

APA STYLE

A closer look at the 'misuses of feminism' for advancing imperialistic agendas: A case study of
Iraq.

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Those who follow the mainstream media and pay attention to some western feminists and politicians' discourses are acquainted with one of the primary justifications for a western civilized nation's invasion of practically any country in the global south. This justification is the liberation of oppressed, backwards and traditional women from the oppressive clutches of their men by a civilized western army. This rhetoric and perception of the 'other', which Spivak (1988) described as "white men saving brown women from brown men" (p. 93), has proven to be quite seductive and resilient as not only is it still regularly invoked as a justification for invading sovereign states but it also has its roots as far back as in the colonial legacy. Thus, it comes as little surprise that western politicians sighted the liberation of oppressed, Muslim women as one motivation for the invasion of Iraq (2003), while the mainstream media- in the run up to the war- increasingly covered the atrocities committed against women under the Baath regimes. Although this paper does not deny the abuses committed against women under Saddam's regime, and recognizes there certainly are individuals – for example scholars, ordinary Americans, Iraqis and Afghani's- that support the war as a possible avenue for the liberation of women, there is also a growing number of individuals that are questioning the possibility of liberating women through military invasions. This group is not only skeptical of the liberators motives but also rejects the possibility of liberating women through a brutal occupation that only serves to intensify the very forces that oppress women.

Thus, in similar vein, this paper is interested- through a case study of Iraq- to deconstruct the myth of liberating women through military invasions and aims to demonstrate that war cannot lead to 'liberation' and 'democracy' for women. In order to achieve this the paper will attempt to compare the status of Iraqi women prior to the invasion and the justifications for the invasion¹, with the material consequences of Iraqi women's lived experiences following an occupation that was supposed to have liberated them. In its endeavor to achieve this the paper will answer research questions such as; how are women living in 'post-liberated' Iraq versus under Saddam? What do their daily struggles look like? If the invasion has failed to liberate women, or if it was never initially intended to liberate them, for whom was the war fought? Additionally, why is the liberation of women a seductive justification for war, or what is the motive for hijacking feminist discourses for imperialistic agendas? Finally, can war liberate women? And why not?

Some of the factors considered in the paper are how, for example, the lack of basic necessities, deteriorating security and the increasing presence of Islamist militias affect the 'liberated' Iraqi women, and how the women have responded to these challenges. At the same time, the paper is cognizant of the fact that the label 'Iraqi women' encompasses a broad category of women that have all experienced and have been affected by the war differentially, and would thus attempt to portray this variety in its analysis. In efforts to achieve its goal the research of this paper turned to prominent feminist scholars- such as Nadjie Al-Ali, Nicola Pratt, Huibin Chew, Zillah Eisenstein and Deniz Kandiyoti- that have written extensively on the research areas of imperialism, women, and Iraq.

Iraq prior to 2003:

¹Which for the purposes of this paper is the liberation of women.

Iraq under the Baath regime was a secular state. As a number of authors² argue, although certainly patriarchy had its own influence, the state's policies and societal attitudes towards women were primarily influenced by economic and political necessities rather than timeless Islam or some other cultural obstacle to women's liberation (Kandiyoti, 2007, p. 9). As Iraq's economy grew in the 1970-80s due to the rise in oil prices, women were able to benefit from the expanded social services. Referring to it as the 'golden age' or 'the days of plenty', the women Al-Ali & Pratt (2009) interviewed about this period mostly remember it with nostalgia (p. 112).

Generally, especially women in the urban cities, and from the middle class, benefited from the economic development experienced during this period. Some of these benefits include; increased access to education, health care, rising public sector employment opportunities, paid maternity leave and free child care (Al-Ali, 2009, pp.31-32). As a result of the government's heavy investment in the country's infrastructure and social services Iraq possessed some of the most educated and professional women in the Middle East. So much so that in 1982 the Iraqi government "won an award from the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)" for the strides it made towards eradicating illiteracy (Al- Ali & Pratt, 2009, pp. 32-3).Furthermore, Iraqi women "made up over 50% of the working force. [They] were doctors, lawyers, nurses and teachers" (Riverbend, 2005, p. 22). At the same time, 70% of "salaried Iraqi women" were employed by the state (Chew, 2008, p. 76).

Reflecting on the social scene in the urban cities such as Baghdad, Al- Ali (2007) interviewed some middle and upper class women who told her they started wearing "western-style clothes" as early as the 1940s and 1950s and miniskirts by the 1960s (p. 97 & 98). This is important to note and interesting to compare with the current lack of freedom of movement for

²See for example Al-Ali, Chew, Efrati, Kamp, Kandiyoti, Pratt and Riverbend.

