilst remaining attentive to those moments of disruption that leave the dominant terms of intelligibility vulnerable to the possibility of subversion and resignification. As well as challenging conventional accounts of subjectivity, this will require a radical rethink of the liberal model of agency along with a careful examination of our ethical obligations to others.
4 Performative Subjects: Judith Butler, Normative Violence and the Politics of Intelligibility

In his recent book *Human Rights and Empire: The Political Philosophy of Cosmopolitanism* (2007), Costas Douzinas returns to the question of the human as the centre of debates about humanitarianism, rejecting the idea that it is ever possible to know the precise form that this subject will take. Against those who have sought to define the human by pointing to some sort of shared universality stripped of all status and substance, Douzinas argues that the history of human rights could be written as the ‘ongoing and always failing struggle to close the gap between the abstract man and the concrete citizen: too add flesh, blood and sex to the pale outline of the “human”’ (2007: 54). Human rights, he claims, ‘do not belong to humans and do not follow the dictates of humanity; they construct humans’, producing them in accordance with the requirements of sovereign power (2007: 45). An important aspect of his work, however, has been to show how these discourses of humanitarianism have also served to reinforce divisions between the human and the non-human, constituting certain populations as the nameless and faceless victims of oppression (2007: 68). For Douzinas, these populations are not only seen as helpless victims but as people living lives that are somehow less than human, temporally excluded from the realms of humanity on account of the evil they have encountered (2007: 69-70). This, he argues, has created a politics of pity – or, more accurately, a politics that has been displaced by pity – in which the ‘global humanitarian sees victims of misfortune everywhere: undifferentiated pain and suffering has become the universal currency of the South, and pity the global response of the North’ (2007: 80).

In the previous chapter, I showed how thinkers such as Zillah Eisenstein, Lila Abu-Lughod and Drucilla Cornell tried to undermine the Bush administration’s narratives of rescue by pointing to the performances of gender and race that helped shaped the dominant discourses of war. By exposing the hierarchical relationship between the protector and the protected, these thinkers were able to show how Afghan women were prevented from appearing as anything other than abject victims who had been deprived

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31 Similar arguments have been made by Christine Sylvester, who has criticised the reliance on ‘stick figures’ in place of real human bodies (1994: 13).
of both agency and voice. At the same time, however, they were also criticised for their reliance upon certain analytic constructs that prevented them from addressing the processes of subject-formation that not only placed Afghan women in a position of inferiority but denied them access to a politically qualified subject position. To help overcome this, I will turn to the work of Judith Butler and, in particular, her attempts to make sense of the normative violence that marks the materialisation of the subject. This chapter will begin with a detailed overview of Butler’s performative understanding of the subject, founding on the uneasy process of repetition and reiteration that circumscribes the appearance of the subject within discourse. In the second section, I turn my attention to Butler’s discussions of normative violence, showing how the appearance of the subject is contingent upon excluding those who cannot conform to the prevailing terms of intelligibility, leaving them to haunt the parameters of what is recognisably human. At the same time, I will also point to the inevitable failure of these norms of adequately capture and convey the lives of those it claims to represent, leaving it vulnerable to the possibility of subversion and resignification. This is something that is particularly relevant for our discussions about agency in chapters 5 and 6, which will focus on the ways in which the actions of Afghan women helped to expose the shortcomings of the dominant representational practices. In the final section, I detail Butler attempts to develop an ethics of non-violence based upon our shared sense of precariousness, outlining the influence of the Italian philosopher Adrianna Cavarero.

4.1 Performativity and the Subject

Reflecting on the trajectory of her argument in the preface to the anniversary edition of *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler suggests that the text should be seen as being in an ‘embattled and oppositional relation to certain forms of feminism’ even though she continues to situate it within the wider scope of feminism itself (2006: vii). In particular, she sought to challenge feminism’s reliance upon a seemingly fixed and unchanging understanding of the subject that fails to account for its ambiguous and antagonistic composition. In contrast to conventional understandings of the feminist subject that conceive it as a pre-existing and bounded entity, Butler rejects the possibility that the subject is antecedent to the discursive world and insists that it should be seen as an effect of specific relations of power (Butler, 2006: 3). For Butler,
then, the production and reification of the subject is implicated in the very structures that feminism opposes and is, as a result, implicated in the formation of new social hierarchies that act to privilege certain experiences of gender whilst ensuring that other possible identifications are rendered unintelligible (2006: viii). The feminist subject cannot, therefore, offer a universally-valid foundation upon which the experiences of women can be based because its coherence is contingent upon a series of prohibitions that preclude certain populations from recognition. Rather than unknowingly involve itself in these acts of normative violence, Butler argues that feminism has an obligation to rethink the necessary exclusions that mark the formation of the subject, taking into account the ‘multiple refusals’ that are generated by the omissions, repudiations and foreclosures by attempts to secure its coherence (2006: 6).  

Through its disruption and displacement of the feminist subject, *Gender Trouble* can be seen as a sustained attempt to expose the normative violence that underpins prevailing conceptualisations of women as a political category. Exposing its foundational presuppositions as the effects of specific relations of power, Butler rejects moves to try and locate an authentic sexual identity that is simply repressed by prevailing power arrangements and deploys a genealogical account that investigates ‘the political stakes in designating as an origin and cause those identity categories that are in fact the effects of institutions, practices and discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin’ (2006: xxxi emphasis in original). The influence of Michel Foucault’s critique of the repressive hypothesis is central to this approach, providing the framework through which it becomes possible to trace the productive nature of power and the processes of *assujettissement* through which the subject is formed and animated. Rather than view power in entirely negative terms as a force that impinges upon the subject from the

32 The focus of Butler’s criticism centres on the heteronormative assumptions underpinning certain brands of feminist thought. However, it is of course possible to locate her arguments within a wider context, pointing to the other areas of tension existing within the feminist movement, such as the criticisms made by black feminists (cf. hooks, 1987; Lorde, 1984; Riley, 2003). The problem cannot be ameliorated simply by pluralising the category woman or supplementing it with the perspectives and experiences of previously marginalised women.

33 In the essay “The End of Sexual Difference”, Butler takes her cue from Luce Irigaray’s suggestion that sexual difference should be understood as an irresolvable question that forms the necessary background for feminist politics. As Butler explains, ‘Irigaray would not argue for or against sexual difference but, rather, offer a way to think about the question that sexual difference poses, or the question that sexual difference is, a question whose irresolution forms a certain historical trajectory for us, those who find ourselves asking this question, those of whom this question is posed’ (2004a: 177; see also Irigaray, 1993).
outside, power is understood as providing the conditions of existence that produce and sustain the subject as a viable being. Accordingly, gender cannot be seen as something assumed by the already sexed subject but is implicated within the mechanisms through which the subject takes on a particular sex and is produced as a particular type of being. As Butler suggests, ‘the subjects regulated by such structures are, by virtue of being subjected to them, formed, defined, and reproduced in accordance with the requirements of those structures’ (2006: 3). Although the subject might appear as a natural given, existing independently of its particular social or historical context, it is, in actual fact, the product of an array of socially articulated norms that have congealed to produce the illusion of a bodily given or inner essence. This process is, however, far from being an entirely innocuous affair as it occurs within a tightly controlled regulatory frame that establishes which gender identities can be perceived as legitimate whilst rendering other possible identifications uninhabitable and unimaginable. In order for the subject to materialise as a culturally intelligible entity, it must disavow a range of possible identifications which have been refused cultural articulation and denied the possibility of attaining a socially intelligible and politically qualified existence, appearing instead as ‘developmental failures of logical impossibilities’ (Butler, 2006: 24).

Many of the ideas initially outlined in Gender Trouble were subsequently developed and clarified in her follow-up book Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex” (1993a), which showed a continued commitment to exposing the constitutive constraints that haunt the formation of the subject and circumscribe who might appear as a culturally intelligible being. Unlike her previous work, Bodies that Matter provides a much more sustained account of the materiality of the body, not only describing how particular normative ideals are inscribed on the surface of the body but explaining how the appearance of a bodily surface is produced in accordance with a set of social norms. By further collapsing the distinction between sex and gender in this manner, Butler is able to show how the very contours of the body are defined through a process of materialisation within a framework of intelligibility that effectively determines which bodies will pass as “normal”. In rejecting the notion of a pre-existing body, Butler shares many of the arguments put forward by Elizabeth Grosz who has also questioned the existence of an ahistorical or pre-cultural body that simply enters into the social world and is subsequently colonised by discursive practices (1994: x). Rather than conceive sex as a natural bodily given or possessing an essential physical quality that can
be used as a stable point of reference, Butler suggests that sex is an ideal construct that is forcibly materialised over time to create the impression of stability (1993a: xi). Most importantly, however, she suggests that this materialisation occurs within a tightly controlled and highly regulated framework that establishes in advance what bodies qualify as bodies and which subjects will register as a culturally intelligible being (1993a: 1-2). Introducing the concept of performativity, Butler argues that the subject is produced and sustained through the repetition, reiteration and embodiment of particular arrangements of social norms that sediment over time to produce the appearance of a tangible subject.

To clarify precisely what is meant by this concept of performativity it is helpful to trace the ways in which it has been developed through the course of her work whilst remaining attentive to the theoretical assumptions that have helped shape its development. In *Gender Trouble*, for example, Butler uses the term to challenge the notion of an inner essence to gender, claiming that the ‘body has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality’ (2006: 185). Rather than view it as a static condition of the body, Butler argues that gender should be seen as the effect of a repeated stylisation of the body, ‘a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being’ (2006: 45). These early formulations owe an obvious debt to Jacques Derrida’s reading of Kafka’s “Before the Law” in which he explains how the anticipation of the law produces that which it claims only to name, creating the appearance of a pre-existing reality that is somehow anterior to discourse (Butler, 2006: xiv; Derrida, 1992: 181-220). It is important, however, not to mistake the bodily appropriation of these norms as a singular and intentional act that is performed by an already identifiable agent. Echoing Nietzsche’s claim that the doer does not pre-exist the deed, Butler argues that the illusion of a coherent subject is an effect of discourse, retroactively installed as the performer behind the performance (2006: 195). As Butler

34 Butler’s concept of performativity also draws on another essay by Derrida in which he attempts to reveal the citational structure of language through a deconstruction of J.L. Austin’s notion of a performative speech act. In his essay “Signature, Event, Context”, Derrida attempts to show that Austin’s dismissal of non-serious and parasitic utterances is ultimately untenable as it refuses to recognise the iterable structure of language that enables it to be readable beyond a determinable context and with the absence of any pre-determined addressee (1988: 7). According to Derrida, therefore, the parasitic utterance betrays the inherent citationality of the mark that enables it to be repeated outside of any contextual totality (1988: 17).
explains, '[p]erformativity is thus not a singular “act”, for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition’ (1993a: 12). The subject is not, therefore, free to simply pick and choose its preferred gender as its every existence as a subject has already been determined by the prevailing norms of intelligibility (1993a: x).

This has a number of important implications for the ways in which we think about the materiality of the body, challenging our conventional assumptions about the metaphysics of substance. Rather than accept the body as being an antecedent to the social world, Butler prefers to understand the materiality of the body as ‘a process of materialisation that stabilises over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter’ (1993a: 9 emphasis added).

Accordingly, matter cannot be understood as possessing an abiding substance nor can the body be read as a fully distinct entity that enters the world as a clearly defined whole; instead, Butler argues that the body should be viewed as an effect of a continual and dynamic process of becoming that operates through the repetition, reiteration and re-enactment of an assemblage of social norms that are themselves contingent upon this process of repetition. As Butler suggests in *Undoing Gender*,

> If we consider that human bodies are not experienced without recourse to some ideality, some frame for experience itself, and that this is as true for the experience of one’s own body as it is for experiencing another, and if we accept that the ideality and frame are socially articulated, we can see how it is that embodiment is not thinkable without a relation to a norm, or set of norms (2004a: 28).

The repercussions of understanding matter in this manner ensure that the body can no longer be understood as a blank canvas on which received notions of gender are illustrated and animated, but as something whose very contours are actively shaped through re-enactment of these norms. Indeed, it is precisely at this point that it becomes

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35 One might also follow Rosi Braidotti’s suggestion that, ‘the body, or embodiment, of the subject is to be understood as neither a biological nor sociological category but rather as a point of overlapping between the physical, the symbolic, and the sociological’ (1994: 4). In contrast to the Hegelian overtones apparent in Butler’s formulation, Braidotti follows the anti-Hegelian spirit of Deleuze by suggesting that, ‘becoming is neither the dynamic opposition of oppositions nor the unfolding of an essence in a teleologically ordained process leading to a synthesising identity’ but an affirmation of positivity of difference (1994: 111).
possible to discern important differences between Butler and Foucault’s understanding of the body, with Butler accusing him of attempting to re-inscribe the body as an object that is ontologically distinct from the processes it undergoes, a site upon which particular constructions are imposed (1989: 601-607). Despite their obvious similarities, then, it is possible to trace an important difference between Butler and Foucault’s understanding of the body as Foucault continues to view the body as being ontologically distinct from the processes that it undergoes (1989: 601-607).

Although Butler has done much to undermine the notion of an originary body upon which social norms are neatly inscribed, it would be a mistake to assume that it is possible to reduce all matter to signs. Whilst she has admitted – only half joking – that she is not a good materialist, Butler has been quick to note that her understanding of materiality does not mean that the body is reducible to language. As Chambers and Carver have argued,

Butler has little patience with an idealism that would reduce all matter to signs as she does with a materialism that would reductively separate matter from signs. The former ignores the fact that matter cannot be created by discourse; the latter ignores the fact that matter is always and only materialised through discourse. Both remain blind to the simple truth that all signs are themselves material (2008: 51, emphasis added).

This point has also been echoed by Grosz in her own work on the materialisation of the body, in which she warns that ‘it is not adequate to simply dismiss the category of nature outright, to completely reinscribe it without residue into the cultural: this in itself is the monist, or logocentric, gesture par excellence’ (1994: 21). Despite these qualifications, a number of thinkers have questioned the extent to which Butler has succeeded in collapsing the boundary between nature and culture, with Vicki Kirby suggesting that she surreptitiously re-instates the nature/culture divide by bracketing off the sphere of nature as being inaccessible (2002: 268). Pushing this point further, Kirby wonders whether nature can itself be seen as literate, caught-up in its own practices of reading and writing that also disrupt the idea that matter is merely a surface awaiting inscription by culture (2002: 265-280). The perception that Butler has effectively sealed off the natural world is not helped by the language used by some of her commentators when describing her work. One such example can be found in Moya Lloyd’s otherwise excellent introduction Judith Butler: From Norms to Politics (2007) in
which she suggests that body is ‘only accessible through language’ and states that Butler ‘presupposes that it is never possible to access – or know – the reality of the entity called the body’ (2007: 71; 74).

Someone else who remains somewhat unconvinced by these attempts to challenge the prevailing orthodoxies that underpin our understanding of matter is Pheng Cheah, who accuses Butler of failing to adequately escape the Kantian morphology by tacitly limiting herself to the materiality of the human body rather than matter in general. Accusing her of perpetuating the assumption that matter is immutable outside of human discourse, Cheah claims that she merely dissimulates ‘the conventional form/matter distinction by displacing it onto an opposition between inert passive nature and its anthropologistic others’, neglecting what makes matter susceptible to the formative reach of power and amenable to processes of materialisation (1996: 115-121). In other words, Butler stands accused of failing to adequately undermined the distinction between nature and culture because she seems to take for granted the fact that the nature of human bodies is already cultural, effectively divorcing the human body from the rest of the natural world. In order to circumvent this problem, he proposes a more radical turn towards Derrida in order to explore the materialisation of matter in general, suggesting that, ‘philosophically speaking, the giving of body or matter – what I propose to call “mattering” – may be the process where history and nature become uncannily indistinguishable in a manner that is both enabling and disabling for political transformation, its condition of (im)possibility’ (1996: 108). This, he argues, will enable us to think outside of the constraints that have been imposed by the anthropological horizon and allow us to understand the materialisation of matter in general. Considering the different ways in which critical geographers such as David Campbell (1998a; 1998b) have been able to use Butler’s work to help understand the boundary producing practices that dominate international politics, it might be argued that her understanding of matter is not quite as restrictive as Cheah seems to think.

4.2 Normative Violence and the Politics of Subversion

One issue that has preoccupied Butler throughout her work is the problem of normative violence, which refers to the exclusionary practices that prevents certain
populations from appearing as politically qualified subjects or socially recognisable beings. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler claims that the materialisation of the sexed subject is contingent upon a series of constitutive exclusions that render particular identities unthinkable according to the prevailing terms of intelligibility. Focusing on this process of melancholic disavowal, she argues that the ‘exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed [...] requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet “subjects”, but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject’ (1993a: 3). For Butler, then, those that are excluded from the subject are left to haunt the parameters of the dominant normative framework, appearing only as the inhuman, the subhuman, the potential human. It is important to recognise, however, that this domain of abjection cannot be fully distinguished from the subject or understood in isolation from the processes through which the subject is formed. Instead, Butler makes it clear that these abject beings are intimately connected through a primary act of repudiation, which provides the defining limit to what counts as a recognisable life. The human, she argues, ‘is not only produced over and against the inhuman, but through a set of foreclosures, radical erasures, that are strictly speaking, refused the possibility of cultural articulation’ (1993a: 8).36

In her earlier work on the feminist subject, Butler was particularly keen to show how this normative violence was evident in the pervasive heteronormativity that permeated feminist thought. Combining Foucault’s idea of a ‘grid of intelligibility’ (Foucault, 1998: 93) with Monique Wittig’s work on the ‘heterosexual contract’ (1992: 21-32) and Gayle Rubin’s notion of ‘obligatory heterosexuality’ (1975-179), Butler argued that the sexed subject is constituted within a tightly controlled heterosexual matrix that effectively decides which gender identities can be considered human whilst ensuring that others are rendered unintelligible (Butler, 2006: 47-106).37 More recently, however, Butler has turned her attention to issues of intelligibility that have emerged during the course of

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36 To understand precisely what she means by this it is helpful to turn to Julia Kristeva’s work in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1984) in which she explains the ways in which the subject tries to jettison what is considered to be unclean and impure. What is significant about this for Kristeva is that the abject is never fully external to the subject but constitutes only the most tenuous of thresholds, constantly threatening to undermine the apparent coherence of the subject by exposing the necessary exclusions that underwrite its formation. As we shall see below, this ambiguous relationship between the subject and the abject will be particularly important for thinking about the ways in which this normative violence starts to come undone.

37 One example that Butler uses to highlight the normative violence suffered by those whose lives remain unintelligible is in regards to the so-called corrective surgery that intersex children are forced to undergo at birth (2004a: 57-74).
the ongoing “war of/on terror”, focusing specific attention on the normative violence that renders certain lives ungrievable within the prevailing terms of recognition. This focus on the politics of grief provides us with a visible example of the exclusionary practices that define the limits of the human, as well as illustrating how those denied access to a politically qualified subject position are exposed to a deadly logic in which their lives become profoundly lose-able in attempts to secure the lives of others. Enumerating this ‘hierarchy of grief’, Butler argues that whilst ‘certain lives will be highly protected, and the abrogation of their claims to sanctity will be sufficient to mobilise the forces of war’ other lives will not even qualify as grievable (2004b: 32). In contrast to the nationally amplified and publically sanctioned acts of mourning that have permeated the political landscape in the aftermath of 9/11, Butler suggests that certain forms of grief have been circumscribed in ways that limits our ability to mourn the loss of those populations who do not and cannot be understood as normatively human (2004b: xiv). This melancholic disavowal of loss provides a stark reminder of the ways in which the dominant norms of intelligibility act to circumscribe who might appear as a recognisable subject and a clear sign of the ways in which grief operates to maintain exclusionary conceptions of the human.

A clear example of this differential allocation of grievability is evident in our collective failure to adequately mark the deaths of Muslims, especially those killed as a result of Western violence (2004b: 12). The refusal to mourn the deaths of those killed in Iraq or Afghanistan reveals, according to Butler, that ‘those we kill are not quite human, and not quite alive, which means that we do not feel the same horror and outrage over the loss of their lives as we do over the loss of those lives that bear national or religious similarity to our own’ (2009: 42). In order to illustrate this point, Butler cites the refusal of the San Francisco Chronicle to publish an obituary for two Palestinian families killed by Israeli forces on the basis that the deaths were unconfirmed and that the publication may cause offence (2004b: 35). This refusal stands in complete contrast to the readiness of the media to mark the deaths of those killed on September 11th and the mass outpourings of grief that came to define the public sphere in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, as well as the continuing acts of remembrances through which the deaths

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38 In her earlier work, Butler was primarily concerned with the heteronormative assumptions that compelled the materialisation of the feminist subject. But her performative understanding of subjectivity can also be used to explore the role of others factors such as race, as shown by her attempts to dissect the exclusionary logic that permeated the “war of/on terror” and her work on the brutal beating of Rodney King (see Butler, 1993b; 2006: xvi-xvii; Bell, 1999).
of soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan are publically consecrated. One particularly notable example of this disparity is the collection of personal images and accounts of those lost in the Twin Towers assembled by the *New York Times* and published over a number of months in its *Portraits of Grief* series. In contrast to the victims of the wars waged by the international community, this assortment of tributes provides a personal glimpse into the lives of those killed and allows us to empathise and identify with the families of the dead, humanising the loss by providing a name and an image of the life lost. However, as Butler warns, our capacity to mourn these lives is dependent upon the simultaneous erasure of a whole series of images that cannot appear within the public sphere, ensuring that the victims of Western violence are destined to remain unknown, unidentified and uncounted (2004b: 37).

In order to understand how it becomes possible for a life to become unmarkable it is necessary to highlight how our capacity to grieve a particular life is fully dependent upon our capacity to perceive it as liveable and socially viable life. Those who fail to fully materialise as politically qualified or culturally intelligible subject and who are barred from appearing as being normatively human cannot be understood as possessing a meaningful existence. As Butler argues, ‘if certain lives do not qualify as lives or are, from the start, not conceivable as lives within certain epistemological frames, then these lives are never lived not lost in the full sense’ (2009: 1). If a life has been so thoroughly de-realised by the normative violence regulating the emergence of the subject that they cannot attain any degree of intelligibility or fit any reasonable vision of the human then it cannot be understood as being of any social importance or political significance. Its death cannot, therefore, appear as a comprehensible loss because it was never possible to comprehend a life worth losing, a recognisable human subject deserving of moral concern. The correlation between the politics of grief and the politics of recognition should be clearly evident at this juncture, but it is helpful to borrow an example Butler uses in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning* (2004b) to flesh-out this argument. In contrast to the *San Francisco Chronicle*’s rejection of the obituary for two Palestinian families mentioned above or the killing of Afghans and Iraqis by coalition forces, Butler cites the ease with which the death of the *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl was mourned by the American media after he was brutally murdered after being captured in Pakistan (2004b: 37-38). Whilst it would be an error to suggest that we are indifferent to the deaths of others, it is certainly clear that these deaths consistently fail to make a
difference to our understanding of the conflict in ways comparable to those questions raised by the death of Pearl.

