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## The beautiful ‘other’: a critical examination of ‘western’ representations of Afghan feminine corporeal modernity

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This paper examines corporeal modernity as part of the larger ‘savior and liberation’ trope produced for Afghan women by US-led military, political and economic intervention post-9/11. This savior trope has been identified as a co-optation of women’s rights discourses and activism (Hunt 2002), a misguided approach to security through gendered scripts of masculine aggressive protection and female submission (Young 2003; Dowler 2002), and as yet another example in a long history of gendered tropes devised by colonial and imperial powers to save Muslim women (Abu Lughod 2002). This study adds to existing feminist critiques of US intervention in Afghanistan by examining the Beauty Academy of Kabul and the participation of Miss Afghanistan in the 2003 Miss Earth Pageant as particular lenses through which the economic and corporeal ‘liberation’ of Afghan women was presented in the US. This economic approach occurs at the site and scale of the body in order to (re)define corporeal modernity through corporate driven, heteronormative, and hegemonic beauty standards.

**Keywords:** corporeal modernity; Afghanistan; gender; body politics; economic development

### Introduction

The Beauty Academy of Kabul, and the participation of Miss Afghanistan (sponsored by the US) in the 2003 Miss Earth pageant, occupy an important chapter in socially and politically constructed western ideologies for ‘saving’ Afghan women. Afghan women’s bodies are unveiled into the beauty parlor in order to reveal feminine corporeal modernity as a significant, and at times ‘necessary’, link to western ideals of freedom and liberty. Beauty pageant participation by Miss Afghanistan is similarly used to exemplify corporeal freedoms, despite the contests’ restrictions. After the removal of the Taliban from Kabul, Afghan women and men were released from many restrictions that had been imposed on them, including the ability to openly run beauty salons or shave one’s beard. However, linking beauty products to liberty as brought forth by US women and their beauty industry sponsors, or identifying a beauty pageant as an emblematic example of women’s rights, remains lost in translation. The publicity the Beauty Academy of Kabul, a small and temporally limited project, received in the US reinforces the drama of beauty as liberation for the local US (rather than Afghan) consumer. Beauty developers became quasi-‘feminists’ by way of linking Afghan women’s acceptance and desire for corporeal modernity with their liberation.

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The publicly displayed female body is in many respects a key part of the process of western modernity (Brumberg 1997; Jay 1993). Placing the public (unveiled) body in continual contrast with the private (veiled) body contributes to the identification of the former as both an example of modernity and, as demonstrated in this article, an example of democratic expectations of liberty and freedom (Barlas 2002). Moreover, democratic ideals and communicative processes in capitalist societies such as the US are often subverted by the economic power of large corporations (Cole 2003). Modifications to the feminine body through beauty products, dress, or surgery are not compulsory; however, the expected corporeal appearances and performances as part of public life for women are fraught with subtle complications associated with seductive power such as found in advertising (see Allen 2003). Women in the US who choose *not* to participate in the use of beauty products or technologies (depending on a variety of factors such as socioeconomic class, racial category, and career path) may risk their social and, at times, economic and political status. Similarly, when women choose to participate in beauty–body regimes of modification are they truly making a ‘free choice’ when by doing so they are supporting dominant beauty paradigms (Menon 2005)?

Conceptions of choice and freedom are directly linked to the Beauty Academy of Kabul in popular tales about this project. For example, the titles of several articles in women’s magazines about the Beauty Academy of Kabul identify the project as: ‘Lipstick Power’, ‘Extreme Makeover’, ‘The Power of Beauty’, and ‘Life, Liberty and a Touch up’ (Wintour 2003; Reed 2003; Johnson 2002; Schulman 2003). Similarly, the text of these articles also link make-up to expressions of freedom and liberty. For example, a *Site News* article states:

Hairdos and makeup help define a woman’s persona, but at a beauty school in Kabul after the fall of the Taliban, each stroke of red lipstick and each snip of the scissors boldly punctuated a new found freedom for women in Afghanistan . . . The Beauty Academy of Kabul, where perms and blush are metaphors for freedom. (Stiles 2006, 1).

Afghan women’s clandestine uses of beauty products under the Taliban, as discussed in US beauty magazines, dramatize the otherwise ordinary and banal expectations of product use in the US. This strengthens the interconnected web of politically and socially produced expectations on the modern feminine body, which acts as a representative space to monitor levels of acceptance to or rejection of western modernity (see Scott 2007). Consequently, corporeal modernity becomes a public marker for identifying a state’s democratic ideals.

The script for the Beauty Academy of Kabul drama directly associates the *burqa* with the Taliban regime: this then provides the necessary backdrop against which the tale of corporeal liberation can be written. Importantly, it also serves to relinquish the United States’ role in creating the conditions that led to the rise of the Taliban (such as US foreign policy and negotiations with the Taliban, funding for the Taliban, and the role of US-based oil company Unocal – see Rashid 2001). Afghan women’s bodies act as a spatial and social metaphor for deliverance by way of their manufactured transformation into a modern, western and hegemonic model of the global feminine subject. This modern feminine body must be presented publicly and meet (or strive for) narrowly defined ideals of beauty, largely associated with light skin color and Anglo-Saxon facial features combined with a thin, tall and young looking body.