Iraqi women seeing as the west equates women's liberation with taking off the burka and wearing western attire however, Iraqi women now, more than ever, have to dress conservatively since, as Riverbend (2005) explains, "a girl wearing jeans risks being attacked, abducted or insulted by fundamentalists who have been 'liberated'" (Riverbend, 2005, p. 17). Furthermore, although there was always some fear of rape or abduction in Iraq prior to the invasion, a number of the women interviewed by Al-Ali (2007) primarily associated such crimes with Uday, Saddam's son and asserted they were certainly not as widespread or as frequent as after the invasion (p. 227). Additionally, it is significant that Iraqis socialized more along their social class, family connections and political affiliations rather than along ethnic, religious or sectarian³ lines (Kamp, 2009, pp. 194-95). This means that the sectarianism associated with present day Iraq was not the country's state prior to the 2003 invasion. For this reason, intermarriages were not uncommon as what individuals were after was "social class, family reputation and looks" (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2009, p. 105).

This is of course until a series of wars with its neighbours and over a decade long UN sanctions deteriorated the education system, healthcare system and employment opportunities, to name but a few, thereby impoverishing a large number of the population and causing a severe impact on their welfare. The sanctions and wars, and the hardship that comes along with these experiences, caused a shift in societal attitudes towards women. A number of scholars⁴ describe a rise in social conservatism and altering marriage patterns as parents became eager to marry their daughters off to a husband likely to be able to economically support his wife and children, forcing families to increasingly abandon their previous criteria such as good looks, education and

³Although this is not to argue sectarianism did not exist in Iraq prior to 2003, seeing as Saddam was more than willing to invoke sectarian and tribal differences to divide and rule the population when it served in his interest (Al-Ali, 2007, p. 232).

⁴ For example, Al-Ali, Efrani, Pratt, Peterson

family reputation (Efrati, 2012, p. 164)

However, most notable of the Iraqi state's achievement towards women's rights is the personal status code of 1959- one of the most progressive in the region- passed under Abd al-Karim Qasim's regime. The personal status code was revolutionary in that it managed to unify, under one law, what were hitherto differential legal rights pertaining to "marriage, divorce, child custody and inheritance" for people from different social groups such as Sunni and Shi'i (Al-Ali, 2007, p. 245). Additionally, although the personal status law is based on the sharia⁵ it is fairly egalitarian and expanded the rights awarded to women in Iraq⁶. What is important to note here is that, though male politicians were instrumental in getting this law passed, Iraqi women activists and their diligent commitment to the campaign, their lobbying and political participation in the context of drafting a new constitution, following the fall of the monarchy, is what enabled the progressive law to be passed (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2009, p. 27). This means, contrary to the stereotypes associated in the west towards Muslim, Middle Eastern women, which views the 'other' as passive, backwards, oppressed and illiterate, Iraqi women were, and are, not mere passive victims but rather active agents struggling to shape the outcomes of their future along with the rest of the population. Unfortunately this is an aspect of Iraqi history one barely hears about seeing as details that reveals the active engagement of Iraqi women in their politics and civil rights issues undermines the rhetoric of the helpless, oppressed Iraqi female victims in need of liberation. Such an image of active Iraqi women taking agency and affecting the outcomes of Iraq's history runs counter to the imperialist's propaganda which insists the women cannot do it

⁵This is not to imply that any law based on the Sharia is automatically oppressive to women as the paper acknowledges that what is important is the interpretation of the Sharia. For example, both Saudi Arabia's relatively conservative Islamic family laws and Morocco's relatively progressive personal status code are each varying interpretations of the Sharia (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2009, p. 135).

⁶For details on the specific changes to the previous laws and the expanded rights awarded to women see Al-Ali and Pratt *What Kind of Liberation?* (2009, pp. 26-7). For details on the 1978 amendment to the personal status code see Al-Ali's book *Iraqi Women* (2007, p. 245).

alone, at least not without the backing of a western army. In fact Al-Ali and Pratt (2009) mention, when interviewing Iraqi women what was constantly stressed to them was the rich history of female activists in Iraq with some declaring “ Iraqi women never needed a western woman or man to identify social injustices or certain inequalities” (p. 14).

Nonetheless, it is important not to romanticize the past either, as for instance the women that Al-Ali and Pratt interviewed that had pleasant memories about the ‘good old days’ also detailed horrific stories of political repression and human rights abuses under the Baath. What becomes clear after reading various accounts of Iraqi women’s experiences under the Baath is that the regime affected women differentially based on a combination of factors such as their social class, place of residence- urban or rural, political affiliation and so on (Efrati, 2012, p.165).