Although the effects of this normative violence can be devastating for those affected and appear to be deeply entrenched, it is important to recognise that they are not set in stone but contingent upon an uneasy process of repetition that leaves them vulnerable to the possibility of subversion and re-signification. Indeed, Butler has herself made clear that a ‘norm only persists as a norm to the extent that it is acted out in social practice and re-idealised and re-instituted in and through the daily social rituals of bodily life’ (2004a: 48). One of the problems that these norms must confront is their failure to adequately capture the lives of those it claims to represent, prompting Butler to suggest that they are forever haunted by the spectral apparitions of those who have been denied access to a culturally intelligible subject position (1993a: 3). These tensions are brought into stark relief in those moments when someone who has been excluded from the norm nevertheless tries to speak from within its terms, thereby exposing the constitutive exclusions and self-grounding assumptions upon which these claims to universality are based. In *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performativ*, Butler describes this tension as a performative contradiction as she tries to draw attention to the possibilities for subversion that arise when someone speaks from the split situation of being at once authorised and de-authorised by the prevailing norms of intelligibility (1997a: 91). Underpinning this argument is the suggestion that the universal cannot be understood in fixed and static terms but as something that is formed through challenges to its existing formulation, when ‘those who are not covered by it […] but who, nevertheless, demand that the universal as such ought to be inclusive of them’ (1997a: 90; see also 2000a: 38-40; 2004b: 191). Importantly for Butler, this demand for inclusion cannot be regarded as a simple assimilation to the existing normative framework but as an insurrection at the level of ontology that actively calls into question the existing configuration of the universal itself (Butler, 1997a: 91; Chambers and Carver, 2008: 89).

The failure of the universal to include those lives that it claims to represent paves the way for a politics of subversion that slowly erodes the constitutive exclusions that mark the formation of the subject. For Butler, this subversion is made possible by the need to repeat the norms that shaped the materialisation of the subject within discourse, leaving them vulnerable to the threat of disruption and re-signification. Although she argues
that the subject is compelled to repeat the norms that governed its emergence, it soon becomes apparent that the subject is not obliged to repeat them in an entirely loyal or faithful manner. What is significant about Butler’s politics of subversion is that she locates resistance within the very structures of power that she opposes, showing how they can be re-imagined in a less violent and exclusionary manner. It is important to recognise, therefore that these subversive strategies are not exterior to the discursive realm but ‘must be [seen as] a political project of erosion, one that works on the norms from the inside, breaking them down not through external challenge but through an internal repetition that weakens them’ (Chambers and Carver, 2008: 142). By suggesting that the possibility of subversion is internal to the prevailing normative framework, Butler can be clearly distinguished from some of her contemporaries on the left, who continue to locate resistance outside of culture. In Gender Trouble, for example, Butler dedicates a significant portion of the text to criticising Kristeva’s claim that it is possible to identify a pre-Oedipal phase that is intimately connected with the maternal body (Butler, 2006: 107-127; Kristeva, 1980). According to Butler, this not only fails to contest the idea that paternal law is responsible for the creation of culture but reproduces the idea that resistance is somehow external to the present system (2006: 109). Similarly, in a series of exchanges that were published in a volume entitled Contingency, Hegemony and Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left (2000), Butler accuses Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek of relying too heavily on the Lacanian notion of the Real, which she claims provides an unnecessarily structural and ahistorical account of agency that cannot accommodate those moments of disruption that occur within language itself (2000a: 11-43). By failing to recognise the importance of immanent critique, Butler argues that these thinkers end up reproducing the same exclusionary structures they are trying to disrupt and depose.

The suggestion that subversion is internal to these relations of power contradicts conventional liberal accounts of agency according to which power is seen as an external force that impinges upon the subject from the outside and denies the opportunity to fulfil its political potential. Indeed, by claiming that resistance can be located within language, Butler’s notion of performativity calls for a radical rethink about the way in which we tend to conceive of agency, moving us away from the idea of a sovereign subject who is the sole author of its deeds towards an understanding of agency beyond the agent. Butler gives her most sustained account of this in her book The Psychic Life of
Power: Theories in Subjection, in which she focuses on the possibilities that are opened up by the process of *assujettissement* through which the subject is formed and defined, reminding her readers that power not only produces the subject but initiates and sustains its agency (1997b: 2). For Butler, a paradoxical feature of these processes of subjectivation is that at the very moment that we are subjected to power we are also interpellated into existence, ensuring that whilst the subject is not reducible to these relations of power it cannot stand fully apart from them either (1997b: 27). This does not, however, mean that the subject is fully determined by the prevailing terms of intelligibility or that it must repeat them in an entirely faithful manner. If in acting, Butler explains, ‘the subject retains the conditions of its emergence, this does not imply that all of its agency remains tethered to those conditions and that those conditions remain the same in every operation’ (1997b: 13). To understand precisely what she means by this, it is helpful to turn to the idea of an ‘enabling violation’ that Gayatri C. Spivak used to describe the violence that marks the formation of the colonial subject but which simultaneously created a subject that was capable of resisting the imperial project (1996a: 19).

Butler’s attempts to rethink traditional assumptions about agency have, however, been criticised by a number of feminist theorists, who claim that her efforts to displace and decentre the subject will inevitably lead to the dissolution of women’s agency. One of her foremost critics is the feminist philosopher Seyla Benhabib, who has claimed that Butler’s account of agency is not only incompatible with the emancipatory goals of feminism but represents a ‘retreat from utopia’ (1995: 20; 29). Of particular concern for Benhabib is her belief that the concept of performativity undermines notions of

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39 Rightly or wrongly, many of Butler’s commentators have tended to conflate her early work on drag with this politics of subversion, viewing these parodic performances of gender as an example of subversion at work (Weir, 1996: e5). It is certainly true that drag has been a prominent part of her attempts to destabilise the heteronormative assumptions that define which bodies count and which do not. This does not mean, however, that drag should be seen as an inherently subversive act or that it can be adopted as some kind of queer strategy that can be used to undermine the coherence of the sexed subject. In *Bodies That Matter*, for example, Butler clarifies some of her early interventions by insisting that drag is only subversive to the extent that it reflects the mundane performances that create the illusion of some inner essence. There is, she argues, no guarantee that these norms will come undone or be reformed in a more inclusive manner (1993a: 231). More recently, Butler has reiterated these claims in *Undoing Gender*, suggesting that drag merely shows how we continue to live and act within certain received notions of gender (2004a: 214).

40 Spivak uses the example of a child of rape to help illustrate this, claiming that rape is something about which nothing good can be said but that, if there is a child, it cannot be ostracised simply because it is a child of rape. For her, the postcolonial situation is akin to the child of rape in the sense that it acknowledges a ‘certain kind of historical enablement which one mustn’t celebrate, but toward which one has a deconstructive position’ (1996a: 19).
intentionality and accountability that have been so central to the feminist project, claiming that ‘[g]iven how fragile and tenuous women’s sense of selfhood is in many cases, how much of a hit and miss affair their struggles for autonomy are, this reduction of female agency to a “doing without the doer” at best appears to me to be making a virtue out of a necessity’ (1995: 22). Another prominent critic of Butler’s work is the political theorist Martha C. Nussbaum, who has also criticised her performative account of agency. Writing in *The New Republic*, Nussbaum accused Butler of neglecting the material reality of women’s oppression in favour of a purely symbolic politics that is both ‘ponderous and obscure’ (1999: 38). According to Nussbaum, the emphasis on subversion and re-signification limits the scope of women’s agency to parodying the very framework that guarantees their oppression, claiming that women are ‘doomed to repetition of the power structures into which we are born, but we can at least make fun of them; and some ways of making fun are subversive assaults on the original norms’ (1999: 40).

In response to her critics, Butler has suggested that their attempts to shore-up the foundational assumptions of feminist thought serve only to reinforce the parameters of the political, effectively deciding in advance what any theory of politics might look like. Dismissing this as an ‘authoritarian ruse’, she argues that ‘to require a subject means to foreclose the domain of the political, and that foreclosure, installed analytically as an essential feature of the political, enforces the boundaries of the political in such a way that that enforcement is protected from political scrutiny’ (1995a: 35-36). Reiterating what she has already argued elsewhere, Butler maintains that the notion of a pre-existing subject is a fantasy that disavows the processes through which it was formed, along with the constitutive exclusions that ensure its coherence. Feminists, she argues, ought to be careful not to valorise a model of subjectivity that is complicit in its own normative violence, reminding thinkers such as Benhabib that the subject is formed through ‘the creation of a domain of deauthorised subjects, presubjects, figures of abjection, populations erased from view’ (1995a: 47). At the same time, however, she is also careful to show that her attempt to deconstruct the subject of feminism does not mean that the category woman can be easily dismissed or simply disregarded. Instead, she insists that it is necessary for feminists to simply suspend their commitments to a particular model of subjectivity, arguing that ‘to deconstruct is not to negate or to dismiss, but to call into question and, perhaps most importantly, to open up a term, like
the subject, to a reusage or deployment that previously has not been authorised’ (1995a: 49).

4.3 Vulnerable Subjects and the Ethics of Responsibility

In the previous section, I described the normative violence that circumscribes who or what might appear as a politically qualified subject, establishing the boundaries of human intelligibility whilst simultaneously ensuring that certain populations are rendered unthinkable within the prevailing normative framework. For Butler, however, these exclusions are not permanent features of the political landscape but are contingent upon an uneasy process of repetition that leaves them vulnerable to the possibility of subversion and re-signification. In order to realise the full potential of this politics of subversion, Butler argues that we must rethink our conventional accounts of agency, rejecting the idea that it is possible to identify an autonomous agent that pre-exists its inscription into language. Rather than viewing power as an entirely repressive force, Butler argues that the process of subjectivation provides the conditions for agency, establishing the subject as a viable actor who is able to resist the terms of its oppression. Instead of trying to locate agency outside of discourse, this performative understanding of agency leaves us with ‘the difficult labour of deriving agency from the very power regimes which constitute us, and which we oppose’ (Butler, 1995b: 136). As well as drawing attention to the exclusionary logic that haunts the formation of the subject, Butler has also begun to articulate an ethical framework that recognises the inherent sociality of the subject, revealing the ways in which we are dependent upon a world of anonymous others for our continued existence as subjects.

One way that Butler tries to illustrate the essential sociality of the subject is to demonstrate how it is continually re-produced and re-defined in the crucible of social life. Pursuing her critique of more conventional understandings of the subject, Butler foregrounds its social vulnerability by showing how it can never be fully distinguished from the processes of its subjectification through which it is formed or the normative framework within which this subjectification occurs. As well as being enabled by these conditions, the subject is also radically constrained by them as they delineate the parameters of what is recognisably human, interpellating the subject in particular ways
and establishing the limits of its agency. However, by looking at the question of intelligibility with an emphasis on the vulnerability of the subject, Butler is able to link it to more Hegelian concerns about the dynamics of recognition and provide a more sustained account of the ways in which the terms of intelligibility act to demarcate the ontological horizon within which the subject emerges. This is particularly helpful for thinking about the subject position occupied by Afghan women in the justifications for war as it provides an important insight into the ways in which this dependency on others constantly plagues the subject with the threat of incoherence, enabling us to attend to the seemingly paradoxical scenario in which the human suffering of Afghan women is hyper-visible yet Afghan women themselves cannot be seen as politically qualified subjects (see chapters 5 and 6). Most importantly, however, Butler also uses the vulnerability of the subject to articulate a less violent form of response to the call of others that challenges the prevailing representational practices through which they are rendered invisible, something that will be more fully developed in the concluding chapter of this dissertation.

In a series of lectures given at the University of Amsterdam and subsequently published as *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), Butler provides the clearest articulation of the vulnerability of the subject and the ethical responsibilities to others that this vulnerability entails. Exploring the narratability of the subject, she insists that any attempt to give an account of itself necessarily falters as a consequence of the inherent relationality of its being, exposing the subject’s dependency upon a world of others who provide the conditions that enable and sustain the subject as a viable being (2005: 7). As Butler argues, ‘the “I” can neither tell the story of its own emergence nor the conditions of its own possibility without bearing witness to a state of affairs to which one could not have been present, which are prior to one’s own emergence as a subject who can know, and so constitute a set of origins that one can narrate only at the expense of authoritative knowledge’ (2005: 37). In other words, the subject cannot provide a definitive account of its becoming because such an account is circumscribed by a contingency on others that can never be fully known or fully explained by the subject. By foregrounding the opacity of the subject to itself, Butler exposes its apparent mastery to be an illusion founded upon a necessary repudiation of its dependency and an attempt to eschew the conditions of its emergence. To this extent, the subject is plagued by an unavoidable foreignness that betrays the ways in which the “you” is
invariably inflected in the emergence of the “I”, revealing a series of invisible ties that bind the subject to a world of others in ways that destroy any possibility of a fully independent existence. It also offers an alternative way of understanding the sociality of the body by expanding upon her attempts in earlier work to expose the public dimension of the body, showing the various ways in which others bear upon the body and imprint themselves on us as they act to establish the boundaries of our being (2004a: 45). By framing our dependency as a form of vulnerability, Butler is able to illustrate how our continued viability as a subject is radically constrained by the prevailing norms of intelligibility that are continually re-enacted and reproduced within the crucible of social life.

In contrast to those who try to depict the subject as a coherent and autonomous whole, Butler shows that the subject cannot be so easily dissociated from the social conditions of its emergence (2005: 7-8). The notion of a fully-sovereign subject that is the sole author of its existence is shown to be an illusion dependent upon effacing the constitutive constraints that enable it and concealing the social norms that sustain it as a viable actor. As Butler explains, ‘although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite entirely our own’ (2004a: 26). The continuing relevancy of Foucault’s understanding of subjectification is clearly evident in these efforts to affirm our dependency on prevailing social code, with Butler invoking his observations in the History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge (1998) that there is no self-making outside of a regime of truth that not only establishes what is humanly knowable but also what is knowably human (2005: 17-22). As Butler observes, “[Foucault] understands that this “other” conditions the possibility of his becoming, and that a regime of truth, in his words, constrains what will and will not constitute the truth of this self, the truth he offers about himself, the truth by which he might be known and become recognisably human, the account he might give of himself” (2005: 30). In common with her earlier work on the sexed subject, Butler relies upon this explicitly Foucauldian understanding of power as a productive force to describe the ways in which we are in the thrall of our relations with others that we cannot always recount or explain, that often interrupts the self-conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control’ (2004a: 19; see also 2004b: 21-24). Likewise, much of Butler’s work in Excitable Speech can be seen as outlining our dependency on others, prompting her to consider whether we would be so vulnerable to injurious speech if we are not, in some ways, linguistic beings (1997a: 1-2).

41 One example which reveals the inescapable relationality of the subject is the process of mourning. As Butler argues, ‘grief displays the way in which we are in the thrall of our relations with others that we cannot always recount or explain, that often interrupts the self-conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control’ (2004a: 19; see also 2004b: 21-24). Likewise, much of Butler’s work in Excitable Speech can be seen as outlining our dependency on others, prompting her to consider whether we would be so vulnerable to injurious speech if we are not, in some ways, linguistic beings (1997a: 1-2).
which the subject is constituted in accordance with a set of cultural norms and social prescriptions that determine the range of possible subject positions that are available at any given moment. In her more recent work, however, Butler tries to link this more explicitly with Hegelian notions of recognition in order to explain how these regimes of truth act to establish the limits of what is recognisably human and determine what qualifies as a culturally intelligible subject (2005: 27-30). This reliance upon the recognition of others for its continued existence reinforces its inherent sociality as it reaffirms the ways in which the subject is vulnerable to and dependent upon the prevailing terms of recognition in order to qualify as human.

The aspect of this argument that is most pertinent for my own purposes is Butler’s attempt to use these moments of vulnerability as an occasion to rethink our ethical obligations to others. In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler considers a number of possible options available to the subject in response to the precariousness of its being, exploring the various ways it might seek to negotiate its dependency on others. One possible response that Butler considers is the attempt to re-establish the illusion of coherence and self-mastery by engaging in acts of condemnation and denunciation that move to externalise the opacity that plagues any account of the subject’s appearance as a social actor. Such a response, however, is not only impossible but is contingent upon the subject masking the inherent sociality of its existence and concealing its dependency upon a series of cultural norms that far exceed its inception. However, as well as attempting to eschew the conditions of its emergence and disavow the commonality of its being, this denunciation of the other is complicit in an act of normative violence that fixes it in a state of abjection and continues to deny it an intelligible subject position. As Butler argues, ‘condemnation becomes the way in which we establish the other as nonrecognisable or jettison some aspect of ourselves that we lodge in the other, whom we then condemn’ (2005: 46). In opposition to this, Butler issues an injunction against acts of ethical violence and suggests that the precariousness of our existence affords us with an opportunity to develop a more ethically responsive mode of address that can affirm the incoherence of others (2005: 41). By acknowledging our own impossibility as subjects, she argues that it is necessary to offer a sustained critique of the underlying

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norms of intelligibility that determine who might qualify as a recognisable human subject, challenging the normative violence that preclude certain populations from possessing a liveable life. Similar themes are also explored in Precarious Life in which Butler criticises attempts made by the Bush administration to reassert the shattered hegemony of the United States in the aftermath of 9/11. Rather than banishing the sense of vulnerability experienced as a result of the attacks, she argues that a less violent response would be to use this experience as an opportunity to evaluate the conditions that render certain lives more vulnerable than others (2004b: 30; see above).

In order to connect the vulnerable nature of the subject with an ethical responsibility to the other, Butler draws on the work of the Italian feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero and the arguments she develops in her book Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood (2000). Challenging the universalising tendencies of Western philosophy, Cavarero follows Arendt in suggesting that its inability to ever successfully determine who someone is or identify the ineffable uniqueness of every human life tends to lead philosophy awry into simply determining what someone or something is (2000: 13). Countering this trend and its propensity towards flattening the complexity of individuals, Cavarero offers the art of narration as an alternative movement that can affirm our unrepeatable identity and fragile uniqueness, revealing meaning without falling into the trap of defining it (2000: 3). According to Cavarero, every human being can be viewed as a narratable self, housing the unrepeatable uniqueness of its being. Yet this narratability is inherently relational and dependent upon a constitutive exposure to the gaze of a plurality of spectators around us who can account for the aspects of the tale that remain unknowable to the subject, as well as being contingent upon the presence of others to whom the story is told (2000: 18-20). What is significant about this understanding of the narratable self and its dependency on others is that it necessarily follows that every other is also a narratable being and whilst we may not know the content of their tale we can be sure of its existence (2000: 34-35). In her discussion of the narratable self, however, she fails to adequately interrogate how the prevailing terms of intelligibility inhibit any attempt by the subject to provide an

43 It is important to note that Cavarero is not attempting to rehabilitate the author as the originator of this narrative, arguing instead that the protagonist of the story is not the author of the narrative but its product (2000: 24). Likewise, although Cavarero presents the self as being narratable she is careful to specific that it does not follow that any narrative is necessarily forthcoming or indeed possible, but that the subject merely desires a narrative (2000: 34).
account of itself by rendering aspects of its story entirely incomprehensible, even to its protagonist. Despite this, Butler finds an important ethical movement in this exposition of the narratable character of the subject which can help illustrate the split situation in which the subject can be seen as both an inimitable singularity yet entwined in a world of others. For Butler, Cavarero’s insistence that we continue to pose the question “who are you?” without ever expecting a full or final answer counters a form of ethical violence that demands a complete and readily transparent identity, tolerating that which is not instantly decipherable in the other (2005: 43). As Butler argues, ‘the violent response is the one that does not ask, and does not seek to know. It wants to shore up what it knows, to expunge what threatens it with not-knowing, what forces it to reconsider the presuppositions of its world, their contingency, their malleability’ (2004a: 35).

Butler’s attempts to formulate an ethics of nonviolence have, however, been criticised by a number of thinkers who have accused her of failing to reconcile it with her earlier work on the formation of the subject and the normative violence that circumscribes its appearance within language. One of the more interesting attempts to get to grips with this problem can be found in a piece by Catherine Mills in which she highlights some of the contradictions that haunt Butler’s ethics of nonviolence, particularly in regards to the issue of normativity. As I have explained above, Butler’s notion of performativity traces the ways in which the materialisation of the subject is dependent upon the repetition and reiteration of those norms that govern the limits of cultural intelligibility, effectively deciding who or what counts as a recognisable human being. For Butler, these norms are seen as being inherently violent as they deny certain lives access to a politically qualified subject position by rendering them unintelligible within language. Indeed, it could be argued that it is precisely this unease that has generated the need for this call for an ethics of nonviolence. According to Mills, however, the ethical framework that Butler proposes is underwritten by a troubling paradox as the ethical subject is itself produced through a violent and exclusionary process, making it impossible to keep questions of violence entirely distinct from questions of ethics (2007: 134). As she explains, ‘if the appearance of the ethical subject is itself productively constrained by social norms and is thus dependent upon violence, then it [becomes increasingly] unclear in what sense an ethics could be [considered] nonviolent’ (2007: 135). As a result, she suggests that Butler should rethink her “ethical turn” as it
fails to adequately interrogate the normative violence that marks the constitution of the subject – something which Butler has herself shown to be both dangerous and irresponsible (2007: 150).

The idea that Butler’s so-called “ethical turn” is somehow incompatible with her earlier work – or that it is even possible to impose such a clear distinction between the different aspects of her work – has been the subject of much criticism (cf. Jenkins, 2007; Butler, 2007). In her response to Mills, for example, Butler questions whether or not she has ever actually subscribed to the view that norms are inherently violent or that their operations are necessarily complicit in violent acts (2007: 181).\textsuperscript{44} Even if this were the case, she argues, it would still be possible to identify crucial breakage between the ‘violence through which we are formed and the violence by which we conduct ourselves once formed’ (2007: 181; 2009: 167). Indeed, it is precisely because ‘someone is formed in violence, the responsibility not to repeat the violence of one’s formation is all the more pressing and important’ (2007: 181). Taken out of context, however, the suggestion that it is possible to identify a crucial breakage between the normative violence that marked our formation as subjects and the violence with which we choose to live our lives risks reproducing a number of problematic assumptions that she has herself criticised. Although she has successfully shown that subjects are only ever conditioned by the terms of their emergence and not fully determined, the language she uses in her response appears to reinstate the notion of a ‘doer behind the deed’ by suggesting that, following their initial formation, subjects are free to choose to act in a nonviolent manner. At the same time, she also seems to suggest that the effects of this normative violence can be easily identified and readily avoided even though she had previously emphasised that normative violence is often an unknown and unknowable force (2004a: 23-25). Finally, it could also be argued that this idea of a break ignores her own concerns about the problems that are encountered by those subjects who fail to repeat the norms by which they were produced and find that their very status as subjects is in doubt. After all, ‘the subject is compelled to repeat the norms by which it

\textsuperscript{44} Expanding on this point, Butler suggests that Mills is in danger of ontologising by trying to locate an original and structural form of violence within normativity itself, thereby ignoring the poststructuralist critique of both origins and structures (2007: 184). It is also not immediately apparent why Mills ascribes such importance to the fact that Butler’s thoughts on normativity is not internally consistent or that she has ultimately failed to reconcile her ethics of nonviolence with other aspects of her work. On this point, Butler has claimed that it never occurred to her to try and establish such an internally consistent philosophical position, arguing that as a living being ‘one writes and then writes again, but it is probably not the case that what one writes first serves as a set of philosophical premises from which the later work is derived’ (2007: 181).
is produced, but that repetition establishes a domain of risk, for if one fails to reinstate
the norm “in the right way” [...] one feels the prevailing conditions of existence

Although Butler’s response to Mills has caused some confusion, it is important to
recognise that her idea of a break does not mean that it is possible for the subject to
fully escape the constraints of normativity or that the effects of these norms do not
continue to impress upon the subject even after its formation. When thinking about her
call for an ethics of nonviolence it is important to remember that, for Butler, there is no
foundational act through which the subject is inaugurated but an uneasy practice of
repetition and re-enactment that pervades its entire temporal life. For Butler, then, these
moments of breakage refer to the constant breaking with context that defines the
iterative process and which open up the possibility for a less violent and less
exclusionary re-enactment. As Butler explains, ‘[t]o claim that there are such conditions
that inaugurate a process and then conditions of breakage is precisely to miss the fact
that norms function by way of their iterative exercise and that norms cannot exist
outside of the iterations by which they are established, disestablished, and errantly or
not-so-errantly reestablished (2007: 182). Yet, this dependency on the dominant norms
of intelligibility does give rise to the same kind of ethical impasse that Mills describes in
her critique, showing how the subject can never quite escape the violence that marred
its inception within discourse. Unlike Mills, however, I do not believe that it is necessary
to abandon this ethical enterprise simply because it rests upon a fundamental
impossibility. Rather than trying to expunge violence from the realm of normativity, it is
important to see these tensions as the necessary bind that makes the struggle for
nonviolence all the more urgent and all the more pressing. As Butler explains, ‘[i]t is
precisely because – or, rather, when – one is mired in violence that the struggle exists
and that the possibility for nonviolence emerges within the terms of that struggle’ (2007:
185).