This article, then, investigates beauty demands on women in the US at the site of Afghan women’s faces and bodies, and the particular manner in which corporeal modernity is (re)constructed within the beauty salon and the beauty pageant as a symbol of liberty. The following sections of this paper include: an overview of the methods used for this study; a critical examination of the press coverage of and documentary film on the

Beauty Academy of Kabul; and the use women's bodies as an emblem of corporeal modernity in beauty pageantry at the national and international scale.

### Methods

A content analysis of US-based media coverage of the Beauty Academy of Kabul (consisting of documentary film, newspaper and magazine articles) provides the basis for critiquing the way in which this project was framed in the US. I collected articles from leading women's magazines including *Vogue* (one of the corporate sponsors of the academy), *Glamour*, and *Vanity Fair*, as well as web-based journals (such as, *news.telegraph*, *Foreign Correspondent*, *SiteNews*, and *PakTribune*). These articles were coded to identify how the uses of make-up and beauty products were described for the reader. The 2004 documentary about the formation of the academy was transcribed and similarly coded. The memoir, written by one of the hairstylists who helped to form the beauty academy, was also included (however, the information in this book has been largely disputed by other women involved in this project and therefore 'factual' data from the book is not included in this article). For the Miss Earth Beauty Pageant, I conducted a content analysis of the pageant's website, and articles about the Pageant in newspapers and the web-based journals listed above. I also included responses to Miss Afghanistan's participation in this pageant from Afghanistan-related websites. The 1972 Miss Afghanistan pageant information was primarily collected from secondary source interviews with, and articles written by, the winner of that pageant.

This data is juxtaposed with interviews with and observations of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA)<sup>1</sup> between 2003 and 2006, in Peshawar, Pakistan, and Kabul, Afghanistan. My work with RAWA was part of a larger project on the Association's use of technology and linkages with supporters outside the Afghanistan region. I conducted interviews with RAWA members, male and female supporters, children and young adults living in RAWA-run orphanages, and attending RAWA-run schools. I conducted these interviews with the assistance of a RAWA member who provided translation assistance (from Dari and Pashto to English). The interviews were recorded and translation was checked upon return from the field. The names of RAWA members and supporters were not recorded. Although my work with RAWA was not focused specifically on veiling or the use of make-up, their use of strategic essentialism techniques and participation in western spectacles of unveiling provides a compelling counter-narrative to the hegemonic portrayals of women's veiled and unveiled bodies.

### 'Saving' women: setting the stage

The story of Afghan women's post-9/11 'liberation' led by US forces, political assistance, and economic aid, includes many visual (still and video) portrayals of women's suffering under the Taliban (most of which were documented by RAWA through the use of cameras and video recorders hidden under the *burqa*). RAWA used this documentation to provide a visual 'Truth' about the human rights abuses and other corporeal atrocities that were perpetrated against the Afghan people by fundamentalist groups. RAWA's documentation of Taliban atrocities were also viewed on several international media outlets, such as CNN and the BBC, after 9/11. These images helped to solidify the US military invasion as a 'saving' mission (see Abu Lughod 2002; Hunt 2002).

Ironically, the Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan in the 1990s also illustrates the capacity of masculine protector and savior mythologies to support the use of violence.

For example, the Taliban's rise to power in Kandahar (southern Afghanistan) is often attributed the ability of a small group of Talibs to save two young girls who had been kidnapped and raped by a local warlord. The rescue of these girls was used by Taliban leader, Mullah Omar, as a mobilizing tactic to increase the numbers and strength of the Taliban in its early organization in Afghanistan (Rashid 2001).

Indeed, the Taliban is one among several other governments and paramilitary groups that have implemented the 'saving women' trope as a reason to legitimate military violence in Afghanistan's nearly 30 years of conflict (Kandiyoti 2007). The Soviet Union's 1979 invasion was riddled with discourses of 'saving' Afghan women from Afghanistan's patriarchal social structures (Zulfacar 2006). Conversely, Afghanistan's Mujihdeen resistance groups, in response, were 'protecting' women from the military and ideological invasions of the Soviets (Dupree 1998; Zulfacar 2006). The categorical use of women as a moral excuse for the implementation of violence is consistent in these various cases. This trope, as argued by various feminist scholars, is powerful and does little to assist the lives of women, empower them, recognize their agency, or understand the effects of violence and militarism on their everyday lives (Enloe 2000; Hunt 2002; Young 2003).

The US, acting as the most recent power with the self-appointed mission of 'saving' Afghan women, provides yet another political context for the identification of the female body as a site from which to measure liberation. And much of the groundwork for what Hunt (2002) identifies as a co-optation of Afghan women's rights was paved by US-based feminist and women's rights organizations that lobbied congress and met before executives of the Union Oil Company of California in order to stop US recognition and support of the Taliban (see Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002; Hunt 2002; Whitlock 2007). This groundwork was marked by a sharp focus on the Taliban's imposition of the *burqa*, which became a leading symbol, in the US, of Afghan women's oppression (see Fluri 2008). The Taliban's insistence on the use of the *burqa* was to set the stage for campaigning for its removal to signify US-sponsored liberation.

In Afghanistan, the removal of the *burqa* actually occurs as a commonplace, everyday activity when women (who wear the *burqa*) cross the threshold of home into the public street and back again. The *burqa* fosters women's mobility by providing them corporeal privacy in public space. Wearing the *burqa* is also a fluid activity. For example, the *burqa* (which covers the face with a mesh screen over the eyes) is lifted up and over the head while moving through public space when men (outside the family) are not present or beyond one's line of sight (the *burqa* remains on the body by way of a cap sewn in to keep it from slipping off the head). The *burqa* is lifted up continually as women move through public space and removed completely upon entry to a household or other private space.

Families, rather than the state, are traditionally the primary site for expectations of one's dress, Islamic practice and deciding a woman's (and man's) place both in the home and public space. In general, women's autonomy and authority within the family are largely gained through aging, motherhood, and relationships with sons (Jayawardena 1986; Kandiyoti 1988; Moghadam 2002). The Taliban's compulsory dress code displaced private and communal decision making with state authority, which was an affront to the respected and expected 'privacy' of family decision making (Johnson and Leslie 2004; Kandiyoti 2007). The Taliban's gendered management and control over public space subverted the power of family-scale decision making around various issues that involved gender, the body and mobility. And many Afghan families resisted the Taliban's edicts in a variety of ways.

The work of the RAWA is highlighted here due to the Association's 'popularity' in the US as a key player in resisting the Taliban. During the Taliban era RAWA used the *burqa*

to conceal information and move about public space with political contraband (such as its political magazine *Payam-e-Zan Women's Message*). For example, in my interviews with RAWA members they identified their use of 'the *burqa* against the *burqa*', meaning the *burqa* enabled them to conceal educational materials for their secret schools, medical supplies, and cameras to document Taliban human rights abuses although they were also against the Taliban's compulsory requirement (also see Brodsky 2003). For example, the following quote is from one of RAWA's political publications, entitled *The Burst of the 'Islamic Government' Bubble in Afghanistan*, which was printed after the Taliban takeover of Kabul:

Besides being mentioned in the Holy Quran, [the] veil is also a part of our culture as it is indeed in Russia and other non-Muslim countries in this region. However, it is the inability of the fundamentalists to understand and improve the economic conditions of the masses which makes them engage themselves in a shameless, cruel and inhuman drive to impose *hejab*.<sup>2</sup> This is an attempt on the part of the fundamentalists to suppress our women and deprive them of their basic rights. We hold that nobody has the right to instruct Afghan men to grow [a] beard or force the Afghan women to wear *hejab*. As a token of defiance, and *without assigning any priority to it, we will resist wearing the veil in the manner the fanatics want us to.* (RAWA 1997, emphasis added).

I use this quote to illustrate the important distinction made by RAWA regarding compulsory *hejab* (veiling) and the manner in which the Association's western counterparts have interpreted the veil and *burqa* specifically as a key symbol of oppression. RAWA did not prioritize the *burqa*/veil in its resistance platforms or attempts at social and political reform. Rather, within Afghanistan RAWA's stance on the veil was part of a much larger political resistance platform that focused on the state's imposition and bodily control of women, rather than the existing 'cultural' use of the veil in various contexts. And yet, RAWA's engagement with groups in the US included a significantly stronger stance on the veil as a symbol of women's oppression.

Due to RAWA's use of Internet technologies it was able to establish a virtual link to individuals and groups outside of Afghanistan and has subsequently developed an international network of supporters (Fluri 2006). The Association also gained international fame and attention from US (and other) feminists in the late 1990s and after 9/11.<sup>3</sup> The international attention RAWA received also included various spectacles of unveiling (despite the important use of the *burqa* for resistance) that symbolically linked the *burqa* to women's oppression in Afghanistan (Azarbaijani-Moghaddam 2004; Whitlock 2005). I identify these unveilings as spectacles because they included public and dramatic performances that unveiled an Afghan woman as a form of figurative emancipation. For example, RAWA member Zoya was asked to bring her *burqa* to a California-based women's rights event organized by *Vagina Monologues* author Eve Ensler, and was publicly unveiled<sup>4</sup> by Oprah Winfrey (Whitlock 2003).

This public unveiling was re-told to me by RAWA members as something 'important' for the women in the US. They also described the event as ultimately beneficial to their organization because the subsequent discussion about RAWA on the Oprah Winfrey show created more interest in RAWA and additional financial and political support from individuals in the United States. This public spectacle of unveiling supplied a western, scopophilic fantasy about the *burqa* and acted as a unit of financial exchange for RAWA. The western women played the role of savior by 'unveiling' Zoya and in exchange she was given access to the event's 1800 attendees and a mention on Oprah's show (also see Whitlock 2005). This access led to increased activity on RAWA's website: 'We could not imagine ... that in one night [there would be] more than three thousand visitors to the



website, which was the case after Oprah Winfrey mentioned RAWA on her show' (interview with RAWA member, Lelia, 2003). The increase in attention led to additional financial support, which in turn bolstered the organization's sociopolitical programs in Afghanistan and Pakistan respectively (i.e. support for schools, orphanages, medical healthcare facilities and literacy programs).

And yet, such spectacles also served to reinforce the subordinate and oppressed position of the 'third world' woman and her perceived lack of agency, thereby bolstering the 'saving Afghan women' trope, that was, in turn, effectively embedded into the subsequent 'war on terror' discourse (Abu Lughod 2002; Ayotte and Husain 2005; Falah 2005; Hunt 2002). In the process, the use of the *burqa* before (and after) the Taliban's imposition, the commonplace and banality of the *burqa*'s everyday use, and its more dramatic role in resistance through the concealment of contraband materials during the rule of Taliban, were removed from western representations of the *burqa* in order to increase its effectiveness as a symbol of women's oppression (see Falah 2005).