Despite some of the reservations that have been outlined above, Butler’s attempts to
rethink our ethical obligations to the other based upon the inherent sociality of the
subject and our shared sense of vulnerability provides a number of important insights
that are crucial to this thesis. By drawing on the work of thinkers such as Cavarero and
Foucault, Butler has successfully challenged the idea that the subject can be seen as an
autonomous agent by showing that it is dependent upon the actions of an array of anonymous others who provide the conditions for its emergence within discourse. For Butler, the precariousness of the human condition means that it is necessary to rethink our ethical obligations to others and avoid attempts to shore-up a sense of self-identity at the expense of those who are denied access to a culturally intelligible subject position. As Chambers and Carver explain, ‘[t]o make life liveable at the limits of intelligibility will require an account of oneself that calls for ethical critique, that demands alteration of the norms that govern intelligibility’ (2008: 99). In the following chapters, I will draw on this ethics of nonviolence to challenge those who have tried to define the lives of Afghan women entirely by the terms of their suffering, constituting them as abject victims in need of rescue. Instead of reproducing the violence that underpinned the Bush administration’s narratives of rescue, I will argue that it is important that we remain attentive to those moments of disruption that subvert our dominant representational practices by showing how they are unable to adequately convey the complexity of their lives. As we shall see below, the idea that Afghan women could only be seen as mere symbols of helplessness cannot account for their resistance to the oppressive measures introduced by the Taliban, their outspoken criticism of the ongoing occupation by coalition troops or their protests against the repression that has been witnessed since the collapse of the Taliban regime.

4.4 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to introduce the theoretical insights that have emerged from Butler’s work on the subject, highlighting their relevance for understanding the construction of Afghan women whilst remaining attentive to the ways in which they can be subverted and undermined. Unlike those who view the subject as a fixed and coherent entity that pre-exists its emergence in discourse, Butler has argued that it is the effect of an ongoing process of repetition and reiteration through which the prevailing terms of intelligibility are appropriated and embodied. Drawing on Foucault’s notion of *assujettissement*, Kristeva’s thoughts on abjection and Derrida’s work on the iterable structure of language, Butler has shown that the very contours of the human body are formed within a tightly controlled regulatory framework that effectively decides who or what might appear as a politically qualified
subject. It is important to recognise, however, that those who have been excluded from the norm do not disappear into pristine nothingness but continue to haunt the parameters of human intelligibility, threatening to disrupt the coherence of the subject by exposing its self-grounding assumptions. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that she is advocating for a more inclusionary framework that can simply accommodate those who have been excluded from the norm. In her discussions of gay marriage, for example, Butler clearly rejects the idea that the legal recognition should be considered the primary goal for gay rights activists, claiming that this fails to contest the prevailing codes of kinship that define which kinds of relationships are to be considered socially acceptable (2004a: 5; 106). For Butler, these appeals for legal recognition serve only to reaffirm the authority of the dominant normative structure, endowing it with the legitimacy to decide who counts as human. To be legitimated by the state is, she argues, ‘to enter into the terms of legitimation offered there, and to find that one’s public and recognisable sense of personhood is fundamentally dependent on the lexicon of that legitimation’ (2004a: 105). Instead of advocating for greater inclusion, therefore, Butler insists that it is necessary to expose these normative structures to a constant critique by revealing their constitutive exclusions whilst remaining attentive to the possibility for subversion and re-signification (2004b: 105). This is why her emphasis on the concept of performative contradiction – which refers to those moments when an individual excluded from the dominant normative framework continues to speak and act within its terms – is so vital for her political project (2004a: 191; 1997a: 84-91). It would also be a mistake to assume that the theoretical framework that is proposed by Butler manages to escape the prevailing terms of intelligibility as this fails to appreciate the implications of her argument, which clearly states that it is simply not possible to retreat from the dominant political landscape.
The Limits of the Audible: Afghan Women as Speaking Subjects

In a rare foray into the political spotlight, the wife of the British Prime Minister, Cherie Blair, joined some of her husband’s cabinet colleagues to speak out against the Taliban’s treatment of women, hosting a gathering of Afghan women refugees at an event in Downing Street. Speaking only a few days after First Lady Laura Bush took over the President’s weekly radio address, Blair told reporters that she could not recall ‘repression and cruelty quite as horrifying as that joyless regime that the Taliban has imposed on the people of Afghanistan’ (Reuters, 2001). One of the main focal points of the event was the need to ensure that women were adequately represented in the peace process and given the opportunity to contribute to the rebuilding of post-Taliban Afghan society. International Development Secretary Clare Short maintained that the British government could guarantee that Afghan women would be an integral part of any interim arrangements, making certain that their role in the reconstruction of Afghanistan was recognised by the international community (Ward, 2001). This commitment was reiterated by Cherie Blair in her own speech to the press, in which she argued that the international community had an obligation to provide Afghan women with an opportunity to speak out about the problems that affected their everyday lives. As she explained, ‘the women here today prove that the women of Afghanistan have a spirit that belies their unfair, downtrodden image. *We need to help them free that spirit and give them their voices back,* so they can create the better Afghanistan we all want to see’ (quoted in Ward, 2001, emphasis added).

The idea that the international community had an obligation to listen to the voices of Afghan women might seem like an entirely benevolent gesture, providing us with an opportunity to hear directly from those affected without the need for the mitigating effects of third-party representation. It is, however, important to consider if it is possible to fully dissociate these appeals to the concrete experiences of ordinary Afghans from the ideological imperatives underpinning the “war on terror”. As well as forming an essential part of attempts by the Bush administration to undermine the legitimacy of the Taliban regime, the idea that they need to be “given” a voice reinforces the image of Afghan women as mere symbols of helplessness. The purpose of this
chapter, then, is to explore the limits of audibility within the dominant discursive landscape, showing how the prevailing representations of Afghan women circumscribed what could be said and heard. Drawing on the work of Gayatri C. Spivak and Judith Butler, I will argue that it is necessary to attend to the processes of subject formation through which Afghan women materialised as a homogeneous social group as well as the normative violence that has denied them access to a recognisable and culturally intelligible subject position. As I will argue below, these processes not only decide who or what is authorised to speak but also establish the limits of the audible. As Butler has argued,

The public sphere is constituted in part by what cannot be said and what cannot be shown. The limits of the sayble, the limits of what can appear, circumscribe the domain in which political speech operates and certain kinds of subjects appear as viable actors (2004b: xvii).

This chapter will begin with a discussion of the more obvious attempts to exclude Afghan women from the peace process after the fall of Kabul, focusing on the Bonn Conference in 2001 and the subsequent loya jirgas that were convened to appoint an interim authority and establish a constitutional framework for the new republic. Although the Bush administration promised to ensure that they were given a voice in the future of Afghanistan, the experiences of women were often sidelined in the efforts to rebuild the country’s shattered political infrastructure. In the second section, however, I will consider the problems that Afghan women encountered when they were invited to speak, particularly when they tried to speak beyond their ascribed status of passive victims awaiting the intervention of others. Reflecting on the experiences of organisations such as the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), I will show how the mainstream media and political establishment were unable to hear anything other than their pleas for help, ignoring their concerns about the coalition’s military campaign and the role of known warlords in the new administration. In the final section, I will take advantage of Spivak’s work on the subaltern as a speaking subject to show how the gendered assumptions that have enabled the Bush administration’s “war of/on terror” ensure that the voices of Afghan women cannot be heard within the global political sphere as it currently stands.
5.1 Women and the Bonn Process

As part of their efforts to liberate ordinary Afghans from the barbarity of the Taliban regime, the Bush administration claimed that Afghan women would be “given” a voice, allowing them to draw attention to their worries and concerns whilst helping them to articulate their hopes and desires for the future. In a speech to the House of Representatives in 2001, for example, Californian Congressman Sam Farr argued that the ‘lives of Afghan women often depend on silence’, describing how the restrictions imposed by the Taliban prevented them from laughing too loudly in public or speaking within the political sphere (2001: H6897). In order to break the cycle of repression, he argued, ‘the women of Afghanistan recognise that their lives also depend on breaking [these] silences’, maintaining that the Bush administration must do all it can to ensure that their quiet whispers ‘have echoed across mountains and oceans and reached our ears’ (2001: H6897). We must, he argued, ‘use our voices and all of our abilities to ensure that the quiet voices of the women in Afghanistan are heard loudly and freely not just here in the United States, but in all countries, and especially, their own’ (2001: H6897). Similar sentiments were also echoed by the senior figures in the Bush administration, with Secretary of State Colin Powell telling a press conference that ‘President Bush and this entire Administration cannot imagine a stable, post-Taliban Afghanistan without the involvement of women in all aspects of the humanitarian reconstruction and development efforts that will be undertaken’ (US State Department, 2001b). The UN were so keen to ensure that women were given the opportunity to speak that they were organising a series of seven intensive training sessions to train those attending the loya jirgas ‘to find their voice’ (Reid, 2002).

This desire to let Afghan women speak for themselves was, however, soon undermined by the decision to exclude their voices from the reconstruction process, with members of the international community claiming ‘to speak for Afghan women, sometimes at the expense of listening to them’ (Barakat and Wardell, 2004: 110).45 One example that shows how Afghan women were marginalised from the political process can be found in the experiences of those (not) attending the Bonn Conference between the 27th November

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45 Similar problems were also identified prior to the outbreak of hostilities. Saba Gul Khattak, for example, quotes members of the Afghan Women’s Network who claimed that they were left ‘confused, insulted, hurt, angry and substantially ignored’ after a visit by the UN Gender Mission headed by Angela King (quoted in 2002: 21).
and the 5th December 2001. Held under the auspices of the UN’s newly-appointed Special Representative in Afghanistan, Lahkdar Brahimi, the conference brought together delegates from the Northern Alliance, Peshawar Group and the Rome Group to discuss the future of Afghanistan, charging them with formulating a framework for rebuilding the country’s shattered political landscape and re-establishing a viable state apparatus. After so many years of conflict it was not surprising that the meeting got off to a rather fractious start, with a number of senior figures walking away from discussions over concerns that their interests were not being adequately represented, including Abdul Qadir and Karim Khalili (Maley, 2009: 224). This was not helped by the absence of the leader of the Northern Alliance and de facto head of state Burhanuddin Rabbani or by the decision of Gen. Abdul Dostum to boycott the conference along with any transitional government that followed (Harding and Watt, 2001). In spite of these difficulties, however, the delegates at Bonn eventually agreed upon a set of interim arrangements, which were subsequently endorsed by the UN in Security Council Resolution 1383. As part of the four-stage process, it was decided that an interim authority would be established after the transfer of power on the 22nd December 2001, consisting of a chair, five vice-chairs and 24 other members (UN, 2001a). In addition, it was agreed that an Emergency Loya Jirga would be convened to decide on the nature of the transitional administration along with a Constitutional Loya Jirga to discuss the country’s constitutional arrangements before elections could be finally held (UN, 2001a). The delegates also approved the creation and deployment of the International Security and Assistance Force (UN, 2001a).

The loosely-defined goals that were set-out in the Bonn Agreement were not welcomed by all, prompting a number of commentators to express some concern at the discrepancies between the ambitions of the international community and the complexity that marked the situation on the ground. William Maley, for example, argued that the agreement could not be seen as a formal peace plan in the conventional sense, claiming that it was more akin to a ‘road-map for the re-establishment of rudimentary state structures’ (2009: 225). The Bonn Agreement, he argued, ‘contained much aspirational rhetoric that was remote from the drab and squalid realities of daily life in most parts of Afghanistan’ (2006: 35). Similarly, Chris Johnson and Jolyon Leslie claimed that, ‘rather than engag[ing] in some hard-headed thinking about what was both necessary and

46 It should be noted that the loya jirga is very much a Pashtun institution and not necessarily one that is endorsed by all of Afghanistan’s ethnic groups (Maley, 2006: 33; Johnson and Leslie, 2008: 59).
possible at this stage of the country’s history, the international community went on a
fantasy tour, imagining a state that could not possibly exist and on this basis
constructing plans that were doomed to failure’ (2008: 173). Of particular concern was
the failure to address the intense rivalries between the main protagonists involved in the
process or to provide adequate provisions for the disarmament of the country’s
notoriously unpredictable warlords, who still controlled much of the country through
the drugs trade. As Barnett R. Rubin explains, ‘[s]tate-building operations following
internal armed conflict must include measures for DDR [Disarmament, Demobilisation,
Reintegration] of combatants and for the changes in government security agencies but
the Bonn Agreement, concluded in great haste under pressure from the US military
campaign, referred to these in only the most general terms’ (2006: 180). The absence of
any meaningful mechanism for the disarmament of warlords ensured that regional
power-brokers were able to maintain their control over the local population, preventing
the new interim authority from extending their influence beyond the city limits of Kabul
(Rubin, 2004: 9). This problem was only exacerbated by Bush’s reluctance to commit
American troops, preferring instead to arm and encourage warlords such as Ismail
Khan and Gen. Abdul Dostum to wage war against the Taliban on America’s behalf
(Rashid, 2009: 125-144; Giustozzi, 2009: 87-100; HRW: 2002a; Kolhatkar and Ingalls,
2006: 85-166).

Aside from these concerns about the specific outcomes of the meeting in Bonn, many
commentators were impressed by the appearance of three female delegates at the
conference, assuming that the presence of Amena Afzali, Rona Mansuri and Sima Wali
was enough to ensure that the experiences of Afghan women were adequately
represented (cf. Erlanger, 2001). What they tended to neglect in their reports was any
discussion of how it was that these women came to be seen as individuals who could
speak on behalf of all Afghan women. It is worth noting, for example, that none of
these women lived in Afghanistan but were all wealthy expatriates who had fled the
country before the Soviets invaded in 1979. It is also important to remember that they
were not invited as representatives of any Afghan women’s groups but were there to
speak on behalf of either the Northern Alliance (Amena Afzali) or the Rome Group
(Sima Wali and Rona Mansuri). The decision to include the Northern Alliance, along
with other known warlords, also angered many Afghan activists who were concerned
that their appearance would limit any possible discussions about the problems affecting
Afghan women, particularly in those areas already under their control (*San Francisco Chronicle*, 2001b). Outside the meeting, a crowd of Afghan exiles living in Germany gathered to demonstrate against the Northern Alliance, warning that commitment to women’s rights was nothing more than an empty gesture designed to appease the international community (MacAskill, 2001). The disparity between the rhetoric of the Northern Alliance and the reality on the ground soon became apparent as news filtered through that the Northern Alliance’s chief negotiator at Bonn, Yunus Qanuni, had banned a protest in Kabul that had been organised by women’s rights groups only two days before the start of the conference (Rhodes, 2001). The Bush administration, it seemed, were ‘unwilling to challenge the particular “Afghan voice” to which they choose to listen’ (Johnson and Leslie, 2008: 179).47

For many Afghan women, the meetings in Bonn revealed the ease with which the international community and the country’s new political elite were willing to exclude their concerns from the peace process, particularly when they were considered to be politically inconvenient. Despite these concerns, the Bonn Agreement did contain one article which stated that the arrangements outlined in the document were intended as a ‘first step toward the establishment of a broad-based, gender-sensitive, multi-ethnic and fully representative government’ (UN, 2001a). The decision to include such a provision was, however, widely seen as an attempt to placate the concerns of international observers, particularly those feminist organisations who had supported military operations.48 One commentator writing for the *Guardian* argued that the language used to frame this particular condition relied upon ‘the kind of wording alien to an Afghan male’, describing it as the sort that ‘could only have been drummed up by the international UN elite’ (Traynor, 2001). Other commentators also pointed to the fact that the document states explicitly that, although Dari and Pashto translations are available, the English version would be considered the ‘authentic text’ to support the suggestion that the Bonn Agreement was intended primarily for an international

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47 Some of those who were not invited to attend the meeting in Bonn gathered instead at a conference in Brussels that was organised by the UN to discuss the issues affecting women after the collapse of the Taliban regime (UN, 2001b). A similar initiative was organised by swisspeace to coincide with the conference in Bonn, bringing together different elements of Afghanistan’s civil society. Interviews with some of those who attended the meeting revealed that many women were confused about their role in the process, expressing a ‘deep unease as to how their views might be portrayed’ (Johnson and Leslie, 2008: 58; see also Kolhatkar and Ingalls, 2006: 126).

48 The article concerning gender-sensitivity followed on from two other statements that had been inserted to ensure the continued support of Rabbani and to mollify former members of the mujahedeen, praising their efforts during the civil war (Maley, 2009: 225).
audience. According to Ahmed Rashid, for example, the conference was convened with such haste that the UN did not have enough translators to staff the meetings so had to rely on interpreters working for the BBC (2009: 102).

The willingness of the United States and Afghan authorities to sideline the concerns of women was also apparent during the Emergency Loya Jirga, which was convened in June 2002, and the Constitutional Loya Jirga, held in December 2003. Although the Bonn Agreement charged the interim authority with ensuring the full ‘participation of women as well as the equitable representation of all ethnic and religious communities’, many women were prevented from participating. One problem that was raised by a number of international observers was the ability of local warlords to manipulate the nomination process through a combination of fear and violence to ensure that their preferred candidates were chosen. Human Rights Watch (HRW), for example, documented several examples of warlords using their military power to threaten and intimidate potential candidates, claiming that ‘in every province of southern Afghanistan, we received at least some reports of local commanders corrupting the election process through the use of threats, beatings, imprisonment, and other tactics of intimidation’ (HRW, 2002b: 9-10; 2002c: 1-12). They concluded by stating that, ‘[d]espite the promise of a partially democratic or at least loosely representative political event, the loya jirga process and meeting was marred by manipulations and abuses by Afghan warlords and commanders, who interfered with the decision-making of other representatives. Many of the delegates selected to the loya jirga were selected and controlled by local commanders’ (2002b: 9-10). In another report, the organisation expressed particular concern about the actions of Ismail Khan in the province of Herat, who they accused of trying to control ‘this process from beginning to end, scaring and intimidating potential delegates out of the process and installing his own people in their place’ (2002d: 18). Not only did the Bush administration do little to address these problems, they were often responsible for precipitating them by working so closely with the warlords, often in opposition to the wishes of the local community (HRW, 2002c: 1; Barakat, 2004: 1-16; Rashid, 2009: 125-144).

Although the two assemblies were seen by many as marking the start of Afghanistan’s conversion to more democratic forms of governance, it quickly became clear that ‘democracy stopped at the door to the tent where the loya jirga was convened’ (Johnson
Approximately 12% of the delegates at the Emergency Loya Jirga were women but many of those chosen to attend complained that their role was purely symbolic, with a number of participants claiming that they were ‘prevented from giving any substantive input’ (HRW, 2002a: 9). Unlike their male colleagues who were permitted to speak for upwards of thirty minutes, the few women who were allowed to address the assembly were only ever allocated a maximum of five, with some even reporting that their microphones were switched off when their comments were deemed to be too critical (HRW 2002a: 9). Particular disquiet was expressed about the role of US special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad, who was nicknamed “the viceroy” for his role in orchestrating a number of important discussions from behind the scenes, such as the king’s decision not to run for office (Kolhatkar and Ignalls, 2006: 132-134). As a frustrated Sima Samar argued, ‘this is not a democracy, this is a rubber stamp - everything has already been decided by the powerful ones’ (quoted in Kolhatkar and Ingalls, 2006: 134). More worrying, however, was the violence that was directed towards those women who dared to speak out against the warlords. HRW, for example, interviewed ‘several women participants who subsequently faced retaliation in the form of harassment, dismissals from their jobs, and transfers to less desirable positions’ (2002b: 10). One of those targeted was Samar who was accused of blasphemy by the powerful Jamiat-e Islami, the party headed by former president Burhanuddin Rabbani. In response to comments she made to the Canadian press, an article appeared on the front-page of their party newsletter in which she is portrayed as the ‘Afghan Salman Rushdie’, prompting calls for her to be given the ‘appropriate punishment’ (Steele, 2002b). As a result of these threats Samar was forced to resign her position as Minister for Women’s Affairs.

Another individual who has been targeted for her outspoken views about the Bonn process and interim authority is Malalai Joya who was one of 114 female participants at the second loya jirga, which was convened to discuss the matter of the country’s constitution in December 2003. Angered by the inclusion of so many known warlords, Joya argued that it was almost impossible for women to get their voices heard above the clamour caused by former mujahedeen commanders, claiming that the only place where female delegates were able to discuss the composition of any constitution was over tea at the end of the day in a hall reserved for women (2009a: 97). After days of waiting, Joya finally managed to convince the chairman, former president Sibghatullah
Mojaddedi, that she should be allowed to speak during the debate, insisting that he let the younger generation contribute. Pushing back her black headscarf, Joya launched into a short but remarkable speech during which she condemned the ‘criminals’ responsible for the country’s civil war, arguing that they be put on trial in an international court. Even ‘if our people forgive them’, she told delegates, ‘history will not’ (Waldman and Gall, 2003). After only ninety seconds, the furious chairman switched off her microphone, telling her that her remarks were an insult to the reputation of the mujahedeen. At the same time, the allies of those warlords who had been targeted in the speech rose to their feet in order to shout abuse at her, calling her a communist and a prostitute as she took shelter behind her supporters. When Joya refused to apologise for her comments, Mojaddedi expelled her from the meeting and told delegates that ‘this sister has crossed the line of what is considered common courtesy’ (Joya, 2009a: 84-86; Waldman and Gall, 2003). She was escorted out of the building by supporters and UN facilitators, who huddled around her to protect her from the angry mob. That night she was forced to take shelter in a safe house provided by the UN and has been forced to move between different safe houses ever since (Joya, 2009a: 86-87; Waldman and Gall, 2003).

In defiance of these threats to her life, Joya managed to get herself elected as an independent to the newly-establish parliament, becoming the country’s youngest MP at the age of 27. Upon entering the recently-refurbished parliamentary building, she was once again confronted with many of the same warlords that she so vehemently opposed in her previous speech, including Abdul Rasul Sayyaf who was seated just one row in front of her. During her time in office, Joya was often insulted, harassed and abused by her colleagues, who would regularly switch off her microphone to prevent her from speaking. During one incident, she was forced to hide under a table to protect herself from other MPs who threw water bottles at her after she criticised the mujahedeen. It came of little surprise to Joya and her supporters, then, when her enemies eventually found an excuse to expel, suspending her from parliament after she described it as being ‘worse than a stable or zoo’. At least there, she argued, ‘you have a donkey that carries a load and a cow that provides milk’ (quoted in Sengupta, 2007). Despite these brazen attempts to silence her, the response of the international community was all-too mute. Although a number of human rights organisations took up her cause, neither the British nor the American government did anything of any substance. The White House, for
example, has yet to comment, whilst the Congressional Record contains only one misspelt entry under her name (2007: H6067). In the UK, by contrast, a few concerned MPs have tabled a series of Early Day Motions about the treatment of women in the Afghan parliament (EDM 832, 1576, 1836 and 2135), but the government did not appear to share their concerns. In response to one question, for example, one junior Foreign Office minister appeared to suggest that the mere presence of women was sufficient enough, telling the House of Commons that ‘President Karzai told me that he is very pleased with the number of women MPs who have been elected in Afghanistan’ (Howells, 2006).