In addition, RAWA's participation in US-based unveiling spectacles became an effective tool for women's rights groups to gain the attention of the US government and citizenry prior to, and after, 9/11 (also see Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002). For example, in congressional hearings on the Taliban in 2000, entitled *Taliban: Engagement or Confrontation?*, Senator Barbara Boxer highlighted the *burqa* as necessary for 'rallying public opinion' against the Taliban more than the various other Taliban atrocities that were brought forth at this hearing (Fluri 2008). On 16 October 2001 Congresswoman Carolyn Maloney (Democrat, New York) wore a *burqa* to deliver a speech in the House of Representatives about the rights of Afghan women (Velásquez 2002). Similarly, Feminist Majority Foundation president Eleanor Smeal compared the *burqa* to a 'shroud' in a prepared statement to the US Congress (Smeal 2001).

These visual 'regimes of truth' (Rose 2001) all helped to solidify the '*burqa* as oppression' trope, setting the stage for its counterpart, the *burqa*'s removal, to signify liberation. Seeing underneath the *burqa* also provides 'us' with a site for performing other forms of saving. Thus, the US-led 'Operation Enduring Freedom' in Afghanistan was subsequently buttressed by a push for gender-based reform in Afghanistan. In the wake of this push rested a profound lack of understanding for the spatial and situational context and complexities of Afghan women's lives (Abirafeh 2005; Kandiyoti 2007; Zulfacar 2006). The Beauty Academy of Kabul is one (among many) examples of this geopolitical and economically focused rush to 'liberate' Afghan women without understanding the history and contemporary contexts that influence gender relations. I focus the next section on the Beauty Academy of Kabul in order to critique the popular attention this project received relative to its small scope, scale, and impact as a failed NGO in Afghanistan.

### Modern interlocation, interpretation and redemption

Long-time aid worker and founder of Physiotherapy and Rehabilitation Support for Afghanistan (PARSA), Mary McMakin, came up with the concept of creating a Beauty School in Kabul.<sup>5</sup> Her vision was to start a school to help bolster women's enterprise by bringing back the traditions associated with women's physical beauty preparations for weddings and other special occasions. McMakin teamed up with Terri Grauel (a New York-based hairstylist), and solicited donations and financial support from various organizations in the beauty industry. As Liz Mermin, the Beauty Academy of Kabul documentary film director, states in the film's press release:

The idea that the pursuit of beauty is an element of democracy and nation building made the school an attractive prospect for beauty-industry philanthropists. *Vogue* editor Anna Wintour rallied the industry. Funds were raised, products were donated, and 'Beauty Without Borders' was born. (Noble and Mermin 2004)

The project was also placed under the direction of the Ministry of Women's Affairs<sup>6</sup> in Kabul and received support locally as well as internationally. The school eventually closed and reopened as a beauty parlor, which catered to the international worker community and wealthy Afghans due to the high price of services offered.<sup>7</sup>

This small school is one of thousands of NGO projects in Afghanistan, many of which have also failed or reorganized (Abirafeh 2005; Johnson and Leslie 2002; McKechnie 2003). The Beauty Academy of Kabul has, however, received an extensive amount of coverage in popular magazines and newspapers; the formation of the school is also the subject of a documentary film (Mermin 2006), and a best selling memoir by one of the women involved in the project who remained to run the salon after the closure of the school<sup>8</sup> (Rodriguez 2007). The following analysis of the media-led representation of the Beauty Academy of Kabul in the US begins with a discussion of the documentary film, before moving on to its portrayal in popular women's magazines.

The documentary film opens with a brief photo-history of Afghanistan intersected with dated footage of Afghan women participating in a 'runway' type fashion show in Kabul (circa 1970s) linking Afghanistan's pre-war past with corporeal modern femininity. This file footage of a fashion show among the educated elite (including members of the former monarchy) does not include any textual content to indicate to the viewer the socioeconomic and political status associated with this western-style fashion performance. Miniskirts (worn by women in Kabul city in the 1960s and 1970s) are identified in the film as an example of Afghanistan's modern past (before the onset of conflict). For example, Sima, one of the Afghan-American hairstylists involved with the project and featured in the documentary states:

When I left [23 years ago], Afghanistan [Kabul] was a modern city, modern for the place that it was . . . *wearing miniskirts, getting our hair done*. They have now gone back more than 100 years. (emphasis added).

In the documentary film, the Beauty Academy is linked to women's liberation through modernity by the voices of white women from the US involved with this project, echoing the discursive displacement of the third world and/or oppressed female 'other' based on her geographic location, ethnicity, race and/or class (see Mohanty 2004; Narayan 1997; Sandoval 2003; Spivak 1987). The non-Afghan (white) women from the US act as a central interlocutor for the tale of suffering and redemption. The Afghan-American expatriates participating in this project as hair/make-up educators provide 'cultural' translation, maneuvering between the situational and experiential divides that separate the US and Afghan women respectively.