The examples that are outlined above go some way to exposing the more obvious attempts to silence the voices of Afghan women and exclude them from the political sphere, undermining the promises of the Bush administration to ensure that women were adequately represented within the peace process. During the early stages of the Bonn process, commentators tended to rely upon a crude political calculus that assessed the role of women based on the number of female participants that were present, with no concern for the environment within which they were expected to speak or, for that matter, how it was that these women came to be seen as being representative of Afghan women in general. Of particular concern, however, was the relatively muted response of the international community to the verbal abuse and physical violence that women, such as Malalai Joya, encountered as they spoke out against the influence of the country’s notorious warlords. Although many human rights organisations tried to draw attention to threats and intimidation used to silence female politicians, the mainstream media and political establishment remained strangely silent on the matter, seemingly uninterested in the voices of those they were so desperate to hear during the early stages of OEF. The voices of Afghan women, it seems, were only listened to when it was politically expedient to do so; the rest of the time they were either ignored or actively suppressed.

At the same time, however, it is important to recognise that the United States and its Afghan allies never quite succeeded in keeping women such as Joya silent. Although these women were often excluded from the decision-making process they continued to speak out against the devastating effects of the US-led occupation and the brutality of the country’s warlords, refusing to back down in the face of the threats of violence they received from their parliamentary colleagues. Indeed, many of these women tried to find alternative ways of getting their voices heard, bypassing the official channels by
organising their own meetings and by speaking directly to alternative media outlets such as *Democracy Now*, *Znet* and *Rabbite*.

During the Constitutional Loya Jirga, for example, female delegates were able to organise a series of unofficial committees that operated outside of the formal structures of the assembly, carving out a space within which it was possible to discuss women’s issues without the fear of retribution. Recalling her own frustration at being placed on a committee headed by Burhanuddin Rabbani, Joya argued that the only way women were able to get their concerns on the agenda was to meet privately in a hall reserved for female delegates, where they gathered at the end of each day to discuss the constitution over tea (2009: 97). It was, as Joya explains,

> In this setting that we worked on the part of constitution that dealt with women’s rights. I contributed to the debate, talking about violence against women and how women’s rights were not clear in law. In the end, we even managed to have the following sentence included in the constitution: “The citizens of Afghanistan – whether man or woman – have equal rights and duties before the law”. This would have been a great triumph, except there was no provision to enforce it (2009: 57).

In many ways, these meetings provide a perfect example of how the dominant representational practices failed to adequately convey the complexity of the situation, undermining the image of Afghan women as the silent victims of Taliban oppression. As I argued in the previous chapter, these moments of disruption are particularly important because they expose the constitutive exclusions that forever haunt the dominant normative framework, allowing for the possibility of a less violent and less exclusionary re-imagining. Norms, as Butler has argued, ‘can become rattled, display their instability, and become open to resignification’ (2004a: 28).

### 5.2 The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan

As well as focusing on the active exclusion of Afghan women from the political sphere, it is also important to look at the ways in which the voices of these women were radically circumscribed even when they were allowed to speak, paying attention to the limits of what could be said and heard within the prevailing frames of war. Although the idea that the international community could “give a voice to the voiceless” seems like an
entirely benevolent gesture, it relies upon a series of problematic assumptions about Western superiority that not only undermine the status of Afghan women but serve to render their speech inaudible. As I will suggest below, it assumes that those living under the Taliban lacked a voice before the heroic intervention of figures such as Cherie Blair, Laura Bush and Colin Powell, ignoring their vocal opposition to the policies that were imposed upon them. It is, therefore, important to pay close attention to these more insidious forms of exclusion, focusing on the normative violence that prevented Afghan women from speaking as any other than abject victims in need of rescue.

One of the more well-established groups to enter the public consciousness after the terrorist attacks on 9/11 was the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) (see chapter 3). Its prominence in Western circles is due, in part, to their vocal opposition to the US-led invasion of Afghanistan and their continued criticism of the decision to include warlords in the Bonn process, which attracted the support of feminist anti-war activists across the world. However, prior to assuming this counter-hegemonic role, RAWA were often called upon to bear witness to the barbarity of the Taliban by those seeking to justify the intervention into Afghanistan. One of their early supporters was the President of the Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF), Eleanor Smeal, who joined a protest organised by RAWA, addressing the crowd of 100 demonstrators who had gathered outside the White House in Lafayette Park (Pollitt, 2000). A number of congressmen and women also offered their support to RAWA, acknowledging the work of the organisation during various congressional debates about the situation in Afghanistan. In one such debate, Rep. Janice D. Schakowsky described the group as a ‘natural ally’ in the fight to eradicate terrorism, arguing that RAWA ‘work underground, fighting for a true democracy and struggling to create a better society’ (2001: H6898). The Bush administration, she insisted, should ‘recognise the voices of RAWA and provide support to their difficult, dangerous and heroic work’ (2001: H6898). In another debate, Rep. Juanita Millender-McDonald even went as far as suggesting that the United States provide funds to the organisation directly, claiming that ‘we applaud RAWA, because RAWA is right there in Afghanistan trying to bring about the type of human rights, the type of democracy and to bring empowerment back to women’ (2001: H7588).
The paradoxical position occupied by RAWA – its voice torn between those in favour of military operations and those opposed – provides us with an interesting opportunity to reflect upon the limits of what was audible within the dominant frames of war. In the weeks following the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington D.C., RAWA representative Tahmeena Faryal arrived in the United States to try and highlight some of the problems affecting Afghan women, draw attention to the organisations humanitarian work and to underline their concerns about the role of the Northern Alliance as an interim authority. Unlike previous trips which went largely unnoticed by the mainstream media, organisers of this visit were inundated with requests from major media outlets keen to speak with Faryal about the situation in Afghanistan. As one of the organisers observed, ‘during the first trip supporters across the country made countless phone calls trying to convince people to talk with RAWA, this time phones rang off the hook with requests for interviews, speeches, and meetings with the RAWA representative’ (Brodsky, 2003: 151). Despite the sudden interest in the activities of her organisation, Faryal’s experiences with the media can help illustrate some of the problems that Afghan women encountered when they tried to get their voices heard. One problem that she encountered time and time again was the expectation that she would speak from the perspective of a helpless victim rather than as a representative of a well-established political organisation, limiting what she could say and circumscribing what her audience could hear. In an interview with Larry King on CNN, for example, talk quickly turned to her own personal experiences under the Taliban, as King tried to ascertain if her life was in danger (CNN, 2001a). As Faryal tried to steer the conversation back towards the issue of RAWA’s humanitarian operations, describing how they had to operate underground to avoid detection, King interjected to confirm that this was because their lives ‘would definitely be in danger’ (CNN, 2001a). King managed to undermine her status as a political agent further still as he brought the interview to a close by telling viewers that, ‘I wish you could see her, she’s very pretty’ (CNN, 2001a).

Rather than acknowledging the important work undertaken by organisations such as RAWA, much of the media seemed content to simply reproduce the image of Afghan women as passive victims in need of rescue. In many instances, the work of RAWA was ignored almost entirely as journalists seemed reluctant to discuss the group’s opposition to the war or their criticism of the Bush administration’s collusion with the Northern
Alliance. In a statement issued a few days after the start of operations in Afghanistan, for example, the organisation argued that ‘[d]espite the claim of the US that only military and terrorist bases of the Taliban and \textit{al-Qaeda} will be struck and that its actions would be accurately targeted and proportionate, what we have witnessed for the past seven days leaves no doubt that this invasion will shed the blood of numerous women, men, children, young and old of our country’ (RAWA, 2001b). Yet, this was rarely mentioned by the press, who seemed unable to see Afghan women as anything other than mere symbols of helplessness. In her account of RAWA’s reception within the mainstream media, for example, Anne E. Brodsky suggested that much of the interest in the organisation was ‘superficial and self-serving’ and their appearances were often used to reaffirm received notions about the suffering of women living under the Taliban (2003: 152). Brodsky, who was one of the organisers that helped arrange her visit, expressed particular frustration at the tendency to focus only on Faryal as an individual rather than on her role as a representative of a wider organisation. Recalling one incident that occurred in a meeting with an unnamed feminist organisation, she described the palpable sense of surprise on the faces of the women in the room when Faryal announced that she was the travelling representative of RAWA’s Foreign Affairs Committee. There was, she claims,

A sudden lull in the conservation as the other women in the room appeared to strain to integrate this piece of information into their mental picture of this young women and her grassroots organisation. Finally someone responded, “A Foreign Affairs Committee, isn’t that organised of you?!” (2003: 152).

The difficulties faced by those women who tried to speak beyond the status of victim were not limited to representatives of RAWA but were also experienced by many others, including those who had campaigned in the United States for many years. Zieba Shorish-Shamley, for example, has lived in the United States since she moved there to study in 1971 and is now the director of the Women’s Alliance for Peace and Human Rights in Afghanistan (WAPHA). Although she was supportive of the American-led invasion at first, she also expressed some concern about the ways in which the suffering of Afghan women was being used by the Bush administration to help legitimise its military operations. When I interviewed her in 2009, she outlined some of the problems she encountered when she tried to raise these concerns with officials from the Bush administration. Recalling one particular incident at the State Department, she described the moment when she dared to challenge an official about the effectiveness of the
international community’s efforts to reconstruct Kabul after the initial defeat of the Taliban, accusing her of painting an overly positive picture of the programs that were already in place. In response, she claims that the official ‘got really mad because I went after her’ and excluded her from the rest of the meeting, telling her that she was ‘full of problems’ (Shorish-Shamley, 2009). Shorish-Shamley also described how she had had similar problems with some of the more mainstream feminist organisations that she had worked with, particularly when they tried to speak on behalf of Afghan women without making any effort to listen to them first. ‘When they started talking for us’, she argued, ‘it really pissed me off’ (Shorish-Shamley, 2009). Similar sentiments were echoed by the founder of Help the Afghan Children, Suraya Sadeed, who claimed that many of the people she met only wanted to hear the views of Afghan women if they corresponded with their own perspective, arguing that ‘if you don’t go with the crowd, you are outcast because they don’t invite you next time’ (Sadeed, 2009). It is ironic, she argued, ‘that here we are talking about women’s freedom and all those things but you don’t give enough freedom to people to just say what they have observed’ (Sadeed, 2009). What is interesting about these individuals is the way in which they have been positioned as ‘authentic’ Afghan voices even though, as wealthy expatriates, they are far removed from the realities of life in Afghanistan.

To help make sense of this rather peculiar state of affairs it is helpful to draw on the work of Gayatri C. Spivak and her attempts to explore the limits of what can be said and heard within the dominant epistemic frame. In an article entitled “Responsibility”, Spivak traces the foreclosure of the native informant by considering how even the most well-meaning of gestures might serve to silence the subaltern subject, focusing on a small conference organised by the Green Party to discuss the World Bank’s Flood Action Plan for Bangladesh. Held at the European Parliament in May 1993, the conference was staged as a dialogue between the voices of global development and the voices of the developing nation, represented in this instance by an ageing peasant leader named Abdus Sattar Khan. There can be little doubt that the conference served as an important corrective to the efforts of the World Bank to silence protests against the project, providing some layer of accountability to the process. At the same time, however, the meeting cannot be considered in isolation from the elaborate rituals of public consultation that make these sorts of developments possible, serving as a ‘theatre of responsibility [constructed] to disguise the mechanics of unrestricted capital
investment’ (Spivak, 2008b: 80-85). According to Spivak, this failure to respond to the call of those actually affected by the proposals quickly became apparent as the conference unfolded. To begin with, the European Parliament did not have the facilities to provide a simultaneous translation of the speech, which Sattar Khan delivered in his native Bengali tongue. Unable to provide an official translator, the organisers were forced to rely upon an amateurish attempt by another Bangladeshi activist in the audience (2008b: 92). Not surprisingly, Sattar Khan’s speech overran its allotted time and he was promptly interrupted by the moderator, who was keen to restore some semblance of order to proceedings. After some negotiation Sattar Khan was eventually allowed to continue, ‘by way of a gesture of benevolence toward someone who could not understand the rules’ (Spivak, 2008b: 93).

For Spivak, the experiences of Sattar Khan reveal the inability of the subaltern subject to speak within the terms of the colonial framework, revealing how seemingly benign gestures can be complicit in silencing the voices of the oppressed. Although this attempt at a dialogue represents a marked improvement on the World Bank’s efforts to stifle protests against the planned project, she maintains that ‘the misfiring of the staging of this elderly man is also a species of silencing’, noting that ‘the way the shape of his words escaped the monumental structuring of the theatre of Old Europe, which determined the “dialogue”, was pathetically trivial’ (2008b: 92). This does not mean, however, that Sattar Khan can be viewed as an authentic subaltern voice and Spivak is careful not to romanticise him as such, arguing that ‘I certainly do not know enough about him to credit him with authenticity, simply because, in that company of card-carrying international activists and development officials, he seemed a guileless old man’ (2008b: 92). Rather, Spivak uses his appearance at the conference to highlight the enormous gulf that existed between his understanding of what he could hope to achieve and the ideological imperatives that ensured that he could only ever speak from the perspective of a victim (2008b: 92). Importantly, then, this example shows that it cannot be assumed that just because a subaltern subject has been invited to speak that their voices are intelligible within the dominant political landscape. At the same time, however, it is important to recognise that his attempt to speak is as a kind of disruption of sorts, exposing the exclusionary logic that has tried to deprive him of a voice. As Stephen Morton notes, ‘Spivak’s analysis of Sattar Khan’s silencing is significant
because it demonstrates how there is no rhetorical space from which disempowered, subaltern subjects from the global south can speak’ (2007: 60).

Spivak’s attention to the underlying epistemic violence that marks the theatre of enunciation within which the subaltern is asked to speak provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding some of the problems that Afghan women encountered in the “war of/on terror”. Although the implications of her approach should already be apparent from the examples that are listed above, there is one incident that deserves particular attention, not least because of its striking similarity to the silencing of Sattar Khan. At a congressional meeting held on the 31st October 2001, members of the Subcommittee on International Relations and Human Rights met to discuss the crimes committed against Afghan women at a hearing entitled “Afghan People vs. the Taliban”. Although the hearing was presented as an impartial examination of the situation, the manner in which it was structured suggests that many of the outcomes had been decided in advance. In her opening comments, for example, the chair explained that the ‘Taliban's reign of terror has riddled the country with death and sorrow’, whilst suggesting that Afghan women bear ‘the scars of the Taliban's crimes against its own people’ (Subcommittee on International Relations and Human Rights, 2001: 8-9). Following these remarks, the subcommittee heard from Lorne W. Craner, the Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, and Jeffrey J. Luntead, the Senior Advisor and Afghanistan Coordinator for the Bureau of South Asian Affairs, about the proposals for reconstructing the country’s political infrastructure. As well as confirming the Taliban’s appalling record on human rights, the pair outlined the administration’s plans for ensuring a ‘broad-based, representative, multi-ethnic government, […] that accepts international norms and practices, particularly regarding human rights in general […] and women’, describing how the international community would ensure that women were adequately represented (Subcommittee on International Relations and Human Rights, 2001: 59). After this, the subcommittee heard the testimony of Amnesty International’s Asia Advocacy Director T. Kumar as well as a written statement that was submitted by Eleanor Smeal on behalf of the FMF.

It was not until much later in the afternoon that the subcommittee heard statements from those directly affected by the policies imposed by the Taliban and the Bush
administration’s intervention into Afghanistan. One of those who spoke at the hearing was Tahmeena Faryal who was introduced by Rep. Cynthia McKinney as ‘represent[ing] the voice of women’, echoing the sentiments of the chair who maintained that the international community had an obligation to ‘ensure that the true and unfettered voice of the Afghan people is heard loudly and clearly’ (Subcommittee on International Relations and Human Rights, 2001: 11; 21 emphasis added). Faryal began by explaining the suffering of women under both the Taliban and Northern Alliance, as well as condemning the civilian casualties caused by military action. Towards the end of her statement she began to articulate a series of more concrete demands, insisting that ‘any Loya Jirga or interim government development process is not legitimate unless it includes and heeds women’s voices from beginning to end in substantial and meaningful ways’ (Subcommittee on International Relations and Human Rights, 2001: 115-116). The moment she began to stray further away from her assigned status as victim, Faryal found her voice becoming increasingly unintelligible to the members of the subcommittee, who struggled to reconcile her comments with their preconceived ideas about the position of women. After a few minutes, the chair interrupted to ask her to ‘wrap up’ her remarks, telling her that she had exceeded her allotted time (Subcommittee on International Relations and Human Rights, 2001: 115-116). Although she was eventually given extra time to conclude her statement, it is quite clear that Faryal was not supposed to be there as an “expert” on the Bush administration’s efforts in Afghanistan or to criticise the policy decisions that had already been implemented. Instead, she was staged as what Spivak has described as a ‘slice of the authentic’, providing a human face to the inhuman crimes of the Taliban whilst reaffirming what was already “known” about the lives of these women (2008b: 92). Ironically, Faryal was well aware of this, warning the subcommittee that the voices of ordinary Afghans are at ‘risk of being drowned out entirely by the horrific crash of war and global geo-politics’ (Subcommittee on International Relations and Human Rights, 2001: 112).

5.3 Can the Subaltern Speak?

The difficulties that Faryal faced as she tried to articulate her concerns to members of the Subcommittee on International Relations and Human Rights go some way to
revealing the underlying obstacles that prevented organisations such as RAWA from getting their voices heard within the dominant frames of war, ensuring that even when Afghan women were present they were just as absent as ever. In the previous chapter, I introduced Judith Butler’s work on the politics of intelligibility to show how the dominant terms of intelligibility ensured that Afghan women could only appear as helpless victims, circumscribing what could be said and what could be heard within the dominant terms of the “war of/on terror”. Following on from these discussions, this section explores the ways in which this normative violence might serve to prevent the voices of Afghan women from being heard and circumscribing their ability to speak. In the remainder of this chapter, I will argue that it is important for opponents of the war in Afghanistan to take into account the constitutive exclusions that ensure that the voices of Afghan women cannot be heard, remaining attentive to how the prevailing representational practices limit what can be said and heard within the global public sphere. As Butler reminds us,

To find that one is fundamentally unintelligible (indeed, that the laws of culture and of language find one to be an impossibility) is to find that one has not yet achieved access to the human. It is to find oneself speaking only and always as if one were human, but with the sense that one is not. It is to find that one’s language is hollow, and that no recognition is forthcoming because the norms by which recognition takes place are not in one’s favour (2004a: 218).

One way that it is possible to tie Butler’s concern for the limits of cultural intelligibility to the representational practices through which we have come to “know” Afghan women as a homogenous social group is to turn to Spivak’s earlier work on the foreclosure of the native informant. Although her essay on responsibility provides some insight into the ideological imperatives that have served to silence the subaltern subject, it is important to situate these within the broader framework set out in her well-known essay “Can the Subaltern Speak” in which she outlines her reservations about the notion of a post-representational politics within which the oppressed are able to simply speak for themselves. The essay begins with a critical reading of a conversation between Michel Foucault and Giles Deleuze in which she accuses the two intellectuals of failing

\[49\] The essay first appeared in an edited volume entitled Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg in 1988. An extended and substantially revised version appeared as the “History” chapter in her book A Critique of Postcolonial Reason that appeared in 1999. Where appropriate, references in this thesis will direct readers to both texts. An edited volume entitled Can the Subaltern Speak: Reflections on the History of an Idea (Morris, 2010) had been published to mark 20 years since the essay first appeared. Helpfully, the essay contains abridged versions of both iterations along with an essay by Spivak that traces the trajectory of the subaltern in her work.
to consider the role of ideology in their work. During their conversation, both philosophers agree that questions of representation have now been displaced by networks of action, prompting Deleuze to suggest that those ‘who act and struggle are no longer represented, either by a group or a union that appropriates the right to stand as their conscience’ (1977: 206).

According to Foucault and Deleuze, rather than speaking on behalf of the oppressed, the role of the intellectual should be to let the oppressed speak for themselves, affirming the ‘reality [that…] actually happens in factories, in schools, in barracks, in prisons, in police stations’ (1977: 212). For Spivak, however, the idea that it is possible to simply recover the concrete experiences of the oppressed is dependent upon a sanctioned ignorance about the role of the intellectual within the international division of labour, ignoring the extent to which their positivist empiricism can serve to consolidate contemporary forms of imperialism (1988: 275-277; 1999: 255-257). In the more recent version of the essay, for example, Spivak has tried to show how their desire to give a voice to the oppressed is almost indistinguishable from the ways in which the ‘testimony of the credit-baited female’ has become the basis for contemporary development and an alibi for globalisation (1999: 256). This failure, therefore, to acknowledge the location of the intellectual within the workings of global capital ensures that Foucault and Deleuze can only create the illusion of a displaced and decentred subjectivity, ushering in a new sovereign subject that hides behind these references to a series of pluralised subject-effects (1988: 271; 1999: 248-254). As Spivak argues, ‘the banality of the leftist intellectuals’ list of self-knowing, politically canny subalterns stands revealed; representing them, the intellectuals represent themselves as transparent’ (1988: 275; 1999: 257). Supposedly radical intellectuals such as Foucault and Deleuze should not, she argues, allow themselves to hide behind the impossible idea of a pure consciousness or abstain from representation altogether as they serve only to mask an essentialist agenda. Instead, they should recognise the limits of the prevailing representational practices and confront them (Cornell, 2010: 101).\(^{50}\)

Part of the problem that Spivak identifies in the work of Foucault and Deleuze stems from the conceptual confusion or verbal slippage between two quite distinct forms of

\(^{50}\) This is one of the reasons that Spivak has a particular fondness for the work of Derrida, who she claims is much ‘less dangerous when [properly] understood than the first-world intellectual masquerading as the absent nonrepresentation who lets the oppressed speak for themselves’ (1988: 292/1999).
representation: representation as “speaking for” in the political sense and representation as “re-presentation” in the style of an artistic portrait (1988: 275-276; 1999: 257-259). To illustrate this, she refers to the famous passage from The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte in which Marx suggests that small peasant proprietors ‘cannot represent themselves, they must be represented’ (1988: 276-277; 1999: 257-258). Missing from the English translation of the text, as opposed to the German original, is the subtle distinction that Marx makes between vertreten (representation by proxy) and darstellen (representation as portrait) that enables him to expose their complicity in the formation of class consciousness as an identity-in-difference (1988: 276-277; 1999: 257-258).

According to Spivak, this tendency to conflate vertreten with darstellen is also apparent in Deleuze’s suggestion that representation has now been displaced by pure action, preventing him from being able to adequately attend to the processes that mark the formation of the subject. By privileging the concrete experiences of the oppressed without any concern for the processes through which they were formed, the work of Foucault and Deleuze risks re-inscribing a coherent notion of the subject at the moment when it seems at its most tenuous. As Spivak argues, although the two forms of representation are related,

Running them together, especially in order to say that beyond both is where the oppressed subjects speak, act, and know for themselves, leads to an essentialist, utopian politics that can, when transferred to single-issue gender rather than class, give unquestioning support to the financialisation of the globe [or, in this case, the relentless violence that came to define OEF] (1999: 259).