The methods used to script this tale of corporeal modernity as liberation allow western women to 'authenticate' the experiences of Afghan women. The white women hair stylists-teachers in the Beauty Academy, when acting as interlocutors, attempt to validate Afghan women students' experiences under the Taliban, reinforcing existing stereotypes as well as providing new social and gender hierarchies (also see Ko 2006). For example, the Afghan women students' 'success' is measured by their white western teachers' assessment of their ability to perform their newly scripted modern womanhood.

The white American hairstylists also underscore 'selfless service' and 'healing' as essential aspects of their work in Afghanistan. For example, one of the hair stylists in the



documentary proclaims that, while she has traveled all over the world, this is the first country that ‘needed’ her:

I have traveled a lot probably over 40 different countries. This is the first country that ever really needed me as far as my skills. I never saw a country that wanted it so bad, that wanted normal, they just wanted normal. (Debbie).

Beauty salons and western beauty practices are defined as normal, in order to identify these standards as the benchmarks for Afghan women’s representational position in the ‘new’ and developing nation. The successfully ‘modern’ woman in this drama also provides her interpretation of Afghan women’s suffering and movement toward social change through the body. For example, Terri, one of the white hairstylists featured in the documentary states:

What really surprised me was how quickly they learned. They are combing the hair brilliantly, they are making the parts straight. You know I forget what they have been through and you know that’s good because that means they are moving on and not dwelling on the past.

In this quote Terri links her own forgetting to Afghan women’s movement forward, effectively acting as a self-appointed conduit for the Afghan women’s past suffering, present movement, and future redemption.

The white women also discuss their own experiences of discomfort and difficulty to underscore the importance of the Beauty Academy. For example the project’s organizer Patricia asks:

How long have I been here? Five weeks, it feels like five years. I think I have aged 20 years since I have been here . . . It is 140 degrees . . . you are often in a dust storm where you can’t breathe or see . . . I mean this [the beauty school] is an oasis in the middle of chaos. It is paradise in the middle of hell.

The beauty school is positioned as a refuge for women by bringing order and discipline to the existing practices of Afghan women. The Afghan students are continually told that they are going to play an important role in healing Kabul city, and in moving Afghanistan into modernity. For instance, one of the white American hairstylists (and author of the *Kabul Beauty School* memoir, Rodriguez 2007) Debbie, admonishes her Afghan students for not wearing make-up because they must represent the ‘face’ of the ‘new’ Afghanistan.

There needs to be something special about you that makes you different than the woman who is the secretary or office worker . . . you can’t have fuzzy perms and bad hair color and bad hair cuts. It is your job as hairdressers to set the new trend for new hairstyles and hair color. It is your responsibility . . . if you guys don’t do it how can Afghanistan change and get into a more modern type look. How will Afghanistan change if you guys don’t change?

This lack of compliance is directly linked to Afghanistan’s future position as a nation as well as the geopolitics of Afghan women’s liberation through their unveiled bodies. At one point in the documentary two white women, Patricia and Shelia, ask one of the students, Nazira, how Afghanistan would ‘look’ if women were running the country. Nazira states:

Women? I don’t think women could run Afghanistan, because men will never allow them. Where are such laws? Women will never have that kind of power. Sure there are a few families that are open, but most are strict. And if the family doesn’t allow it, women will never hold power.

Patricia and Shelia are clearly unhappy with her answer and become despondent. Nazira replies, ‘Why are they so quiet? Was my response wrong?’

In summary, this documentary film illustrates the link between liberation and modernity in three distinct ways: through the US (white) women’s role as a modern savior, interpreter and interlocutor; second, by linking national modernity to women’s corporeal

modernity; and, finally, through the white US women's disappointment when the Afghan women do not properly perform modern liberation.

The *Vogue* article's discussion of the Beauty Academy of Kabul successes also serves to reinforce the importance of beauty products for corporeal modernity. A discussion of 'beauty resistance' during the Taliban states: 'mirrors were covered with curtains, products were smuggled in from Pakistan, and makeup was so precious it was buried' (Reed 2003, 465). The denial of beauty products is combined with their importance as a signifier of women's liberation, which *Vogue* highlights to endorse the use of cosmetics as part of 'modern' womanhood.

They [Afghan women in the beauty school] are all mystified at our lack of jewelry and lipstick, at our wrinkled linen clothes and the flip-flops or espadrilles on our feet. Nafisa and Jamila have just presented me with one of their old perm 'rods', a crude, hand carved piece of wood with a rubber band attached that had been all they had to work with, and suddenly I am appalled at my own messy hair. (Reed 2003, 472).

This quote illustrates the exchange of 'primitive' for 'modern' tools and, consequently, provides a lesson for the US reader – that 'looking good' by industry standards is an essential component of representing modern womanhood. This identifies corporeal modernity as an equally important, and at times neglected, aspect of being a woman in the US.<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, several articles identify the 'need' for western influences due to the lack of skills and equipment locally in Afghanistan. For example, Debbie, one of the white American hairstylists, states:

When I first came to Kabul, I was shocked at what these women did to their hair and faces . . . They would use henna, which is horrible for your hair. The scissors looked like hedge trimmers. They used buckets from nearby wells to rinse hair. I asked one of the girls to do my make-up once and I looked like a drag-queen. (quoted in Ghafour 2004; *SiteNews* 2004; *Pak Tribune* 2004)

This quote focuses on the role of the white western savior, due to the perceived lack of information, talent, and equipment in Afghanistan; the Afghan women in this project are positioned once again as in need of their western, fully modern counterpart.