Rejecting the idea that it is possible to simply reactivate a previously subjugated knowledge, Spivak argues that the desire to let the oppressed speak for themselves cannot account for the epistemic violence that renders their voices unintelligible. To help explain this, Spivak turns her attention to disputes about the practice of sati, or widow sacrifice, which emerged during the nineteenth century in colonial India. Against opposition from traditionalists, nostalgic for their lost cultural origins, the British were keen to abolish the practice as part of their wider efforts to create a good society, rescuing women from the barbarities of their society. Caught between the two competing discourses, however, the agency of the women involved was doubly effaced. If, after agreeing to perform the ritual, the widow decided to abandon the task and turn back, it would be seen as a transgression of the traditional code, for which a particular penance was prescribed. For the British, by contrast, if the local police officer
supervising the sacrifice was able to convince the widow not to follow through with her intentions it would be seen as a real demonstration of free will (Spivak, 1988: 298; 1999: 235). Absent from the archive, however, is the testimony of the women who performed the act, who appear only as victims of a patriarchal tradition or bearers of their cultural heritage. As Spivak explains, ‘[b]etween patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling that is that displaced figuration of the “third-world woman” caught between tradition and modernisation, culturalism and development’ (1988: 306; 1999: 304). Although their ‘grotesquely mis-transcribed names’ are recorded within the colonial archives, their voices are irredeemably irretrievable: ‘the subaltern cannot speak’ (1988: 297; 308; 1999: 287; 308).

To understand how Afghan women were produced as speaking subjects it is necessary to consider the complex relationship between the two forms of representation that Spivak identified in the work of Marx, showing how organisations such as RAWA were only allowed to speak as victims within the justifications for war. As paradoxical as it might first appear, the desire of figures such as Laura Bush and Cherie Blair to give the women of Afghanistan a voice relies upon many of the same assumptions that underpinned attempts by Foucault and Deleuze to let the oppressed speak for themselves, as both assume the existence of an authentic voice that is waiting to be heard by the international community. As Spivak suggests, ‘when card-carrying listeners, the hegemonic people, the dominant people, talk about listening to someone “speaking as” something or other, I think here one encounters a problem. When they want to hear an Indian speak as an Indian, a Third World Woman speaking as a Third World Woman, they cover over the fact of the ignorance they are allowed to possess, into a kind of homogenisation’ (Spivak: 1990: 59). Within the parameters established by the discourses of the “war of/on terror”, these ‘card-carrying listeners’ were only interested in hearing Afghan women speak from their status as victims, reaffirming pre-defined perceptions about their lives under the Taliban whilst confirming what was already known about the barbarity of the regime. By claiming to let Afghan women represent (vertreten) themselves, the international community failed to appreciate the ways in which the representation (darstellen) of these women as helpless victims in need of rescue

51 Chandra T. Mohanty has also raised similar concerns, arguing that ‘the existence of third world women’s texts is not in itself evidence of decentering hegemonic histories and subjectivities’ (1991: 34).
circumscribed their ability to speak and prevented their voices from being heard. The moment that these women were asked to speak as Afghan women, their voices are almost immediately drowned out by the terms of their appearance. What was invariably effaced in these portraits was the heterogeneity of their experiences as agents of resistance to the oppression that they were forced to endure under the Taliban as well as previous regimes.

In response to the limits that were imposed on Afghan women, a number of feminists have tried to draw attention to RAWA’s opposition to the war, with Drucilla Cornell insisting that ‘RAWA’s voice must be heard and given the respect it deserves in the UN effort to establish a humanitarian government in Afghanistan’ (2002: 434). Nevertheless, there is a real risk that this uncritical support for groups such as RAWA will reproduce the assumption that there is an authentic Afghan voice that can be recovered from the dominant discourses of the “war of/on terror”, failing to contest the ideological imperatives that have enabled these organisations to speak for Afghan women. In her work on the foreclosure of the native informant, Spivak’s own unease about attempts to retrieve the consciousness of the subaltern subject is evident in her ambivalent relationship with the Subaltern Studies Collective, who she accuses of failing to make visible the epistemic violence that rendered their voices inaudible from the outset (cf. Guha and Spivak, 1988; Spivak, 1996a: 210; 226-227). Significantly, however, she does not dismiss their historiographical methods outright but prefers to view it as an important political strategy that allows us to ‘acknowledge that the arena of the subaltern’s persistent emergence into hegemony must always and by definition remain heterogeneous to the efforts of the disciplinary historian’ (1996a: 217). The point, then, is not to try and excavate an authentic subaltern subject from within the colonial framework but to recognise the unknowability of the margin, tracing its withdrawal from the dominant systems of knowledge by marking the blank spots in the text (Morton, 2007: 66). As Spivak explains, ‘[t]o steer ourselves through the Scylla of cultural relativism and the Charybdis of nativist culturalism regarding this period, we need a commitment not only to narrative and counter-narrative, but also to the rendering (im)possible of (another) narrative’ (1999: 6). This would enable us to think about the ways in which the voices of organisations such as RAWA are able to subvert the dominant terms of intelligibility without simply reifying them, revealing the
exclusionary processes through which certain groups are marginalised within the prevailing frames of war.

To limit the scope of any critical intervention to tracing the blank spots in the text might seem like an inadequate response to attempts by organisations such as RAWA to speak as it does little to show how their voices work to disrupt the exclusionary logic that has defined the “war of/on terror”. Indeed, the suggestion that the subaltern are unable to speak has prompted a raft of criticism from thinkers such as Benita Parry, who has accused Spivak of a ‘deliberate deafness to the native voice’, claiming that she ‘severely restricts the space in which the colonised can be written back into history’ (1987: 39). Yet to claim that Spivak ignores the voices of the oppressed betrays a profound misunderstanding of what she actually meant, which in no way implies that the subaltern woman is mute, only that her voice is not audible within the overriding scheme of intelligibility. Towards the end of her essay, Spivak refers to a slightly more recent example from her own family history, telling the story of her grandmother’s sister, Bhubaneswari Bhaduri, whose body was found hanging in an apartment in Calcutta in 1926. As a member of the armed resistance to colonial rule, she was entrusted with the task of a political assassination but was unable to complete it, prompting her to commit suicide. Aware that a death of this sort would likely be read as the result of an illicit pregnancy, Bhubaneswari waited until she began to menstruate before killing herself, rendering her body graphematic in order to communicate from beyond the grave (Spivak, 1988: 307-308; 1999: 306-308). Despite this, Bhubaneswari’s suicide was still seen by her family as the outcome of an illicit pregnancy, who seemed oblivious to her efforts to make the real motive visible. To say, therefore, that the subaltern cannot speak does not mean she ‘does not express her desires, form political alliances, or make culturally and politically significant effects, but that within the dominant conceptualisation of agency, her agency remains illegible’ (Butler, 2000a: 36).

As Spivak explains, ‘even when the subaltern makes an effort to the death to speak, she is not able to be heard’ (1996b: 292). Parry’ also claims that Spivak fails to account for the materiality of colonial exploitation. Apart from ignoring whole swathes of her work in which she does focus on the economic, social and political institutions that underpin contemporary forms of imperialism, this criticism relies upon an untenable distinction between the material and the ideal. In the previous chapter, I borrowed Butler’s notion of performativity to show how matter can be regarded as the effect of a particular normative ideals that have congealed over time to produce the appearance of a surface or substance. Elsewhere, Spivak has tried to divert attention away from the specific act of speech by emphasising the transactional relationship that completes the speech act, insisting that we try to avoid confusing speaking
In order to overcome these problems it is important to focus on these moments of disruption, focusing on the ways in which organisations such as RAWA undermine the image of Afghan women as passive victims. Butler’s notion of the performative contradiction, which I discussed briefly in chapter 4, is a useful supplement to Spivak’s work, highlighting the ways in which the voices of the subaltern can interrupt those normative assumptions that have rendered their voices inaudible. In *Excitable Speech: The Politics of the Performative* (1997a), Butler explores the linguistic vulnerability that haunts the subject by tracing the processes of interpellation through which it is inaugurated, arguing that ‘[i]f the subject who speaks is also constituted by language that she or he speaks, then language is the condition of possibility for the speaking subject, and not merely its instrument of expression’ (1997a: 28). Importantly for Butler, the specific form that the subject might take is not decided once and for all by this initial act of interpellation but is contingent upon the performative repetition and reiteration of those norms governing the limits of intelligibility. These norms are themselves liable to failure; a failure which is often exposed by moments of performative contradiction that arise when those who are excluded from the dominant framework continue to speak and act within its terms (1997a: 89-91). As Butler explains, ‘[t]he failure of the norm is exposed by the performative contradiction enacted by one who speaks in its name even as the name is not yet said to designate the one who nevertheless insinuates his or her way into the name enough to speak “in” it all the same’ (1997a: 91).

The idea that the international community could “give” Afghan women a voice was, as I have argued above, based upon an assumption that these women would simply confirm what was already known about their lives in Afghanistan rather than try to contest it. By refusing to speak only as victims in need of rescue, the efforts of organisations such as RAWA to get the voices of Afghan women heard have placed them in a rather paradoxical position, creating their own kind of performative contradiction. These attempts to speak beyond their assigned status as victim cannot, as Butler makes clear, be seen as a simple ‘assimilation to an existing norm, for that norm is predicated on the exclusion of the one who speaks, and whose speech calls into question the foundation of the universal itself’ (Butler, 1997a: 91). In this respect, their

with talking (1996: 289). It should not, however, be assumed that the appropriate response to this problem is simply to listen more carefully as this too presupposes the existence of an authentic voice that can be recovered, once again side-stepping the question of the representation.
critical interventions can be seen as potential moments of insurrection which threaten to disrupt the prevailing frames of war, calling into question the boundaries between the speakable and the unspeakable, the audible and the inaudible. This does not mean, however, that the actual content of their concerns can be simply dismissed in favour of a purely allegorical reading that simply ignores what it is they are saying. Instead, it is necessary to historicise the experiences of Afghan women by making visible the assignment of subject positions that have produced “Afghan women” as a coherent political category. Experience, as Joan W. Scott explains, is ‘not origin of our explanation […] but rather that which we seek to explain, that about which knowledge is produced’ (1992: 26).

5.4 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to examine these limits in relation to the experiences of those women who were invited by the international community to speak about their lives under the Taliban as well as their hopes and aspirations for the political future. I began with a detailed discussion of the Bonn process that was initiated after the initial collapse of the regime, showing that the concerns of women were often relegated to the margins of the debate by both the Bush administration and its allies in Afghanistan. Despite assurances that they would be given a central role in the efforts to rebuild the country’s political infrastructure, those women who tried to speak out have had to confront an onslaught of verbal abuse along with threats of physical violence from their colleagues whilst the international community has stood by idly. Rather than focusing only on the more overt forms of silencing, this chapter has also explored some of the more insidious practices of exclusion that have denied Afghan women access to a politically qualified subject position, especially when they attempted to speak as something other than mere victims awaiting the intervention of others.

The representational practices that I identified in previous chapters have done much more than simply create a partial and distorted understanding of Afghan women and their lives. By combining Spivak’s work on the foreclosure of the native informant with Butler’s attempts to uncover the constitutive exclusions that haunt the formation of the subject, I have been able to show how the voices of Afghan women were rendered
unintelligible, limiting what could be said and heard within the dominant discourses of war. Despite supposedly having the ear of the elite, they were compelled to speak as the embodiment of particular normative category that was decided by the imperial imperatives that underpinned the Bush administration’s “war of/on terror”. The exclusion of Afghan women cannot, however, be rectified with the ‘unexamined nativism’ that has marked some of the feminist responses to OEF (Spivak, 1999: 173), which has seen particular voices re-staged as a slice of the authentic without any concern for the wider social environment within which they are expected to speak. It is, as Spivak reminds us, important to remember that seemingly coherent political categories such as “Afghan women” are not a pre-given point of departure but the effects of particular discursive arrangements, produced in accordance with the requirements of contemporary forms of colonialism. To simply affirm the concrete experiences of the oppressed risks reproducing the same exclusionary logic through which they were formed, failing to contest the normative violence that circumscribes their appearance within the colonial framework. Instead, I have argued that it is necessary to remain attentive to the performative contradictions caused when a subject speaks from a position not previously authorised, showing how the dominant norms of intelligibility fail to adequately convey the complexity of Afghan women as subjects. At the moment of foreclosure, ‘the unspeakable speaks’, revealing at once the exclusionary logic that circumscribes our understanding of the situation in Afghanistan whilst allowing for the possibility of a less violent resignification (Butler, 2000b: 151).
One of the most famous figures in Afghan folklore is a woman known as Malalai of Maiwand, who became a national hero as a result of her actions in the Battle of Maiwand during the Second Anglo-Afghan War (1878-1880). In the summer of 1878, the Russians sent a diplomatic mission to meet with the Afghan Amir Sher Ali Khan to discuss relations between the two countries. Worried about Russia’s growing influence in the region, the British Viceroy Lord Lytton demanded that the Amir meet with his own mission, which was to be led by Sir Neville Chamberlain. By the time news of the request had reached Kabul the Amir had entered into the traditional process of mourning following the death of his son and heir apparent. Showing little sensitivity for his situation, the British accused him of procrastination and sent over 40,000 troops across the border into Afghanistan. Although the British enjoyed a succession of decisive victories during the early stages of the conflict, they went on to suffer a disastrous defeat at the hands of Mohammad Ayub Khan on the 27th July 1880. According to reports from the battle, Ayub Khan’s victory was inspired by the bravery displayed by a young woman named Malalai who was there to tend to the sick and injured. Aware of the low morale among her comrades, she tore off her veil and shouted:

Young love, if you do not fall in the battle of Maiwand,  
By God, someone is saving you as a token of shame!

And when one of the leading flag bearers was killed by the British, Malalai held her veil up high and sang:

With a drop of my sweetheart's blood,  
Shed in defence of the Motherland,  
Will I put a beauty spot on my forehead,  
Such as would put to shame the rose in the garden.

Encouraged by her actions, the Afghan army went on to cause one of the worst military upsets in British history, killing 971 soldiers and injuring 168 more (L. Dupree, 1973: 410-412). Although the British eventually defeated them a month later in Kandahar,
Malalai quickly became a folk hero. Even today hundreds of schools and hospitals across Afghanistan are named in her honour.

The image of Malalai as a courageous war hero stands in stark contrast to the portraits of Afghan women that were produced and circulated in the justifications for Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), according to which they were little more than helpless victims. What was often neglected by the Bush administration’s narratives of rescue was that the fact that these women were not passive prisoners of the Taliban regime but active political agents who were relentless in their attempts to carve out a some space for resistance in the face of such hardship. The purpose of this chapter is to focus on what the late Howard Zinn would have described as the ‘countless small actions of unknown people’, focusing on the often unacknowledged role of women during the period of Taliban rule. In the opening section of this chapter, I will provide an overview of the different ways that women living under the Taliban were able to subvert and undermine the oppressive edicts that were imposed upon them by the regime, paying particular attention to the secret schools that were organised in local communities across Afghanistan. Although it is important to recognise the previously unacknowledged role of women in the country’s recent past, there is a danger that by making visible these acts of agency we end up reifying the same categories of gender that were imposed by the Bush administration in support of the war. In the second section, therefore, I will consider how it was that certain acts of agency were rendered unintelligible within the prevailing frames of war whilst, at the same time, exploring how the mainstream media and political establishment were able to appropriate other forms of agency and use them to justify the invasion. In the final section, I draw on Judith Butler’s understanding of performativity to show how it is possible to rethink agency in a way that does not serve to decide, in advance, who counts as an agent and what agency must look like.

6.1 Agency and Resistance

In her work on humanitarian intervention, Anne Orford has argued that contemporary humanitarianism often relies upon the same colonial fantasies that marked the imperialism of the past, reinforcing beliefs about ‘the need for benevolent tutelage of uncivilised people who [are] as yet unable to govern themselves’ (2003: 11). According
to this fantasy, the international community tends to assume the role of the heroic just warrior who has both the need and the capacity to bring about new worlds in its own image, whilst the “uncivilised peoples” can only ever occupy the roles of the brutal savage or the beleaguered victim (2003: 170). Agency is seen as something exercised by the international community, whilst the objects of the intervention appear as being unable to bring about any meaningful changes to their everyday lives. Missing from this picture, she argues, ‘is any sense of agency of the peoples of states where intervention is to be conducted’ (Orford, 2003: 170). In response to the images of Afghan women that circulated in the justifications for OEF, a number of women’s rights activists have argued that the idea they were abject victims ignores the countless acts of defiance that often passed unnoticed. Orzala Ashraf, who helped found Humanitarian Assistance for the Women and Children of Afghanistan (HAWCA), has been particularly critical of the idea that the women of Afghanistan were somehow ‘disabled’ by the Taliban, reminding the international community that whilst ‘no one was caring about this country, we continued to fight’ (Ashraf, 2009). Similarly, Sima Wali argues that ‘the image of Afghans as miserable victims is but one of a series of myths created and perpetuated by the Western world’, which appeared to render ‘America deaf to the voices and tears of the Afghan people’ (2002: 2; 6).

Before turning to the period of Taliban rule, it is helpful to consider the historical role played by women in the resistance to Soviet occupation, which is often neglected by those who focus only on the actions of the mujahedeen. It was, for example, during this period that the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) first appeared on the political scene, established under the leadership of Meena in 1977. Along with various other clandestine women’s groups, RAWA formed an essential part of the non-violent opposition to the PDPA and their Soviet backers. As well as organising secret meetings and literacy classes, which were often disguised as traditional sewing circles, women working with RAWA would visit the notorious Pul-e-Charki prison complex to get information from resistance fighters imprisoned by the Khadamat-e Etela’at-e Dawlati (KhAD) (Chavis, 2003; Brodsky, 2003: 57-100). One of the most effective weapons against the occupation, however, were the Afghan equivalent of samizdats, known as shabnamas, which women smuggled underneath their veils so that they were able to distribute them without arousing the suspicions of local informants. RAWA had their own shabnama called Payam-e Zan (Women’s Message) which they used
to publicise the regime’s repressive policies, expose the mujahedeen’s treatment of
women and circulate reading materials to those women who were unable to attend
RAWA literacy programs (Brodsky, 2003: 76-79). First published in 1981, the magazine
was hand-printed by a small group of individuals who used a mimeograph machine to
produce batches of a few hundred copies, which were then distributed through a
network of friends and family (Brodsky, 2003: 79).

One of the main ways that women and girls were able to express their discontent about
the Soviet-backed PDPA regime was through public demonstrations, which were often
brutally suppressed by the security forces. At one protest in the province of Kunduz, a
head teacher from the local girl’s school arranged for her students to collect wasps in
the weeks immediately before a major military parade in their town, which they kept in
tiny matchboxes in preparation. On the day of the parade, the children released these
wasps at the feet of the soldiers as they darted in and out of the procession, causing
widespread panic amongst the marchers. Amidst the chaos and confusion, local women
were able to collect the guns dropped by the panicked soldiers, hiding them under their
burqas so that they could be smuggled to the mujahedeen on the frontline (Ellis, 2000:
8). Another important protest took place in Kabul during the month of April in 1980,
when students from the local high schools gathered to demonstrate against the ruling
PDPA at a state ceremony. During the demonstrations, which continued for several
days, security forces shot and killed five high school students (N.H. Dupree, 1984: 332-
334; Emadi, 2002: 109). In response, a second demonstration was held a few days later
by girls from Soriya High School, who marched on Kabul University shouting slogans
such as “liberty or death”, “Russians leave Afghanistan” and “death to Babrak Karmal”.
Again, this protest was brutally suppressed as Soviet helicopters, which had been
monitoring the situation from above, opened fire on the crowd of protestors, killing
many of the students (Emadi, 2002: 109-110). In addition to these demonstrations,
women also took part in the armed struggle against the occupation, taking part in
political ambushes, abductions and assassinations. One well-known female fighter
known as Nadia lured at least 15 Soviet soldiers into an ambush and executed them,
whilst another woman named Razia formed her own band of female fighters in the
province of Herat (Emadi, 2002: 114).
The presence of so many women in the resistance to Soviet aggression undermines the image of Afghan women as helpless victims devoid of both agency and voice. It would, however, be a mistake to assume that the women’s resistance movement ceased its activities after the withdrawal of Russian troops in 1989 and subsequent collapse of the PDPA a few years later. During the early stages of Taliban rule, for example, women’s groups continued to organise protests to raise awareness about their concerns, challenging the restrictions that were being imposed by the country’s new ruling elite. On the 23rd October 1996, for example, some 400 women joined a march against the Taliban in the city of Mazar-e-Sharif, which was, at that time, still under the control of Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostum (Dynes, 1996; Frail, 1996). A few months later, 150 women joined a protest in Herat against a decision to close the city’s bathhouses, which resulted in twenty arrests and a number of hospitalisations after the protestors were attacked by Taliban officials (N.H. Dupree, 2001: 161; UN, 1997: 16). Elsewhere, reports emerged of a group of nomadic women in Jalalabad who had managed to chase off a group of Taliban soldiers who had insulted them for not wearing appropriate veils (Writenet, 1996). As the Taliban began to enforce their policies in a more brutal and systematic manner, the public acts of defiance became much less common. Instead, these women’s groups were forced to operate in a much more covert way, taking many of their activities underground to avoid officials working for the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice. Just because these groups were no longer as visible to the gaze of the outside observer, however, it does not mean that these women were no longer willing or able to resist the terms of their oppression. Despite even stricter repression, first under President Burhanuddin Rabbani and then under the Taliban regime, the women of Afghanistan continued to fight against oppression and injustice that they encountered in their everyday lives.

One of the Bush administration’s main criticisms of the Taliban was about its decision to exclude women from education, with the UN reporting that the closure of 63 schools in the capital city had affected around 103,000 girls, 148,000 boys and almost 8,000 female teachers in Kabul alone (1997: 19). Although there can be little doubt that this policy had an enormous affect on the lives of young girls across the country, the women of Afghanistan did not lie down and accept this without a fight but responded by establishing a network of secret schools in communities across Afghanistan. Many of the teachers who had lost their jobs after the Taliban seized power joined together with
former university students who had been prevented from completing their degrees to help run these secret schools, transforming their homes into covert classrooms for both boys and girls. Indeed, in rural areas one of the unintended consequences of the Taliban’s restrictions on education was that it actually put the issue back onto the political agenda, with many people only realising its importance after the Taliban had closed the few local schools that already existed (Pont, 2001: 71). Due to the clandestine nature of these classes it is difficult to appreciate the sheer number of schools that were in operation at any one time, but it would be a serious mistake to underestimate their significance. In Kabul, for example, the Women’s Vocational Training Centre had over 6,000 students in the years immediately before the Taliban took charge and continued to operate these classes in homes across the city after the regime shut them down (Rostami-Povey, 2007: 29-30). Others have estimated that their own schools taught upwards of 600 students during the period of Taliban rule (Rostami-Povey, 2007: 34). In addition to these individual efforts, some schools received help from international NGOs such as the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan, who estimate that around 170,000 girls were being served in its 567 schools (Skaine, 2002: 65).

Shaima Khinjani, who now works with the New York-based organisation Women for Afghan Women (WAW), was one of those who organised secret literacy classes in the basement of her family home. When the Taliban first came to power, Khinjani was in the final year of high school but was unable to complete her exams due to the ban on female education, forcing her to go to Pakistan so that she could finish her high school diploma. Following her return to Kabul, Khinjani soon became despondent about the situation for young women and girls, describing how she initially felt quite ‘useless’ and ‘disempowered’ (Khinjani, 2009). However, after meeting with her former teacher, Khinjani decided to set up a secret school in her house and, under the cover of her burqa, met with all the parents in local neighbourhood to speak to them about her idea. Soon the school had over 100 students and was able to get books and materials from the NGOs, along with training and logistical support. In addition to her school, there were at least 25 others who were all part of a local committee that met every month to discuss their problems, exchange information and share their experiences. Unlike other schools in the area, which were discovered by the authorities, Khinjani was able to keep her classes hidden because her house had a communal water pump. Because so many people in the local area got their water from her family’s well, it was not uncommon for
crowds of people to be coming and going during the day. Hiding their books under their burqas, this enabled girls to sneak into class without ever raising the suspicions of government officials or Taliban informants (Khijani, 2009).

Another individual who helped organise these classes was Suraya Sadeed, an Afghan-American whose charity had 17 secret schools serving 425 girls in Kabul and the surrounding area. Initially, Sadeed used her contacts within the community of Afghan exiles living in the United States to raise money for the network of schools she sponsored, allowing her to buy materials for the classroom and make photocopies of old textbooks that former teachers had kept hidden in their homes. In addition to raising this money, she would visit Afghanistan three or four times a year, smuggling herself across the border from Pakistan under the cover of a burqa. Recalling one visit, Sadeed explains the emotions she felt after attending a candlelit graduation at one of the schools she helped run, describing it as one of the ‘beautiful’ moments in her life (Sadeed, 2009). When I interviewed her a few years later she told me that she ‘was really amazed to see all these courageous women who knew that their lives would be in danger, but [continued to...] seek education and to teach in the basements of their homes’ (Sadeed, 2009). Similar stories were uncovered by Elaheh Rostami-Povey during her research into resistance to Taliban rule. One of those she spoke to was an activist named Golala, who argued that these schools had become so commonplace in her home city of Jalalabad that the Taliban were simply unable to do anything about them (Rostami-Povey, 2008). Another woman she spoke to even went as far as suggesting that, ‘in a strange way, it was a rather exciting time. We were doing everything wholeheartedly, we had no shoes, no good clothes, but what we did was fulfilling and rewarding’ (Rostami-Povey, 2008).

One of the ways that people were able to hide classes for older women was to disguise them as traditional sewing circles, as Sunday Times foreign correspondent Christina Lamb found out on a visit to Herat. During her stay in the ancient city, Lamb was introduced to a man named Ahmed Said Haghighi who was the president of the city’s literacy circle, which was first formed in 1920. Under the Taliban, the society was also able to provide classes for women and girls in the house of Mohammed Nasir Rahiyab, a 47 year-old professor of literature from the city’s university. Using the cover of a sewing circle, women were able to come and go without raising too much suspicion, hiding
their notebooks underneath their sewing materials (2002: 158). Once inside his home, they would remove their burqas and sit around a blackboard as the professor taught forbidden subjects such as literary criticism, philosophy and poetry, along with foreign classics such as the works of William Shakespeare (2002: 158). Outside, their children would play in the alleyway whilst watching for government informants, ready to alert the women inside if necessary. During this period, the society was also able to continue publishing the poetry of its members, who would use symbolic language to hide their criticism of the largely illiterate regime (2002: 156-157). One woman was even able to publish two novels and over thirty short stories about the plight of women, using a male pseudonym to facilitate the publication and protect her identity (2002: 163-165).

Outside of Afghanistan women also set up a number of schools in refugee camps in both Pakistan and Iran. In the Pakistani province of Balochistan, for example, a survey by Save the Children found that in 1999 some 1,169 girls attended home-based schools whilst an additional 3,735 were registered in refugee village schools (2000: 20). One of those organisations operating in both Afghanistan and Pakistan was HAWCA, who organised a series of home-based literacy classes for small groups of around 10-15 women and supplied them with reading materials and stationary (Ghaffar, 2009). Reflecting on her experiences working with HAWCA, one of the organisation’s founding members explained the enormous responsibility that she felt during the period of Taliban rule, describing how ‘in each place we had literacy classes, women were trying to fight for […] the opportunity to read and write’ (Ashraf, 2009). In Iran the schools for refugees were known as madarese khodgarzdan (self-run schools) and were set up primarily because Afghan children were not allowed to attend Iranian schools. To get around this problem, women’s organisations would work with local authorities so that they could continue to help provide some form of an education. Activists working in Tehran, for example, were able to get permission to use a half-ruined local mosque, which they converted into a school for 130 students before moving to another mosque that could hold up to 350 students (Rostami-Povey, 2008). One of the women who attended the school as a girl described the poor conditions that existed at the school, recalling how it had ‘not enough light, no space to have a break, no playground, one toilet, four class rooms, torn books from Iranian schools, cold in the winter, hot in the summer’ (Rostami-Povey, 2008). Despite this, however, she argued that ‘it is good that all Afghan children are together and learn about Afghanistan as their homeland’ (Rostami-Povey, 2008).
In this section, I have shown how the dominant representations of Afghan women as the passive prisoners of the Taliban regime ultimately fail to capture the complexity of life under the Taliban, leaving them vulnerable to the possibility of subversion and resignification. Although it was widely assumed that the lives of Afghan women were effectively put on hold during the period of Taliban rule, held in suspense until the United States and its coalition allies were able to intervene, the small and seemingly mundane acts of defiance that are outlined above show that the lives of these women were far from being passive or inert. Against all the odds and in the face of such enormous hardship, these women were able to find some room to exercise their agency and autonomy, taking advantage of the contradictions and inconsistencies around them as they tried to make their lives liveable. Despite the horrifying conditions that existed under the Taliban, ‘[t]hey broke the pre-defined spaces of confinement and silence and contested the idea that Muslim society is about building barriers to shut women out, condemning them to a life of domesticity and oppression’ (2007: 7). Just because these acts of resistance were not visible to the outside observer it does not mean that the women of Afghanistan were mere symbols of helplessness, simply awaiting the rescue of the international community. By re-activating these previously subjugated knowledges and drawing attention to the clandestine acts of agency, it is possible to contest the prevailing representational practices that have come to shape what we think we “know” about the lives of those living in Afghanistan.

6.2 Romanticising Resistance

In his book Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Resistance (1985), the anthropologist James C. Scott considers the agency of oppressed populations who have not been afforded the luxury of open displays of political defiance because they were ‘dangerous, if not suicidal’ (1985: xv). Emphasising the importance of tactics like false compliance, sabotage and dissimulation, Scott argues that these prosaic forms of resistance ‘require little or no coordination or planning, […] make use of implicit understandings and informal networks; [and…] typically avoid any direct, symbolic confrontation with authority’ (1985: xvi). As the examples outlined above suggest, the actions of Afghan women under the Taliban shared many similarities with the resistance that Scott identifies in his own work, avoiding large-scale acts of defiance in favour of more covert
forms of disobedience. However, despite their attempts to subvert and undermine the
edicts imposed by the Taliban, the role of women during this period was often
overlooked by the international community, as both the mainstream media and political
establishment seemed unwilling to portray Afghan women as anything other than
damsels in distress. Even when examples of their agency did emerge into the public
sphere, they did little to contest the prevailing images of Afghan women that were
circulating within the dominant discourses of the “war of/on terror”.

A good example of this can be seen in the reaction to the documentary *Beneath the Veil*,
which tells the story of a British-born Afghan filmmaker called Saira Shah as she travels
through Taliban-controlled Afghanistan to try and find her family home in the town of
Paghman. Originally broadcast on the 26th June 2001, the film begins in a refugee camp
located across the border in Pakistan, where Shah first encounters the ‘human disaster’
caused by the Taliban (Dispatches, 2001). After crossing the border at Spin Boldak, she
arrives into the Taliban stronghold of Kandahar but is arrested almost immediately after
her crew is spotted filming in the market by a Taliban official, who escorts them to the
headquarters of the notorious Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention
of Vice. The centrepiece of the documentary, however, is a rather distressing sequence
of film showing the execution of a woman named Zarmeena, who was accused of
killing her husband whilst he slept. The clip begins with a shot of three veiled women
sitting in the back of a red pick-up truck in Kabul’s soccer stadium, which had been
recently rebuilt with proceeds from the international community (Dispatches, 2001).
Two of the women are female police officers working for the Taliban, whilst the other
is Zarmeena. After a short period of time, the three women are let out of the truck by
an armed guard and marched from the halfway line to the edge of the penalty area,
where Zarmeena is forced to kneel down. A few moments later, another guard raises an
automatic rifle to her head and shoots her at point blank range in front of a crowd of
cheering onlookers (Dispatches, 2001). According to reports from those present,
Zarmeena’s seven children and the family of her husband – who said that they had
forgiven her for the murder – were forced to watch from the sidelines (RAWA, 1999).

When the film was first broadcast it made little impact on the political agenda, failing to
provoking much interest amongst those who were not already concerned with the plight
of Afghan women. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, however, the film became an
important part of the discursive landscape and was shown on a seemingly endless loop on CNN. One commentator quipped that ‘CNN re-ran *Beneath the Veil* so many times that it became a kind of daily documentary ritual’ (Spigel, 2004: 249). For many Americans, the execution of Zarmeena came to symbolise everything that was wrong with the Taliban regime, reaffirming their belief that the women of Afghanistan were living in a state of almost total despair. What was often neglected by those showing the film was the fact that the footage of the execution was not filmed by Shah or her team but by members of RAWA, who had secretly recorded the spectacle on camcorders hidden underneath their burqas. One of those who had risked their lives to capture the footage was a RAWA representative known as Salima, who argued that,

> We knew this execution wouldn’t be documented by any news agency. Taliban wouldn’t do it and they wouldn’t let others. So it was our responsibility. […] The least we could do was document the scene by filming it and getting the word out. We did it because no one else could document this, to show the brutalities. We were willing to sacrifice our lives to do this. It was a matter of determination’ (quoted in Brodsky, 2003: 14).

The bravery displayed by those who managed to film the execution, along with RAWA’s wider organisational framework that enabled them to complete their mission, was quickly forgotten by those watching the film, who saw only the gruesome events surrounding Zarmeena’s demise (Brodsky, 2003: 14). In one interview, Larry King asked the makers of *Beneath the Veil* whether the women of Afghanistan were ‘just placid’, suggesting that they appeared to have ‘no power to strike back’ (CNN, 2001b). In the same interview he asked a similar question to Mavis Leno, who was there on behalf of the FMF. In response, she told that ‘there is nothing they can do’ because the Taliban ‘took away every kind of weapon’ (CNN, 2001b). This view was also echoed by Katie Couric in a similar interview with RAWA representative Tahmeena Faryal, this time on *Good Morning America*. Unlike King, Couric did acknowledge the role of RAWA in obtaining this footage but seemed only concerned with the risks associated with such activities, asking Faryal to tell her ‘about the danger of when you go in and film the things you're filming’ (ABC, 2001). More surprising, however, was that even Shah seemed to forget about the vital role RAWA played in making her film possible, despite making such a fuss about it in the film itself. In an article published in the *Guardian*, for example, she recounts her trip across Afghanistan, describing how a country, ‘full of such promise, [had been] reduced to so much rubble and decay’ yet fails to mention her own debts to RAWA (Shah, 2001). Rather than take the opportunity to correct the
partial and distorted accounts of these women’s lives, she simply reaffirms their status as victims and argues that women were ‘invisible’ under the Taliban (Shah, 2001).

This refusal to acknowledge the work of RAWA in obtaining the footage is just one example of how the agency of Afghan women was rendered unintelligible within the dominant discourses of the “war of/on terror”. At the same time, however, the actions of organisations such as RAWA call into question the belief that Afghan women were mere victims in need of rescue. In her work on the subaltern subject, Gayatri C. Spivak focuses on these clandestine forms of agency that exceed limits of the prevailing disciplinary codes, showing how the actions of oppressed people often went unnoticed by the colonial authorities. One example that Spivak uses to illustrate this hidden form of agency is the death of Bhubaneswari Bhaduri, which was discussed in the previous chapter (Spivak, 1999: 306-308; 1988: 307-308; see chapter 5). For Spivak, these acts of agency can be seen as being clandestine in two related but quite different ways. On the one hand, the resistance to colonial rule obviously relies upon remaining hidden from the authority. On the other hand, they are not legible within the colonial framework, which cannot accommodate such activities within its terms. The actions of subaltern women like Bhubaneswari Bhaduri, she argues, cannot be readily incorporated into dominant disciplinary codes but point towards the impossible boundary that marks off what is wholly other. As such, their actions represent both an act of concealment as well as a disclosure, pointing towards that which cannot be known with the prevailing epistemic framework (1999: 173). The fact that their actions are never fully knowable does not, however, mean that the subaltern does not continue to act in the most robust sense of the word. As Stephen Morton explains, ‘Spivak clearly accepts that subaltern women can and do act and speak in ways that frequently resist the patriarchal authority of the state. However, she also emphasises that the sovereign and embodied acts of subaltern women are often not audible or intelligible in the systematic terms of dominant representation’ (2007: 122).

Although we did not know it at the time, the woman whose execution that was seen in the grainy footage can also be seen as a curious guardian of the margin, withholding her

54 Drawing on J.M. Coetzee’s reading of Robinson Crusoe, Spivak also presents Friday as an example of someone who acts as a guardian of the margin, making the impossible visible whilst continuing to withhold aspects of his culture (1999: 174-189).
last act of resistance from both the Taliban and the world. After the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, two British journalists managed to track down a police officer named Rana Sayeed who was one of the women that had accompanied Zarmeena in the back of the pick-up truck to the stadium (Antonowicz, 2002). Revealing some previously unknown details about the case, Sayeed claims Zarmeena had plotted to kill her husband because she could no longer cope with his relentless abuse. Lacing his food with sleeping pills, she alleges that Zarmeena had intended to bludgeon her husband to death with a hammer but could not follow through with her plans, leaving her 16-year-old daughter to deliver the deadly blow (Antonowicz, 2002). Following her arrest, however, Zarmeena refused to betray the true identity of the culprit even though she was tortured with a metal cable for over two days. As Sayeed recalls, “Zarmina [sic] said she was the murderer. That she acted alone. She stuck to that story all the time she was tortured. It was only two years later when she knew me well that she admitted the truth. And I wasn’t going to tell anyone” (quoted in Antonowicz, 2002). Although the narrative constructed by the Mirror does little to contest the dominant discourses of the “war of/on terror”, these new revelations refuse the tidy distinctions that present Afghan women as the abject victims, hinting at the hidden forms of agency that existed under the Taliban. By choosing to sacrifice her own life rather than risk the life of her daughter, Zarmeena’s execution confounds the dominant representational practices that cast her only as a victim showing instead that she was also an agent in death. Although we should be careful not to try and make a virtue out of an absolute horror or to downplay the malevolence of her executioners it is important nonetheless that we recognise the additional layers of complexity that are so often relegated to the unknowable margins of the political discourse.

Whilst it is important to recognise the role of women in the resistance to Taliban rule, it is important not to make the mistake of assuming that it is possible to simply recover their agency without attending to the processes of subject formation that rendered it unintelligible to begin with. In the previous chapter, I discussed Spivak’s work on the subaltern as a speaking subject and, in particular, her criticism of those thinkers who treat the voices of non-western women as pieces of material evidence that can be easily excavated from the colonial archive. Warning against their nostalgia for lost origins, she argues that not only do they risk transforming the subaltern woman into a positive category of thought but they might also end up legitimising the very colonialism they are seeking to contest (Spivak, 1999: 287). In her article “The Romance of Resistance:
Tracing Transformations of Power Through Bedouin Women”, Lila Abu-Lughod shares similar concerns about conventional accounts of agency, accusing feminists of trying to ‘read all forms of resistance as signs of the ineffectiveness of systems of power and of the resilience and creativity of the human spirit in its refusal to be dominated’ (1990: 41-42). For Abu-Lughod, the actions of non-western women are often seen as evidence of an underlying desire to experience the same kinds of freedoms that we in the West are said to enjoy. By imposing their own interpretations, she argues that there is a real danger that feminists end up reproducing the idea that these women, whilst clearly different from us, nevertheless want to be like us, act like us and live like us. The tasks for feminists, therefore, is to try and find a way of thinking about resistance in a way that does not perpetuate the notion of a universal feminist consciousness or risk de-valuing the practices of non-western women by dismissing them as pre-political, primitive or misguided (1990: 47).55

The ease with which agency of Afghan women was appropriated into the dominant discourses of war is something that is clearly evident in Sally Armstrong’s book Veiled Threat: The Hidden Power of the Women of Afghanistan (2002), which profiles the work of Sima Samar (an Afghan doctor who went on to become a deputy prime minister in the interim government before she was forced to resign after receiving a series of death threats). Beginning with Samar’s childhood, Armstrong describes her education at a co-ed school staffed by teachers from the American Peace Corps which did not have the ‘ubiquitous boundary wall’ of normal Afghan schools, allowing her to play sports, climb trees and ignore the ‘stifling rules for girls’ (2002: 22). After graduating from university, Samar was able to set up and run a medical clinic in her in-law’s house for a number of years before she moved to Quetta, founding a clinic for Afghan refugees with the support of the international community. During her time in Pakistan, Armstrong argues that her ‘steadfast refusal to observe purdah – and the stand she took on equality for women – made her anathema to the fundamentalists, but a hero to the women she was serving’ (2002: 27). Within this narrative, women such as Samar are portrayed as extraordinary individuals who have fought to undermine the ‘suffocating rules’ imposed

55 Taking this criticism a step further, Mahmood argues that Abu-Lughod continues to ‘romanticise resistance’ by equating agency with resistance whilst failing to attend to the various ways in which women living in their societies willingly submit themselves to seemingly oppressive structures (2005: 7-8). It is worth noting that a significant minority of women were quite supportive of the policies imposed by the Taliban, working as informants for the regime and persecuting those who were suspected of opposing it (Rostami-Povey, 2007: 6; 36).
by their societies, whilst their actions are seen as evidence of a universal desire to overthrow the constraints imposed on them by their culture (2002: xii). Ignoring the complexity of their lives, the actions of Afghan women are quickly co-opted into a script that casts them as the downtrodden victims of oppression desperately fighting to attain the freedoms that are so often taken for granted in the West. Although Armstrong tries to dissociate herself from the actions of the Bush administration, her attempts to render visible the agency of Afghan women cannot be understood in isolation from broader objectives of the “war of/on terror”.

Another example of this romanticisation of resistance can be found in a book by Cheryl Benard entitled *Veiled Courage: Inside the Afghan Women’s Resistance* (2002). Expressing her frustration with the attitude of the aid workers she met on her visit to Afghanistan, Benard criticises those in the international community who give the impression that Afghan women are both unwilling and unable to challenge the terms of their oppression (2002: 2-3). Although she admits that she initially bought into the idea that these women were voiceless and invisible, she soon realised the error of her ways after she encountered a group of female doctors working at a hospital run by RAWA on the outskirts of Peshawar in Pakistan. It was, she explains, ‘one thing to realise abstractly that these women’s lives were sad, telling myself that they weren’t really like me and didn’t expect anything different and therefore didn’t really mind. It was another to come face-to-face with an entire roomful of their helpless, hopeless misery’. Yet, as she began to speak with these women, the international community’s ‘comfortable deception’ soon fell apart as she discovered that these women were not passive victims but active agents seeking to change their lives for the better (2002: 9). As she discovered more about RAWA’s network of secret schools and the newsletters that they distributed, Benard argues that she began to realise that the situation in Afghanistan was not one of total dominance but one that ‘pitted heavily indoctrinated, well-armed, pitiless male fanatics who hated women against unarmed, untrained, female civilians who were additionally hampered in their ability to act by cultural constraints, family obligations and a slew of rules restricting their behaviour (2002: 43-68; 75). Noticeably absent from Benard’s account, however, was any mention of the organisation’s opposition to the invasion of Afghanistan and the subsequent occupation. The agency of Afghan women, it seems, is only visible to the extent that it conforms to the interpretations that are imposed from outside. Beyond that, it soon becomes strangely unintelligible.
A more recent example of this tendency to appropriation of Afghan women’s agency can be seen in the media’s coverage of the Shia Personal Status Law that stated that men were entitled to have sexual intercourse with their wives every fourth night. If their wives refused to comply, the law stated that men could withhold basic maintenance. Reacting to the proposed law, which was quietly enacted by President Karzai in February 2009, a number of human rights organisations argued that it effectively sanctioned marital rape, whilst the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay described it as a ‘huge step in the wrong direction’, claiming that it was another ‘clear indication that the human rights situation in Afghanistan is getting worse not better’ (Boone, 2009a; UN, 2009). In Afghanistan, a number of women MPs accused the beleaguered president of sacrificing women’s rights in return for support from hard-line clerics in the upcoming elections (Boone, 2009a; Philp et al., 2009; Starkey, 2009a). In response, a group of these MPs joined together with a coalition of women’s groups to protest against the law. At the main rally, which was held on the 16th April 2009, around 200 women gathered outside a mosque run by Mohamad Asif Mohseni, one of the most influential supporters of the law, to express their anger at the provisions restricting women’s rights. Soon after the protest began, however, a group of religious students from a nearby university surrounded the demonstrators, tearing down their signs, spitting in their faces and throwing stones in their direction.

What is particularly interesting about this protest was reaction of the world’s media, who suggested that the protest was evidence of the gradual progress towards equality that had been made possible by the intervention of the United States. Although they were obviously critical about the proposed law, with a number questioning Karzai’s ability to lead, there was also a sense of smug satisfaction that these women were at least

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56 Following pressure from the international community – including Barack Obama, who described the law as ‘abhorrent’ – Karzai agreed to review the legislation, signing an amended version a few months later (Obama, 2009; Boone, 2009b). This, however, did little to placate the concerns of human rights organisations, with Brad Adams from HRW arguing that ‘these kinds of barbaric laws were supposed to have been relegated to the past with the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001, yet Karzai has revived them and given them his official stamp of approval’ (HRW, 2009). In reaction to the media furore surrounding the proposed law, one Afghan activist criticised what she saw as Western ‘hysteria’ to the issue, wondering why it was that the international community was getting so upset about one particular piece of legislation when ‘the majority of all Afghan women are in fact hostage to far more draconian practices, enshrined in customs and traditions that [predate the law]’ (Pazira, 2009). Writing in The Independent, she argued that there is little concern about the general lack of security that prevents women from going out in public, attending school or finding work, arguing that ‘there hasn’t been a single protest in the West about these crimes which are affecting the lives of women every day – not a single expression of support for those victims who, of course, don’t make it into the headlines’ (Pazira, 2009).
able to speak out against the legislation. One journalist writing in *The Times*, who was seemingly oblivious to the demonstrations that occurred under Taliban, claimed that the protest was ‘unprecedented’ in recent history, describing those present as the ‘bravest women in Kabul’ (Coghlan, 2009a). In another article, the same journalist suggested that the demonstrators signalled towards the growing sense of empowerment amongst Afghan women, arguing that ‘the women of Afghanistan find a voice’ (Coghlan, 2009b). Although he was quick to explain that to describe the ‘women’s rights movement as embryonic is to overstate its strength’ (Coghlan, 2009b). At no point during these two articles did the journalist make any effort to situate these protests within the context of those that had occurred during the period of Taliban rule or before. More worrying, however, was an article by Sandra Martin in the *Globe and Mail* which used the protest to justify the ongoing occupation without any regard for the actual views of the women involved, many of whom were just as angry about the continued presence of foreign troops. After speaking with a number of academics and commentators about the success of OEF, Martin concludes that, ‘[h]orrifying as it was to watch women being pelted with stones, seeing them march with their faces uncovered and their veils pulled back to show some hair was a hopeful sign that women are feeling strong enough to protest against an unjust law’ (Martin, 2009).