The public representation of femininity and corporeal modernity exemplifies a social morphology that inscribes 'civilized' and 'modern' controls over the natural body through industrialized modifications and manipulation onto the 'natural' body (Grosz 1994). Hence, the dichotomous relationship between the revealed body's link to liberty and the covered body's link to victimization and oppression must be continually examined in order to untangle the historical and social inaccuracies that are distorted by this binary (Barlas 2002). The beauty parlor does provide a space for women-to-women enterprise. However; the explicit and implicit links between women's participation in beauty education and their liberation through feminine modernity requires critical examination. Similarly, a critical engagement with the public performances of female corporeal modernity within beauty pageantry underscores how the female body becomes a marker for assessing national modernity or 'progress'. The next section examines two representations of Miss Afghanistan; the 1972 National Miss Afghanistan pageant held in Kabul city, Afghanistan; and the participation of Miss Afghanistan in the 2003 Miss Earth Pageant.

### **Beauty, pageantry and (inter)national modernity**

Afghanistan's first 'Miss' pageant was held in 1972 as part of the country's continued modernization efforts and eight years after the adoption of a constitution that guaranteed

equal rights for women. This was also the last such pageant, as 1973 marked the end of the ruling monarchy and the beginning of continued political unrest in the capital city.<sup>10</sup> *Afghan Life* magazine sponsored the pageant, which attracted nearly 100 contestants, aged between 18 and 26, from the urban educated elite in Kabul (Mehtam 2001). As Zohra Yusuf Daoud, the winner of this pageant, explains:

There was, of course, no swimsuit competition and no emphasis on beauty; to be perfectly honest, I was even a little chubby then. Instead, the pageant was about a woman's intellect and poise. It was about public speaking and academic knowledge . . . In America, pageants seem to be trivial events that have had feminists up in arms and perhaps rightly so. In Afghanistan, however, a pageant meant we were catching up to the world, working to fit in, joining the global community. It meant we were moving forward, moving away from archaic notions and toward a balanced modernization. (Daoud 2002, 104)

Daoud identifies the pageant in Afghanistan as a sign of modernization and the country's subsequent connection to the modern world. And yet, as Cohen et al. (1996) and Munshi (2001) point out, such pageants actually illustrate a representation of modernity as defined by corporate and often hegemonic conceptions of femininity and beauty.

Miss Afghanistan's participation in the 2003 Miss Earth Pageant provided an opportunity for the US, rather than Afghanistan, to illustrate a performance of modernity. The Miss Earth Pageant is held each autumn in the Philippines as a global competition to promote environmental responsibility through corporeal feminine beauty. Awards are presented to the winner, Miss Earth, and runners-up Miss Air, Miss Wind, and Miss Fire. The following is an excerpt from the pageant's website.

After establishing a track record in mounting world-class beauty pageants over the last decade, Carousel Productions Inc. decided to reinvent and improve the concept of beauty competitions for the new millennium. Because many people admire and aspire to be a beauty queen, Carousel Productions, Inc. believed beauty queens would be a good and effective advocate of worthy causes. To give life to this vision, Carousel organized and launched in 2001 the MISS EARTH® Beauty Pageant, a beauty event whose *raison d'être* was to have its candidates and winners actively promote and get involved in the preservation of the environment and the protection of Mother Earth. (<http://www.missearth.tv/about.html>)

Vida Samadzai, who was born in Kabul but resides in California, participated in the United States Miss American-International pageant, which allowed her to participate as Miss Afghanistan in the 2003 Miss Earth competition. The Miss Earth Pageant includes a bathing suit and evening gown competition, and participation is contingent upon meeting specific beauty/body requirements. For example, all participants must be between 18 and 26 years old, single, never married or given birth, minimum height of five feet five inches, 'possess beauty of face and proportionate body structure', and be in excellent physical condition.<sup>11</sup>

As with the Beauty Academy, newspaper and magazine reports about Miss Afghanistan's participation painted a tale of new-found 'liberation' for Afghan women, despite the many Afghan women, including Habiba Sorabi (currently the governor of Bamian province in Afghanistan, and at that time the Women's Minister), who denounced the pageant. She argued that this was not liberation, but a degrading performance of women parading for men (Armitage 2003). Miss Afghanistan did not win the competition but received a special *Beauty for a Cause Award*. The award was given to Samadzai for, according to the organizers:

Symbolizing the newfound confidence, courage and spirit of today's women and representing the victory of women's rights and various social, personal and religious struggles. (Armitage 2003)

Both Daoud and Samadzai's experiences as Miss Afghanistan illustrate the feminine corporeal as a representative space for national links to modernity and international geopolitics. This geo-gender politics defines public performances of femininity and corporeal modernity as both a cause and victory for women's rights. Conversely, covering or veiling the body is fraught with negative association due to its compulsory enforcement in different contexts and, therefore, is not generally hailed by western feminists as a method for reclaiming the body as a private space or a method for resisting corporate-driven consumer modernity.