### 6.3 Rethinking Agency

In the previous section, I showed that the agency of Afghan women was often neglected and ignored by the mainstream media, ensuring that it remained largely invisible within the dominant discourses of the “war of/on terror”. On the rare occasions that their deeds managed to find their way into the public domain, they were quickly re-appropriated by commentators such as Armstrong, Martin and Benard to justify the intervention of the international community. By romanticising the resistance of these women, the mainstream media was able to portray the activities of groups such as RAWA as evidence of an underlying feminist spirit that, although dampened, had not been destroyed by five years of Taliban. This allowed them to impose their own interpretations of the events which were secretly unfolding in communities across Afghanistan, usually at the expense of the women who were actually involved. I have alluded already to Spivak’s attempts to rethink resistance by pointing to clandestine
forms of agency that remain hidden from sovereign power and defy the disciplinary codes that have rendered them passive victims. In this section, however, I will return to the work of Judith Butler in order to highlight the moments of potential undoing that can be found within the performative process, exploring the possibilities of subversion and re-signification that emerge as a result of the subject’s need to repeat those norms governing its intelligibility. Although this cannot avoid all the pitfalls identified above, it does enable us to think about agency in a way that does not rely upon notions of a fully autonomous subject whose status as an agent is not dependent upon it conforming to a particular model of resistance. Not only will this enable us to see how Afghan women were able to subvert the dictates of the Taliban but also undermine the categories imposed by the Bush administration.

One theorist who has written extensively about the problems associated with thinking about agency is the anthropologist Talal Asad, who has suggested that the actions of subaltern subjects only become visible when they conform to a particular secular-liberal model of agency. In his book Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity (2003), Asad argues that secular accounts of agency tend to presume the existence of a fully-conscious subject who acts to realise its full potential as a human being in accordance with its own interests and desires (2003: 70-71). Within this model of agency, power is seen as an entirely repressive force that the subject must overcome if it is able to realise its ambitions (2003: 71). Rejecting this view, however, Asad argues that this negative view of power fails to appreciate the processes of subjectification through which the agent is produced and animated, showing how the very possibility of agency is contingent upon these relations of power (2003: 71-73). Indeed, he is quick to expose the paradox at the heart of the secular-liberal account of agency, noting that ‘the self to be liberated from external control must be subjected to the control of a liberated self already and always free, aware, and in control of its desires’ (2003: 73). Rather than rely on such a narrow understanding, Asad outlines a much broader definition of agency, describing it as ‘a complex term whose senses emerge within semantic and institutional networks that define and make possible particular ways of relating to people, things, and oneself’ (2003: 78). To help illustrate this, he turns to the issue of pain, which is often assumed to be a barrier to the exercise of agency (2003: 74). Against this view, he claims that in many religious contexts pain is seen as agentive, noting that a number of ‘Christian and Islamic traditions have, in their different ways, regarded suffering as the
working through of worldly evil. For the suffering subject, not all pain is to be avoided; some pain must be actively endured if evil is to be transcended’ (2003: 92).

Following Asad, Saba Mahmood has turned her attention to the role of women within the Egyptian mosque movement in order to criticise feminism’s reliance upon the secular-liberal account of agency, which tends to present pious women as victims of their culture rather than agents of it. In her book *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (2005), Mahmood argues that feminists often present Muslim women as if they are labouring under a false consciousness, ‘who, if freed from their bondage, would naturally express their instinctual abhorrence for the traditional Islamic mores used to enchain them’ (2005: 1). Rejecting this view, Mahmood explores ‘the conceptions of self, moral agency and politics that undergird the practices of this non-liberal movement’, drawing on Butler’s notion of performativity in order to show how these women have been able to subvert the traditional structures of subordination at the same time that they willingly submit themselves to them (2005: 1-2, 5 and passim). Focusing on the role of female teachers in the mosque movement, she argues that, ‘on the one hand, women are seen to assert their presence in previously male-defined spheres while, on the other hand, the very idioms they use to enter these arenas are grounded in discourses that have historically secured their subordination to male authority’ (2005: 5-6). At the same time, however, she clearly departs from those feminist frameworks that look only for moments of potential disruption and displacement, rejecting those who wish to co-opt the agency of Muslim women into a teleology of progress (2005: 14-22). Instead of reifying particular acts of agency, therefore, Mahmood argues that it is necessary to consider the performative processes through which agency becomes possible, whilst remaining attentive to constitutive exclusions that effectively decide who counts as an agent and what count as agency.

The importance of subversion to any politics of resistance was something that was clearly evident in the way that Afghan women were able to turn some of the Taliban’s most oppressive edicts on their head, transforming sites of subordination into opportunities for defiance. Despite only being a very marginal issue for many Afghan women, the burqa – or chaddari, as it is known in Afghanistan – was seen by many in the international community as one of the most brutal and pervasive forms of oppression, symbolising the exclusion of women from the public sphere. At a Downing
Street press conference held on the 19th November 2001, Cherie Blair condemned the Taliban’s treatment of women, claiming that ‘nothing more symbolises the oppression of women than the burqa’ (quoted in Rumbelow, 2001). Focusing particular attention on women’s exclusion from the public sphere, she argued that the burqa provided a ‘very visible sign of the role of women in Afghanistan’ (quoted in Rumbelow, 2001). Similarly, Guardian columnist Polly Toynbee claimed that the burqa was one of the most horrific acts of repression by the regime, arguing that it was the basis of all the other forms of cruelty that were witnessed during the period of Taliban rule. According to Toynbee, the burqa was an essential part of attempts to objectify Afghan women, transforming them into ‘cowering creatures demanding and expecting violence and victimisation’ (Toynbee, 2001). With ‘its sinister, airless little grille’ she argued, ‘[it] is more than an instrument of persecution, it is a public tarring and feathering of female sexuality’ (Toynbee, 2001). In one of the more surreal moments of the “war of/on terror”, a US Congresswoman even went as far as address the House of Representatives whilst wearing a full length burqa, joining a number of her colleagues who had pinned small swatches of blue fabric to their jackets ‘as a sign of solidarity to their suffering and torment’ (Maloney, 2001: H6893; Capps, 2001: H6895).

What was particularly problematic about these discussions was the way in which the issue of the burqa became bound-up with some form of dehumanising logic, reinforcing the idea that Afghan women were trapped in a state of suspense. 57 One notable example of this was the tendency to associated the burqa with images of death, as evidenced by the number of commentators who referred to the veil as a ‘shroud’ (cf. Burns, 2002; Goodman, 2001; Solis, 2001: H6892; Waldman, 2001; Willsher, 2001). Writing in Time magazine, for example, Richard Lacayo even went as far as describing the burqa as ‘a kind of body bag for the living’, which was used by the Taliban to ensure that women were not only submissive but also largely invisible (Lacayo, 2001). According to Lacayo, the heavy fabric from which the burqa is made is so unwieldy that it can ‘induce panic, claustrophobia and headaches’ whilst causing such psychological stress that it is ‘akin to Chinese foot binding’ (Lacayo, 2001). On the city streets, he argues, ‘you would never

57 Butler, for example, has argued that images of veiled Afghan women enabled a kind of hyperbolic dis-identification that served only to reinforce a sense of distance between us and them, self and other, human and non-human (Butler, 2004a: 140-144). Others have suggested that the unveiling of Afghan women was part of a ‘biopolitics of beauty’ within which ‘beauty [became…] a category through which bodies achieve humanness and if humanness is a quality distributed unequally through forms of civilisational thinking, then a concept of beauty informs in some important way how human rights are understood’ (Nguyen, 2011: 368; see also Abu-Lughod, 2002: 785-787; McLaren, 2009)
know that these silent, shapeless forms, encased in these shrouds, have any views at all’ (Lacayo, 2001). Another article in the *Boston Globe* made a number of similar claims, describing Afghan women as a ‘spectral heap of humanity’ (Goodman, 2001). Catching a glimpse of these ‘dehumanised shapes’, the article argues these women formed nothing more than ‘a mute and invisible backdrop to their own history’ (Goodman, 2001). These sentiments were echoed by Marilyn Gardiner, who asked readers of the *Christian Science Monitor* readers to ‘imagine spending five years without ever feeling the warm glow of the sun on your face, […] cocooned, head to toe, in yards of hot, scratchy fabric that makes you look like a walking tent – a faceless, shapeless being, robbed of your individuality and public identity’ (Gardiner, 2001). According to Gardiner, the burqa represents one of the ‘most extreme forms of repression against women in modern memory’, reminding us how simple items of clothing have ‘shackled the female form and imprisoned women’s spirits’ (Gardiner, 2001).

Although the burqa is most associated with the period of Taliban rule, many commentators failed to recognise that the veil has a much longer and more complex history in the country. In the 1920s, for example, King Amanullah Khan’s attempt to ban the veil was one of the most controversial parts of his program of modernisation, angering religious conservatives across the country. In response, they distributed photographs of his unveiled wife, Queen Soraya Tarzi, consorting with male politicians on a recent trip to Europe, helping to create the social unrest that eventually led to his downfall (L. Dupree, 1973: 450-452; Saikal, 2004: 75-76). In 1959, Prime Minister Mohammad Daoud also tried to ease the restrictions on women’s dress, supporting the voluntary removal of the veil whilst encouraging senior political figures and military officers to allow their wives to discard the burqa at public events. When they did so at a parade celebrating Afghan independence, Louis Dupree reported that ‘the large crowd of spectators stared in stunned disbelief’ (1973: 532). At the same time, it is important to recognise that the burqa has a variety of different social and cultural meanings in Afghanistan. Rural women, for example, rarely wore the veil even during the period of Taliban rule as it interfered with their work, particularly if they were picking crops out in

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58 Some even went as far as suggesting that the unveiling of Afghan women would be a sign of their liberation, (Powell, 2001; *San Francisco Chronicle*, 2001a; Macintyre, 2002). After the initial success of OEF, however, it soon became apparent that the majority of women were still not willing to appear in public without the burqa, usually citing the deteriorating security situation as one of the main reasons for their reluctance to unveil (*The Economist*, 2002). Indeed, according to the *Observer*, it was not uncommon to see journalists trying to persuade women to remove their veils just so they could get a photograph (see Kolhatkar and Ingalls, 2006: 205-206).
the fields. As a result, wealthy women often wore the burqa in order to distinguish themselves from poorer women, buying lavishly embroidered silk garments to show off their social status (N.H. Dupree, 2001: 160). This has obvious parallels with Chandra T. Mohanty’s work on Iran in the 1970s (albeit in reverse), where middle-class women adopted the veil as a gesture of solidarity with their working-class sisters, transforming it into a symbol of defiance against the ruling regime (1988: 75). It is also important to note that rules requiring women to wear the burqa were actually introduced by Burhanuddin Rabbani four years before the Taliban seized power (Dorronsoro, 2005: 291, UN, 1994: 14).

Given its complicated history, it is perhaps not surprising that women were not so keen on removing the burqa following the defeat of the Taliban. Lila Abu-Lughod, for example, has questioned why it was that we were so quick to assume that women would choose to dress ‘immodestly’ following the collapse of the Taliban, arguing that anthropologists know perfectly well that ‘people wear the appropriate form of dress for their social communities and are guided by socially shared standards, religious beliefs, and moral ideas’ (2002: 785). Indeed, it is worth remembering that when Daoud introduced his reforms in the late nineteen-fifties, the outfit chosen by most women was ‘a scarf, dark sunglasses, heavy coats, gloves, and cotton stockings’ (L. Dupree, 1973: 246-247). Afghan women’s groups have also expressed their frustration at the way in which the international community became fixated on the burqa, whilst ignoring important problems such as poverty, malnutrition and insecurity. Recalling her experiences working with the Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF), for example, one Afghan activist described how the organisation quickly became ‘obsessed’ with the issue of the burqa, even buying large quantities of the garment to cut up and sell as a gesture of solidarity (Rostami-Povey, 2007: 123). This, she argued, left her feeling hurt, angered and insulted, revealing just how little the organisation seemed to know about her country and her culture (Rostami-Povey, 2007: 123). Similar problems were also encountered by Selay Ghaffar during a visit to Europe on behalf of an organisation called Humanitarian Assistance for the Women and Children of Afghanistan (HAWCA). Despite being there to discuss the work of her organisation, which runs a series of health and training programs across Afghanistan, Ghaffar soon discovered that many of the journalists she met were only interested in her decision not to wear a veil (Ghaffar, 2009). Asked how she felt not wearing the veil, she responded simply by
telling them that ‘the burqa is not a problem for us, hijab is not a problem for us, the scarf is not a problem for us’ (Ghaffar, 2009). Although the international community were right to be concerned about the Taliban’s treatment of women, the emphasis that was placed on the burqa not only revealed a deliberate deafness to the voices of Afghan women but served to obfuscate more pressing problems that could not be so easily fixed. As one Afghan activist explained, ‘all I hear since the fall of the Taliban is chaddari, chaddari, chaddari …[ but my] problem is not chaddari; my problem is that I don’t have any food to feed myself and my children’ (quoted in Rostami-Povey, 2007: 37).

What the United States and its coalition allies failed to realise, however, was that many women saw the burqa as a condition of their agency as it allowed them to camouflage their opposition, prompting Rostami-Povey to suggest that the women’s resistance movement was dependent upon the very institution that was designed to suppress it (2007: 36; 2003). For those women operating the network of secret schools across Afghanistan, the burqa was an invaluable method of moving about cities such as Kabul without raising the suspicions of Taliban officials, allowing them to smuggle notebooks, stationary and reading materials to their classes. Indeed, it was not uncommon to hear members of RAWA quip that the organisation might need to change its position on the veil as so many of their activities were dependent upon it (Brodsky, 2003: 18). Following the assassinations of high-profile individuals such as Malalai Kakar, Sitara Achakzai and Safia Amajan by the Taliban in more recent years, a number of female politicians and public figures have resorted to wearing the burqa as an additional layer of security. One of those who now relies on the burqa to continue with her political activities is the outspoken MP Malalai Joya, who has been the target of five assassination attempts in an attempt to silence her criticism of the warlords (Joya, 2009a: 2). In this respect, the reliance on the burqa as a way of masking individual acts of defiance can be seen as an example of what James C. Scott has described as a public display of acquiescence to disguise a hidden transcript of disobedience and insubordination (1990: x). As Colette Harris has shown in a similar study about gender relations in neighbouring Tajikistan,

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59 During her research, Rostami-Povey also discovered that the rules banning women from travelling with an *mahram* also had an unintended effect as more wealthy women were able to hire men to accompany them in public, transforming them from victims into employers. Although this does not diminish the devastating effects of the Taliban’s restrictions, it does add another layer of complexity that threatens to confound the dominant representations of Afghan women (2007: 36).
many women use the burqa as a kind of gender mask behind which they can hide the more illicit activities (2004: 21).

The ability of the Afghan women to subvert and resignify the prevailing codes of intelligibility was not limited to the edicts enacted by the Taliban but was also evident in regards to various programs that were operated and maintained by members of the international community. One of the few schemes that were allowed to continue under the Taliban was the Urban Vulnerable Bakery Project organised by the World Food Program (WFP), which employed widows to bake and distribute subsidised bread to the most vulnerable in Kabul and other major cities. After two decades of civil war, there were an around 25,000 war widows living in the capital alone, with some estimates putting the figure as high as 50,000 (New York Times, 2001). As a result of the Taliban’s restrictions on female employment, many of these widows were unable to provide food for their families, despite being the sole breadwinners in their female-headed households. To help avoid the risk of widespread starvation and malnutrition, the WFP established some 135 bakeries in districts across Kabul and appealed to the Taliban to let these widows work, providing them with both an income and some food to take back to their families. According to its own estimates, the WFP were able to assist 282,000 people (almost 25% of those living in Kabul), providing 3,000 tons of wheat flour per month. Similarly, in the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif, the agency continued to operate 80 bakeries helping more than 120,000 people (WFP, 2001).

As part of an ethnographic study of these bakeries, Anila Daulatzai spent a summer working at Bakery No. X in a district she called Kart-e-Naan, one of the poorest and most deprived areas of Kabul. The bakery was set-up in 1996 by the WFP to provide food to people in the local area who had been identified by the NGO as being at risk of starvation and given a ration card entitling them to fortified bread sold at only 40% of the market value (2006: 296). The bakery was staffed by 14 widows and one supervisor who were split into two shifts, the first working from 4am to 9am and the second working from 9am to 3pm, with the women taking it in turns to perform the various tasks required to produce the traditional naan bread (2006: 296). One of the people that Daulatzai worked with during her fieldwork was a 25 year-old woman named Hila, the youngest at Bakery X. Although Hila had spoken with Daulatzai about the deaths of her three brothers and her father, she had never mentioned the death of her husband.
When Daulatzai asked her about this, she began crying and told her that “I am a widow, dear sister, but I was never married” (2006: 297). As a result of the conflict, traditional structures of kinship, which would have normally absorbed family members unable to cope following the death of a family member, had been drastically reconfigured. Unable to care for her mother or find a husband that could afford to support them both, Hila was forced to assume the role of what Daulatzai describes as ‘pre-emptive widowhood’ (2006: 298). Even though Hila had never had a husband to lose she ‘has become a widow by classification, not due to the death of a husband, but due to the death of the possibility of marriage’ (2006: 298).

The predicament in which Hila found herself reveals not only the destructive effects of the civil war but also the limitations of the international community’s understanding of the situation, which relied upon ‘the figure of the war-destitute, dependent, and subjugated widow […] as the paradigmatic object of intervention’ (Daulatzai, 2006: 298-299). In order for women like Hila to gain access to the resources that were provided by agencies such as the WFP, they were expected to conform to the identities that had been constituted within the dominant discourses. According to institutional scripts produced and narrated by the mainstream media and global political elite, Afghan women could only become visible to the extent that they were able to fit the image of the abject victim in need of rescue, with the country’s war widows being seen as a particularly vulnerable group. By framing the situation in this manner and producing these particular subject positions, the international community was able to determine the range of political possibilities that were available, opening up certain opportunities whilst closing down many others. As Daulatzai explains, ‘[t]hese clichés or tropes have not only governed representations of contemporary Afghanistan, but have now moved from the discursive into the domain of everyday life and are thus impacting the social worlds of Afghans’ (2006: 299). Although the identities imposed by the international community clearly had a negative impact upon the lives of those living in Afghanistan, the ambivalence at the heart of these identities opened up a space for possible subversion. As the case of Hila shows, women were often able to access the bakery ‘through this category of widowhood as defined by the Bakery Project, which was, in turn, creatively engaged with and transformed by her community’ (2006: 299).
By assuming and then subverting the categories that were imposed by both the Taliban and international community, women like Hila were able to take advantage of the instabilities that mark the performative process, allowing them to transform these categories to suit their own political purposes. Importantly, the ability of Afghan women to subvert these categories emerged from inside these structures of oppression, revealing how their agency was dependent upon the very thing that they opposed. At the same time, however, it would be a mistake to assume that these sites of resistance are immune from co-optation and appropriation, as Daulatzai has herself warned. Reflecting on the occasions when aid workers, UN officials and foreign visitors came to the factory, Daulatzai argues that they would often present it as a space where ‘the otherwise suppressed spirit of feminism defied the repressive regime of the Taliban’ (2006: 300-301). As Daulatzai explains,

The widows sometimes asked me to translate the conversations among the official visitors, and were usually somewhat annoyed to hear that their daily work was celebrated as a heroic political struggle. [...] One of the bakers expressed herself with tears: ‘One day we are heroines for them, the next day something else, at the end we are useless.’ Another baker continued by saying, ‘they know nothing about our lives yet they tell our stories on our behalf’, while other bakers found it disturbing that the visitors never tried to speak with them and only wanted to take their photographs (2006: 300).

Rejecting these attempts to romanticise their resistance, she argues that the foreign visitors to the bakery project paid no attention to the individual circumstances of the women that worked there or their particular reasons for seeking employment, many of whom saw their position as a social necessity rather than a courageous act of defiance (2006: 301).

6.4 Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to highlight the failure of the dominant norms of intelligibility to adequately capture the lives of Afghan women whilst remaining attentive to the possibilities for subversion and resignification. Throughout this thesis, I have shown that the Bush administration’s narratives of rescue, which framed how the war in Afghanistan was both fought and thought, relied upon the idea that the lives of
Afghan women were effectively in a state of suspension during the five years of Taliban rule; that they were being held in abeyance until the Bush administration was able to intervene and liberate them. Against this, I have argued that the women of Afghanistan were not passive prisoners of the Taliban or mere symbols of helplessness but active political agents who were able to carefully negotiate their social status in order to limit the regime’s grip on their lives. Despite the horrifying conditions that existed under the Taliban, ‘Afghan women found a space in which to exercise autonomy and agency’ (Rostami-Povey, 2007: 7). One of the main ways that women were able to do this was to transform the mandatory burqa from a symbol of their oppression into a cunning disguise for their defiance, using the garment to transport books, pamphlets and other forbidden items around their local communities without arousing the suspicion of local government officials. This enabled a number of organisations and individuals to set up secret literacy classes for women and underground schools for girls in an attempt to limit the damage caused by the Taliban’s restrictions on education. In addition, many Afghan women were also able to assume and subvert the categories that were imposed by the international community, whose understanding of the situation in Afghanistan meant that aid rarely got to those most in need. As Rostami-Povey has argued, Afghan women know how to fight for their rights, ‘they refused the gender identities that the Taliban attempted to impose and now they are refusing to conform to those imposed by the invading forces’ (2007: 2).

At the same time, I have warned against moves to romanticise resistance, showing how easily the agency of Afghan women was appropriated by the mainstream media and co-opted into the dominant discourses of war as a way of legitimising the intervention of the international community. Turning to the work of thinkers such as Butler, Mahmood and Asad, I have argued that it is necessary to try and think about agency outside of the secular-liberal model, which tends to treat power as an external force that must be overcome. Rather than assume the existence of a fully-formed subject that exists outside of these power relations, I have emphasised the performative processes through which the subject is produced, highlighting the moments of potential undoing that emerge as a result of the need to repeat and reiterate the norms governing intelligibility. Rejecting the idea that it is possible to know what agency looks like in advance, Butler insists that ‘performativity involves the difficult labour of deriving agency from the very power regimes which constitute us, and which we opposed’, exploring moments of ambivalence and undecidability that allow for the possibility of re-signification (1995b:}
136). The particular form that the agency of Afghan women could take was something that materialised within the parameters set by both the dictates of the Taliban and contours of the “war of/on terror”. This is, as Spivak would argue, ‘the theatre where today’s “native informants” collectively attempt to make their own history as they act (in the most robust sense of agency) a part in a part they have not chosen, in a script that has as its task to keep them silent and invisible’ (1999: 102).
Conclusion

On the 9th August 2010, *Time* magazine published a photograph of a young Afghan woman named Bibi Aisha on its front cover. The style of the photograph was designed to invoke memories of Steve McCurry’s iconic image of Sharbat Gula, the Afghan girl whose sea-green eyes mesmerised readers of *National Geographic* in 1985 and helped to highlight the horrors of the country’s civil war. However, despite the more obvious similarities there are a number of important differences between the two images. Unlike the photograph of Gula, whose pain and suffering was betrayed only by the intensity of her stare, the violence that Aisha had experienced since the collapse of the Taliban was clear from the hideous scar that adorned her face – a gaping hole that marked the spot where her nose used to be. According to the article that accompanied the image, the injuries were caused by members of the local Taliban as punishment for running away from her abusive husband and violent family-in-law (Baker, 2010). Ignoring her pleas for clemency, the Taliban commander in charge ordered her husband to slice off her ears and hack off her nose, seemingly unmoved by her stories of abuse. Afterwards, Aisha was left to die on the mountain, choking on her own blood before being rescued by members of a local women’s refuge, who provided her with shelter and some degree of security (Baker, 2010). It was later claimed that the Taliban commander responsible had boasted to Aisha’s uncle about the attack, claiming that he was going to make an example of her in order to deter other girls in the village from trying to leave their husbands (Baker, 2010). Shortly after the photograph was published, Aisha was flown to the United States for reconstructive surgery with funds raised by the magazine, the New York-based organisation Women for Afghan Women (WAW) and the Grossman Burn Foundation. After a series of complex medical procedures, Aisha emerged from surgery with a new prosthetic nose.