### Summary and conclusions

As this analysis and other examinations of gender politics and national modernization in South and Southwest Asia suggest, women's bodies are often key sites for representing and monitoring modernity and resistance to modernity. This is because corporeal modernity requires a public, and repetitive, presentation, which provides a space for performing beauty standards and expectations. The body acts as the site for the imprinting of social constructions of gender, race, sex and sexuality as well as the countering of these gendered, social norms (Duncan 1996; Moss and Dyck 2003; Nast and Kobayashi; Nast and Pile 1998; Rose 1993; Valentine 2001). Moreover, the body provides a site for capital accumulation and a space of manipulation for the purposes of meeting corporate demands for consumer consumption. Public performances of western, corporeal modernity, when exported by way of the media, international beauty pageants, advertising, and the marketing of consumer products, have developed an Anglo-centric ideal of feminine beauty (Bordo 1993; Butler 1990; Cohen et al. 1996; Davis 1999; Grosz 1994). Much of this reinforces racial and racist ideologies, as well as representing bodily ideals that are often physically unattainable (Bordo 1993; Wolf 2002).

Despite its avowedly 'feminist' credentials, the 'unveiling' and hence 'liberation' of Afghan women is extremely problematic. This is because, first, beauty salons and the use of make-up and other forms of body modification exist in Afghanistan in conjunction with, rather than separate from, the *burqa* and other veiling practices. In contemporary Afghanistan, the use of cosmetics and hairstyling occur primarily in homo-social all-female spaces (also see Tapper 1991; Doubleday 2006). Beauty salons and the use of cosmetics are part of a long history of women's beautification for special events, and illustrate the influences from the exportation of advertising from the 'west' as well as Indian cinema and television. Seen in this light, the Beauty Academy of Kabul provides a corporate-capitalist avenue for (re)defining the use of make-up and other products as part of a US-sponsored public exhibition of female liberation. What is more, the influx of international aid and private sector development this entity represents has increased the role of money as an agent of change and action in communities. In some cases, money has replaced or corrupted existing systems of respect and alliances among and between kinship groups and communities, which has corresponding negative effects on women (Kandiyoti 2007; Johnson and Leslie 2004; Rubin 2002).

Second, the prescribed and (pre)scripted liberation associated with corporeal modernity as discussed in this article places the 'first world' white female as the 'gentle savior' of her third world 'sister', which orientalizes Afghan woman's suffering under the *burqa*, as imposed by the Taliban. This is presented in stark contrast to her western counterpart's corporeal liberation. This form of corporeal modernity also provides a necessary feminine counterpart to the hyper-masculine ideals that accompany war discourse, particularly the US 'war on terror' (Dowler 2002). The exportation of US

corporeal modernity into Afghanistan in the wake of US bombings acts as a subtle and soft tool for smoothing over the processes of militarization (see Enloe 2000, 293). This case study, then, exemplifies the use of Afghan women's bodies as a geopolitical space for inscribing US political intervention as a positive example of hegemonic modernity and 'civilization' through the exportation of western expectations of feminine beauty.

A geopolitics of modernity, progress and democratic ideals are mapped onto Afghan women's bodies at various political scales. In Afghanistan during the 1970s, modernity at the national scale was marked by women's public presence and mobility in the capital city Kabul. This form of modernity was contingent upon a woman's spatial location (i.e. urban), socioeconomic level (i.e. elite), and the support of her family. The swimsuit competition, and contemporaneous pageantry expectations of the body's thinness, height and beauty, fell by the wayside in order to promote a more contextually specific and accepted emblem of national feminine modernity. More recently, the participation of Miss Afghanistan as the US model of modern feminine corporality, and her competitive presence in the Earth Pageant, (re)defined the general cause for women's struggles against social, political and religious restrictions.

The importance of the visual as a representative space of western culture and modernity must also be critiqued, particularly when public displays of the body and performances of a socially produced femininity are a site of control and modification rather than liberty and freedom. Lipstick and make-up are not necessarily metaphors for liberation and freedom; rather they are tools for a gendered capitalist framework with the body as a prime site of product consumption and marketing through the performance of femininity. How, then, can we accede to the categorization of the Beauty Academy of Kabul, for example, as a 'feminist' project when it is entrenched in both capitalist structures and patriarchal gender regimes in the US and Afghanistan respectively?

The scope, scale and impact of this project in Afghanistan does not begin to match its level of coverage in the US. Importantly, it is the associated with women's corporeal modifications that provides a strategic node from which to elaborate on the story of consumption, beauty and bodies in order to 'sell it' to western audiences. This is not necessarily a tale of Afghan women's experiences, but rather a story of their white interlocutors, who learn the 'value' of their participation in this project. This tale also reinforces the capitalist myth that economic opportunity presents the best path to women's emancipation and autonomy. The focus on women's work outside the home, and as a unit of exchange and eventual path to liberation, does not take into consideration the family and other social and cultural contexts that shape women's and men's lives within Afghanistan. Gender-based or -focused economic reforms, particularly neo-liberal structures and development projects, must also be critically appraised as to their dependence and impact upon existing, complex gender norms and relations (Abirafeh 2005; Kandiyoti 2007; Laurie and Calla 2004; Zulfacar 2006). The social, political and cultural contexts that shape women's lives within societies must be a central component of any discussion for improving women's status and participation in formal and informal sectors of civil society and governance (see Moghadam 2002).

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## Notes

1. RAWA was founded in 1977 and is the oldest indigenous and independent political women's organization in Afghanistan. I highlight RAWA as one example of an indigenous Afghan women's organization that (through the Internet) actively initiated support from individuals and organizations outside Afghanistan (including the US). RAWA represents a particular Afghan feminist perspective on body, beauty and *burqa* politics. RAWA does not represent *all* Afghan women and it has been critiqued for engaging in acts of strategic essentialism as a unit of exchange.
2. Islamic veil, also used to identify the *chadori* (what the *burqa* is called in Afghanistan) or *burqa* by RAWA.
3. The Association also received acknowledgment from the US government until it publicly criticized the US bombing (10 July 2001) of Afghanistan and US military and political use of the Northern Alliance and other warlords in Afghanistan as part of the military strategy to defeat the Taliban. The Northern Alliance, also known as the United Front, is considered by RAWA as a major contributor to human rights abuses in Afghanistan.
4. Ironically, the unveiling was not televised and did not reveal a 'face' because in order to conceal their identities for security purposes RAWA members will not be photographed publicly.
5. The Beauty Academy of Kabul is also known as 'Beauty without Borders' and the 'Kabul Beauty School'. The name for this project changes depending on who is speaking about the project and/or taking credit for it. For example, the documentary film about this project is called *The Beauty Academy of Kabul*; the attempt to raise funds and other donations by Anna Wintour (editor of *Vogue*) termed the project 'Beauty without Borders'; and Debbie Rodriguez, one of the American hairstylists, wrote a memoir (where she took credit for starting the beauty school) entitled *The Kabul Beauty School: The Art of Friendship and Freedom*.
6. This ministry was formed after the Bonn Agreements and was part of the formation of the interim government. It still exists as part of the current Karzai government; however, it is not well funded and experiences a high turnover of ministers.
7. This information is based on formal and informal interviews and discussions with international aid and private sector development workers involved with this project or who frequented the salon. The documentary film, *The Beauty Academy of Kabul*, has been shown to potential international aid workers as an example of what one should not do when starting an economic development project in Afghanistan.
8. The author of the memoir identifies herself as the founder of the Beauty School, which is disputed by most of the women involved with the initial project.
9. Moreover, the toxicity of hair color and make-up are not discussed in a country with very little running water and one of the worst levels of water quality worldwide.
10. In 1973, Mohammed Daud, King Zahir Shah's cousin, took over the government in a bloodless coup and instated a republic with himself as president. Five years later, in April of 1978, the community coup, known as the *Saur Revolution*, took over the capital city government, killing Daud and several members of his family. This led to the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1979 and subsequent years of conflict (see Edwards 2002; Rubin 2002).
11. Pageant requirements as stated on the Miss Earth Pageant website, <http://www.missearth.tv/requirements.html>.

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## ABSTRACT TRANSLATION

### La hermosa ‘otra’: un análisis crítico de las representaciones occidentales de la modernidad corporal femenina afgana

Este trabajo analiza la modernidad corporal como parte de un tropo más abarcador de ‘salvador y liberación’ producido para las mujeres afganas por la intervención militar, política y económica dirigida por los EEUU luego del 11/9/01. Este tropo de salvador ha sido identificado como una cooptación de los discursos y del activismo de derechos de las mujeres (Hunt 2002), una forma errónea de encarar la seguridad a través de escritos generizados de protección agresiva masculina y sumisión femenina (Young 2003; Dowler 2002), y como un ejemplo más en una larga historia de tropos generizados diseñados por los poderes coloniales e imperiales para salvar a las mujeres musulmanas (Abu Lughod 2002). Este estudio se suma a las críticas feministas de la invasión estadounidense en Afganistán examinando la Academia de Belleza de Kabul y la participación de Miss Afganistán en el concurso de Miss Tierra en 2003 como un punto de vista en el que la ‘liberación’ económica y corporal de las mujeres afganas fue presentada en los EEUU. Este abordaje económico ocurre en el sitio y la escala del cuerpo para (re)definir la modernidad corporal a través de estándares de belleza heteronormativos y hegemónicos conducidos por intereses corporativos.

**Palabras claves:** modernidad corporal; Afganistán; género; política del cuerpo; desarrollo económico

**美丽的‘她者’：严格审查‘西方’如何代表阿富汗妇女的现代身体**

美国自9-11事件后在阿富汗的军事，政治及经济干预被比喻为是当地妇女的“救世主和解放”。本文将探讨现代身体作为其救世主比喻的一部分。这救世主的比喻已被确认为是拉拢与收买妇女权力的论述和行动(亨特，2002)。它也被认为是以一个错误的方式来对待安全议题，基于它持有男人应该积极保护而女人应当服从的性别脚本思维(杨，2003；道勒，2002)。它更是代表了殖民和帝国权势长久以来使用性别比喻来拯救穆斯林妇女的另一例子。通过探讨喀布尔美容学院以及阿富汗小姐参加了2003年地球小姐选美赛，这项研究了解了阿富汗妇女经济和身体的‘解放’在美国是如何被呈现。这有助于增加现有女权主义者对美国在阿富汗的各种干预的批评。这经济分析将用于身体的规模，以便通过企业推动，异性恋主流价值和支配的审美标准来为现代身体(重新)定义。

**关键词：**现代身体，阿富汗，性别，身体政治，经济发展