Almost immediately doubts began to emerge about the accuracy of the story after it became apparent that the Taliban were not involved in the attack. A few weeks before her face appeared on the cover of *Time*, Ann Jones, the author of the widely-acclaimed book *Kabul in Winter: Life Without Peace in Afghanistan* (2006), met with Aisha in a women’s refuge in Kabul and asked her about the incident. According to Jones, Aisha said that her father-in-law had caught her trying to run away from her husband and had cut off her nose on his own accord. Later, the punishment was approved by village
elders, but the Taliban did not figure at all in her account. Accusing parts of the mainstream media of inflating the role of the Taliban for political purposes, Jones argues that Aisha’s own personal narrative was transformed into a ‘portent of things to come for all women if the Taliban return to power’ (Jones, 2010; see also Khpalwak, 2010). The Taliban, she argues,

[...] do terrible things. Yet the problem with demonizing them is that it diverts attention away from other, equally unpleasant and threatening facts. Let’s not make the common mistake of thinking that the devil we see is the only one (Jones, 2010).60

The decision to print the picture of Aisha’s mutilated face also provoked a raft of criticism from anti-war activists who were angered by the headline that accompanied the story and, in particular, the suggestion that ‘an early withdrawal of international forces could be disastrous [for Afghan women]’ (Baker, 2010). Commenting on what was seen by many as a form of emotional blackmail, Malalai Joya accused Time magazine of exploiting the suffering of Afghan women in order to justify the presence of coalition troops, claiming that, ‘[t]he headline – "What happens if we leave Afghanistan" – could have, or should have, been "What happens while we are in Afghanistan", because crimes of mutilation, rape and murder against women are commonplace today’ (Joya, 2009b). Similarly, Tom Scocca argued that although the headline provided ‘a gut-wrenching assertion of what’s at stake in the Afghan war’ it had mistaken the failures of the war in Afghanistan with the purpose of the war (Scocca, 2010). Responding to the criticism, Time’s Managing Editor, Richard Stengel, argued the image was not designed to shore-up support for the war but to provide ‘a window into the reality of what is happening – and what can happen – in a war that affects and involves all of us’. The photograph, he argued, offered a ‘combination of emotional truth and insight into the way life is lived in that difficult land’ (Stengel, 2010). These comments, however, did little to appease the growing criticism from anti-war activists who viewed the article as a

60 Her father-in-law Haji Sulaiman was later arrested for his part in the attack after he confessed to taking part in the attack. Sulaiman was, however, later released by the governor of Uruzgan, who said that he was covering for his son Qudratullah. The governor also claimed that any prosecution would be impossible because Aisha had fled the country. This has infuriated human rights organisations, who have argued that ‘releasing him is a betrayal of the women who seek justice and of the police who tried to arrest them’ (quoted in Rubin, 2011).
cynical propaganda piece designed to shore-up support for a deeply unpopular and divisive war.\textsuperscript{61}

What angered activists the most was the failure to acknowledge the slow and steady erosion of women’s rights that had already occurred since the collapse of the Taliban despite the presence of coalition troops (Coursen-Neff. 2003). One powerful indicator of the problems that Afghan women continue to face is the unrelenting level of violence that they experience in their everyday lives. On the 12\textsuperscript{th} April 2009, for example, a leading female politician called Sitara Achakzai was shot dead outside her home in the province of Kandahar by two gunmen working for Taliban in response to her views on women’s rights (Boone, 2009c). A few months earlier, the country’s most high-profile female police officer, Malalai Kakar, was also assassinated outside her home as she left for work, after receiving numerous death threats about her work with the unit responsible for investigating crimes against women (Sengupta, 2008). This was not the first attempt on her life, having thwarted a previous attempt by killing her three would-be assassins in a shoot out (Meo, 2004). Another prominent politician to be killed by the Taliban was Safia Amajan, the provincial director of the Ministry of Women’s Affairs in Kandahar, who was shot dead whilst travelling in the back of a taxi on the 25\textsuperscript{th} September 2006 (Kluyver, 2006). The impact of these attacks has, however, affected more than just the friends and the family of the dead, deterring many more women from seeking political positions within their local communities. A report by UNAMA, for example, found that ‘[i]nsecurity, coupled with fears for personal safety, have been hugely detrimental, and hindered efforts geared to undoing deeply engrained discrimination that marginalise women and inhibit their participation in the public life of the country’ (2009: 6; see also HRW, 2004b; 2010). So far, however, the response of the government has been rather weak, with Human Rights Watch reporting that threats to women’s lives are rarely taken seriously by the security forces. Indeed, they quote one female parliamentarian who claims that when she tried to tell the authorities about the

\textsuperscript{61} A few months before the publication of Aisha’s story, the CIA published a memo discussing the declining support for war in Europe in which it warned that the United States can no longer rely on public apathy and indifference (Wikileaks, 2010: 1). Focusing specifically on public perception of the war in France and Germany, the memo suggests that more emphasis should be placed on the benefits of ISAF operations for ordinary Afghans in an effort to counteract the negative publicity created by the high numbers of civilian casualties (2010: 2). Afghan women, it argues, "could serve as ideal messengers in humanising the ISAF role in combating the Taliban because of women’s ability to speak personally and credibly about their experiences under the Taliban, their aspirations for the future, and their fears of a Taliban victory" (2010: 4; see also O’Keefe, 2010).
death threats she had been receiving they responded by telling her ‘not to make enemies, to keep quiet’ (quoted in HRW, 2009: 22).  

As well as targeting female politicians and high-profile women’s rights activists, militants have also been responsible for a spate of acid attacks on young girls in an attempt to dissuade families from sending their children to school. In late 2008, for example, eleven girls and four teachers were attacked by three groups of men outside the Mirwais School for Girls in Kandahar, who circled around them on motorbikes and squirted them with acid from water pistols (Filkins, 2009). In another attack a few months later, over 90 students from the village of Mahmud Raqi were poisoned in a gas attack on their school. After staff and students noticed a strange odour engulfing the school, a number of children started retching uncontrollably and passing out, with at least five slipping into comas (Starkey, 2009b). Despite the seriousness of the situation, Human Rights Watch has argued that ‘[n]either the Afghan government nor the international community have developed a strategy to end attacks on girls, teachers, and schools; to keep schools open; or to make education accessible to insecure and rural areas’ (2006: 101). In addition, human rights groups have also reported a sharp increase in the number of women who have been raped, abducted and attacked since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, with Amnesty International claiming that countless women have been the victims of violence within their homes and their local communities (2003: 11; 2005: 17-20). These problems are compounded, they argue, by the fact that the criminal justice system has not only failed to identify the perpetrators but has tended to treat the victims as if they were adulterers (HRW, 2009: 32-48; Amnesty International, 2005: 30-31; UNAMA, 2009: 21-28). In one case in 2008, President Karzai was accused of pardoning two men convicted of gang raping a woman named Sara after only two years of their 11 year sentence, although he later claimed that the pardon was forged (HRW, 2009: 36). According to HRW, Sara was abducted on the orders of a local commander and was brutally raped with a bayonet before being turned out onto the street so that passersbys could see her bloodied clothes (2009: 36). After reporting the attack, Sara’s husband was attacked and murdered in an act of revenge whilst the two men convicted of the rape still remain at liberty (2009: 36-37).

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62 Karzai also stopped paying for Malalai Joya’s security – which she was entitled to as an MP – despite continuing to pay for the bodyguards of a number of known warlords (Joya, 2009a: 162).

63 In other areas, human rights organisations and educational officials have reported that schools have been attacked with explosives and arson, with the Ministry of Education recording approximately 102 separate incidents between April and August 2009 in the south of Afghanistan (HRW, 2009: 78).
A rather alarming consequence of these judicial failings has been the sharp rise in suicide amongst women, with large numbers of women setting fire to themselves in order to escape the violence and abuse they have been forced to endure. Although there are no accurate statistics available, healthcare advisors to the president have estimated that around 2,300 women commit suicide each year, approximately 5 for every 100,000 women (BBC, 2010). Similar figures have also been reported by hospitals across Afghanistan, with the AIHRC documenting some 100 cases in Kandahar in 2006 and the director of the burn unit reporting another 80 cases at a hospital in Herat in 2008 (Brewster, 2010; IRIN, 2006). Likewise, a report published by Canada’s Foreign Affairs Department, which was obtained under a freedom of information request, stated that ‘[s]elf-immolation is being used by increasing numbers of Afghan women to escape their dire circumstances, and women constitute the majority of Afghan suicides’ (quoted in Brewster, 2010). The consequences for those who survive are particularly gruelling. Declan Walsh, writing in the Guardian, recalled his visit to a hospital in Herat where he was shown the charred body of a woman called Saya, describing how her bandaged arms jerked with pain as she desperately tried to find some relief from her injuries (Walsh, 2004). In 2011, Jon Boone visited the same hospital to meet a woman named Salma, who had doused herself in lamp oil on her wedding night before setting herself alight. Although she survived her body was left with 70% second and third degree burns (Boone, 2011). Afghan human rights activists have pointed to a variety of problems behind this sudden rise in acts of self-immolation, pointing to the desperate security situation and the barriers to justice. Ahmed Shah Wazir, the doctor in charge of the burns unit, has also emphasised the effects of poverty and inequality on these women, stating that ‘people say the problem is violence, but I think that is really secondary to the problem of poverty’ (quoted in Boone, 2011).

Considering the precariousness of their position and the insecurities that they face, it is perhaps not surprising that many Afghan women’s groups and anti-war activists were enraged at the suggestion that Aisha’s injuries were a chilling reminder of what might happen if the Taliban were able to seize power once again. In many ways, these attempts to appropriate the experiences of Afghan women and use their suffering to justify the presence of coalition troops can be seen as an example of the problems that I have identified in this thesis. In chapter 1, I showed how the Bush administration, the mainstream media and influential US-based feminist organisations like the FMF tried to appropriate the suffering of Afghan women in order to frame the invasion of
Afghanistan as a humanitarian endeavour designed to liberate the downtrodden victims of Taliban oppression. Yet these narratives of rescue were contingent upon reproducing an image of Afghan women as a monolithic and homogenous social group whose lives were defined almost entirely by the terms of the suffering they endured. Incapable of capturing either the complexity of their lives or the diversity of their experiences, these narratives of rescue relied upon a set of stock stereotypes about the status of non-western women and the barbarities of the societies within which they live. As Priyamvada Gopal argues, ‘misogynist violence is unacceptable but we must also be concerned by the continued insistence that the complexities of war, occupation and reality itself can be reduced to bedtime stories [or...] simplistic morality tales’ (Gopal, 2010). This tendency to treat Afghan women as passive victims in need of rescue was only reinforced by the crude historical narratives that I identified in chapter 2, which constituted Afghanistan as a worrying anachronism in the modern world and the Taliban as a barbaric aberration in Afghan history. As well as ignoring the long legacy of international interference in Afghan affairs, which date back to the colonialism of the nineteenth century and has continued unabated ever since, these imaginative cartographic constructions and historical frameworks reinforce the idea that the lives of Afghan women were in a state of suspense during the period of Taliban, as if their very status as human beings had been compromised. The problem with trying to define Afghan women only by the terms of their suffering is that it radically circumscribes their appearance within discourse, denying them access to a culturally intelligible subject position within the global public sphere.

The idea that Afghan women were refused access to a politically qualified life has obvious parallels with Giorgio Agamben’s notion of bare life, which has been used by a number of thinkers to highlight the exclusionary effects of contemporary forms of humanitarianism. In Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life (1998), Agamben observes that the Ancient Greeks had no single word to express what we call life. Instead, they distinguished between \( \zeta \) as a form of natural life that is common to all and \( \beta \) as a particular kind of politically qualified life that is notable for its inclusion within the public sphere (1998: 1-2). Using this distinction to examine the biopolitical strategies that have come to define modern sovereign power, Agamben explores the ways in which the state increasingly targets natural life, including it within its political calculations. As a result, he argues that it is no longer possible to adequately differentiate between \( \zeta \) and \( \beta \), leading to the emergence of a new kind of expendable bare life,
which is constituted in the zone of irreducible indeterminacy between the two pre-
existing forms. What is interesting about this form of bare life is its peculiar relationship
with the polis. Introducing us to the figure of homo sacer, an obscure figure of archaic
Roman law, Agamben describes how bare life is included within the juridical order only
to be excluded from it, allowing him [sic] to be killed but not sacrificed (1998: 71-74).
However, this is not a straightforward exclusion from the law but a paradoxical state of
being incorporated within the terms of the law only to the extent that it is explicitly
expelled from its remit. In order to illustrate this, he invokes Jean-Luc Nancy’s notion
of the ban to describe how ‘he who has been banned is not, in fact, simply set outside
the law and made indifferent to it but rather abandoned by it, that is, exposed and
threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become

A number of thinkers working on contemporary forms of humanitarianism have also
utilised this concept of bare life to describe how certain populations have been excluded
from the public sphere, abandoned into a zone of indistinction by those seeking to
alleviate their suffering. Jenny Edkins, for example, has argued that ‘[b]oth the sovereign
state and a humanitarianism based on the concept of a common human essence
produce (and depend on) a particular form of subject: one that is excluded from
politics’ (2003: 256). In her work on famine, she suggests that the distribution of
humanitarian aid is less about the restoration of a particular form of politically qualified
life but the preservation of life itself, managing those populations deemed to be at risk
(2000: xvi). Focusing on the depoliticising effects of these practices, Edkins contends
that ‘humanitarian aid provides food and the means for bare survival. Life alone, bare
life, is what matters, not the continuance of a particular way of life’ (2000: 38).
Importantly, a number of commentators have also applied this notion of bare life to
explain how Afghan women were refused the possibility of a politically qualified life
within the Bush administration’s narratives of rescue. Slavoj Žižek, for example,
invoked Agamben’s concept of bare life in his critique of the violence witnessed during
the early stages of OEF, arguing that the ‘ultimate image of the “local population” as
homo sacer is that of the American war plane flying above Afghanistan: one can never be
sure whether it will be dropping bombs or food parcels’ (Žižek, 2002). Similar views
were also expressed by Drucilla Cornell who, in an article on the sacrilege of feminism,
claimed that the Bush administration’s failure to engage with activists such as the
Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) betrayed the extent to which the lives of Afghan women could not and did not count in the “war of/on terror” (2004: 314). Likewise, Cristina Masters argues that the image of Afghan women as the hopeless victims of the Taliban ensured their ‘figural death from the realm of the political’, eviscerating the messy complexity of their lives (2009: 44).

Whilst there can be little doubt that Agamben’s diagnosis of sovereign power has been a persuasive rhetorical device in the “war of/on terror”, there are a number of problems with his concept of bare life that limit the efficacy of his analytical approach for understanding the exclusion of Afghan women (not least his profound indifference to questions of gender and race). The first problem that we encounter is that Agamben’s notion of the sovereign ban is dependent upon a set of needlessly abstract claims about the contemporary biopolitical horizon that fail to account for the ways in which power differentiates between populations on the basis of a series of socially articulated norms (Butler, 2004b: 68). Although she is broadly sympathetic to his argument, Butler has argued that the exclusionary practices that prohibit certain subjects from a politically qualified existence cannot be reduced to a straightforward abandonment from the law but are dependent upon a primary form of violence that prevents them from even appearing as recognisable lives (Butler and Spivak, 2007: 8-9). For Butler, then, the suggestion that bare life is marked by an absence of power underestimates precisely how much power is required to maintain and sustain these lives in a state of suspension.

This does not mean, however, that these more overt forms of normative violence were not apparent in the justifications for war in Afghanistan. As I have noted in previous chapters, a paradoxical feature of contemporary forms of humanitarianism is the way in which those in need of rescue are portrayed as if they are somehow less than human or at least temporally excluded from the realms of humanity. In the justifications for the war in Afghanistan, for example, it was widely assumed by politicians and pundits that the edicts imposed by the Taliban were so detrimental to the lives of Afghan women that they not only restricted their rights as individuals but compromised their very status.

64 Agamben’s work on the state of the exception has been particularly useful for understanding the detention of suspected terrorists and so-called “unlawful combatants” at places like Guantánamo Bay in Cuba and Bagram airbase in Afghanistan (cf. Agamben, 2005; Butler, 2004b; Gregory, 2004). Whilst the world’s attention has been focused on the detention of suspected terrorist at Guantánamo Bay, several hundreds of people are currently being detained at Bagram airbase. As pressure mounts to close Camp X-Ray, the population at Bagram has swelled dramatically (Amnesty International, 2009; HRW, 2004a).
as human beings (Winik, 2001; Willsher, 2001). The cruelty witnessed during the five years of Taliban rule was seen as being so overwhelming that their lives were in a state of suspension, held in abeyance until the international community could intervene to restore some semblance of normality. A notable example of these more deliberate and overt forms of dehumanisation can be found in a report published by Human Rights Watch (HRW), which suggested that the crimes committed by the Taliban not only threatened the rights of Afghan women but jeopardised their continued existence as individuals by negating their ‘human dignity’ (2001b: 2). According to HRW, the abuse of women’s rights cannot be understood as discrete and isolated incidents but as a cumulative attack that ensures that ‘the opinions, thoughts, expressions, resistance and very existence of women is effectively denied’ (2001b: 12). Others have even gone as far as describing Afghan women as the ‘living dead’, claiming that the edicts enacted by the regime were so horrific that they were effectively ‘buried alive’ during the period of Taliban rule (Mann, 1998; Goodwin, 1998). Although the war in Afghanistan was justified with appeals to the suffering of Afghan women as human beings, they were only visible as spectral apparitions of the human as they waited to be resurrected from the dead.65 As Jennifer L. Fluri argues, the displaced bodies of Afghan women were constituted as a site of ‘perpetual potentiality’, visible only as ‘living corpses on the precipice of survival, suffering, or saviour’ (forthcoming, 18).

The other problem that we encounter with Agamben’s account of bare life is that it relies upon an overly totalising and deterministic view of sovereign power that pays insufficient attention to the possibility of subversion and resistance. Accusing Agamben of reproducing the myth of a fully-reconciled society, for example, Ernesto Laclau claims that ‘[i]nstead of deconstructing the logic of political institutions, showing areas in which forms of struggle and resistance are possible, he closes them beforehand through an essentialist unification’, which inevitably leads to a politics of nihilism (2007: 22; see also Ziarek, 2008; Edkins and Pin-Fat, 2005). Indeed, Agamben himself has suggested that ‘[t]he ‘body’ is always already a biopolitical body and bare life, and nothing in it […] seems to allow us to find solid ground on which to oppose the demands of

65 Focusing on the dehumanising effects of international law, Samara Esmeir has argued that ‘becoming subjects of human rights ensures recognition of their (temporary) humanity and its (possible) suspension. A person is, therefore, at once a human and yet-to-be human, a member of universal humankind and its dehumanised figure’ (2006: 1546). Rather than viewing the abuse witnessed under tyrannical regimes like the Taliban as impinging upon the rights of a particular population, Esmeir argues that these crimes are often recoded as an act of dehumanisation, reproducing the idea that the human is a status that can be ‘recognised and conferred, or seized and taken away’ (2006: 1544-1546).
sovereign power’ (1998: 187 emphasis added). This failure to account for the possibility of resistance is a problem that is particularly relevant for the purposes of my argument here as it reveals the limitations of Agamben’s biopolitical approach for under how Afghan women were able to undermine the edicts enacted by the Taliban and confound suggestions that they were nothing more than mere symbols of helplessness. Unlike those who have taken their inspiration from Agamben’s approach, therefore, this thesis has been influenced by Butler’s work on normative and the politics of intelligibility, showing how Afghan women were denied access to a culturally intelligible subject position whilst remaining attentive to the possibility of subversion and resignification. Outlining her concept of performativity, I argued that the materialisation of the subject within language is contingent upon an uneasy process of repetition and reiteration that occurs within a tightly-controlled regulatory framework. However, far from being an entirely innocuous affair, I have shown how these performative processes are dependent upon excluding those populations who cannot conform to the dominant terms of intelligibility, preventing them from appearing as recognisable human beings in any real or meaningful sense. The effects of this normative violence were clearly apparent within the justifications for the war in Afghanistan, which prevented Afghan women from appearing as anything other than helpless victims in need of rescue.

As well as drawing attention to the constitutive exclusions that haunt the formation of the subject, Butler’s concept of performativity also enables us to understand those moments of disruption and disturbance that challenge the dominant terms of intelligibility. Central to this thesis is the argument that the dominant representations of Afghan women are always liable to failure, leaving them open to the possibility of a less violent and less exclusionary re-imagining. In chapter 5, for example, I showed how the outspoken views of women such as Malalai Joya and Tahmeena Faryal not only helped to expose the radical disjuncture between rhetoric and reality in Afghanistan but were also able to contest the very limits of our dominant representational practices, confounding the image of Afghan women as the silent victims of Taliban oppression. Even though the concerns of Afghan women have been largely ignored by the Afghan government and members of the international community, they have continued to speak out against the injustices experienced by women in their everyday lives, the inclusion of warlords in the interim authority and the ongoing occupation by foreign troops. As a result, these women have been threatened, intimidated and assaulted by militant groups and even their own parliamentary colleagues, yet they still refuse to
remain silent. This does not mean, however, that the feminist scholars should resort to what Spivak has described as an ‘unexamined nativism’ in order to contest the Bush administration’s narratives of rescue, as this fails to account for the epistemic violence that circumscribes what can be seen and heard within the prevailing frames of war (1999: 173). Unlike those who have tended to assume that the voices of organisations such as RAWA are representative of Afghan women in general, I have argued that it is important to consider the complex array of social, cultural and political histories that have enabled these organisations to get their voices heard whilst simultaneously silencing others.

This is why Butler’s notion of a performative contradiction has been a useful theoretical tool for the purposes of this thesis, as it has allowed me to trace the ways in which Afghan women have been able to challenge the dominant discourses of war. For Butler, a performative contradiction arises when someone who has been excluded from the prevailing normative framework continues to speak and act within its terms, exposing the normative violence that has denied them a politically qualified subject position whilst allowing for the possibility of subversion and resignification. In chapter 6, for example, I described how Afghan women were able to overcome the Taliban’s restrictions on female education by setting up a network of secret schools across Afghanistan, converting their homes into classrooms where they could teach those who had been excluded from formal education. Using their burqas as camouflage, these women were able to transport their books, stationary and reading materials around their local communities without arousing the suspicion of government officials, transforming one of the most potent symbols of their oppression into a tool of resistance. As well as allowing them to undermine the edicts enacted by the regime, these acts of defiance can also be seen as a kind of performative contradiction, unsettling the image of Afghan women as a population without agency. Far from being the passive victims of Taliban oppression, these women continued to speak and act in ways that undermined the efficacy of the edicts enacted by the regime whilst confounding the dominant representational practices that enabled the international community to justify a violent and coercive intervention. This does not mean, however, that we can simply ignore the concerns of Afghan women in favour or a purely allegorical reading but requires us to develop a strategy of reading otherwise that is capable of responding to these moments of disruption without disregarding the content of their concerns. The task, then, is to think about ways of responding to the concerns of Afghan women in a way that does
not reproduce the same exclusionary practices that defined the Bush administration’s narratives of rescue. Only then might we begin to appreciate the complexity of the situation in Afghanistan and the experiences of the people that live there. As Spivak argues, ‘you can only read against the grain if misfits in the text signal the way’ (1996a: 224).
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