Justifications for invasion; co-opting feminist discourses:

In the run up to the war, although not as emphasized as in the case of Afghanistan, politicians co-opted feminist discourses as one of their justifications for the invasion of Iraq. During this period, high ranking U.S. and U.K. politicians met with different Iraqi women’s organizations in efforts to advertise the abuses of women under the Baath. Similarly, the U.S. State Department and the mainstream media broadcasted the human rights abuses- such as rape, beheadings and torture- Iraqi women were subjected to under the Baath (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2009, p. 56). Iraqi women were presented in the media as helpless victims and reconstruction heroines who had suffered at the hands of a brutal regime and a backwards culture- and thus were in need of liberation by a civilized, western, army- but would nonetheless lead the path in reconstructing and rebuilding Iraq (Al-Ali, 2009, p. 88). After all, an imperial project under the guise of liberating women and extending humanitarian ideals is much easier to push through than one that sights the need for cheap natural resources and continuing economic hegemony as its motives

(Chew, 2008, p. 81). Meanwhile, some of the most ardent supporters of the U.S. invasion of Iraq were female Iraqi Diasporas⁷. Groups such as ‘Women for a Free Iraq’ are examples of Iraqi diaspora women’s organizations that held press conferences, workshops and so on to raise awareness about women’s rights abuses under the Baath. Such organizations received analytical support from politicians and funding from large foundations that were interested in disseminating the message these women were communicating (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2009, p. 56). However, one cannot emphasize the importance of the timing of such support for these women’s initiatives seeing as, although a large number of Iraqi diasporas were campaigning to get Iraqi women’s rights abuses international attention, U.S. politicians appropriated their discourses only in the run up to the 2003 invasion, when it served their imperialistic agendas. As one Iraqi diaspora woman came to tell Pratt during an interview “they [the U.S.] thought our campaign was useful for their objectives. But they didn’t give us any real support. Our campaign was not a priority for them” (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2009, p. 89). However, not only was the liberation of Iraqi women a false justification to invade a sovereign nation, the trope of saving women is ironically putting more ordinary Iraqi women and local Iraqi women’s activists at an even greater risk of violence seeing as they are accused of appropriating the occupiers agenda and siding with the oppressors. Thus, it is important to consider how the liberation rhetoric of the west is itself ironically fueling more violence against women as the demand for women’s rights becomes associated with the west and the occupation forces in the eyes of the insurgents and Islamist militias (Chew, 2008, p. 82).

However, it is not only politicians and the Iraqi diaspora that have expressed support for the liberation of Iraqi women through military invasion. Support for the invasion has also been

⁷Although there were some Iraqi diaspora women that expressed skepticism about the invaders intentions and the possibility of liberation through occupation, such as Al-Ali and the organization she co-founded called *Act Together*, such voices were largely drowned out and lacked mainstream support.

lent by western feminists who argue military invasions can liberate women by dismantling the old regime that oppressed them. These western feminists, or to borrow Chew's (2008) term 'imperial' feminists⁸-apply a top down, hierarchical feminist solutions to liberating women while all but excluding the women who are being liberated from the process of their emancipation (p. 82). Nevertheless, these western feminists have been criticized for applying a shortsighted- or a narrow- vision of liberation and for being Eurocentric. Chew (2008) argues western feminists should confront the bias they possess, which views themselves and western culture as the epitome of liberation (p. 82). This Eurocentric bias is highly problematic since not only does it serve to mask the systemic patriarchy still present in the west but it also serves as an obstacle to feminist solidarity. Chew (2008) argues, if feminist solidarity is to be possible western feminists must first acknowledge the systematic violence and oppression committed against women -around the world and including in the west- as a direct result of the U.S.' military policies and immediately mobilize to challenge such an approach to women's liberation (p. 82).

Living under occupation; why military invasions cannot liberate women:

When speaking about Iraqi women and their experiences of the U.S. occupation it is important to reflect the variety of reactions to, and impacts of, the occupation. For instance Leila H., an Iraqi woman who lived in a majority Shi'i neighbourhood, recalling her memories of the early days of the invasion, told Al-Ali (2007) "we could not believe it... [o]nce the statue came down, we forgot about all our fears and horrors of the bombing. It was all worth it. We were finally free...of course, things changed after some time and people started to feel more resentful

⁸Although she does not explicitly define the term, imperial feminists are western women, such as Laura Bush, who advocate for the liberation of women through uncritical processes such as military invasions. Chew (2008) attributes this to their failure to acknowledge the roles historical processes such as colonialism, racism and economic exploitation played in putting the women they seek to liberate in their current predicament (p. 82). Chew's (2008) main criticism of those she terms imperial feminists is that their position only serves to cloud systemic patriarchy, thereby, at best misguiding the efforts to truly liberate women (p. 75).

of the soldiers. But I will never forget the joy of that day” (p. 220). While on the other hand, recalling her memory of the same ‘National Day’, Riverbend (2005) writes:

The day began with heavy bombing...we were all sleeping in the living room because the drapes were heavy and offered small security against shattering glass...my cousin’s wife was awake. She sat in the middle of her two children and held them closer to either side. She had not spoken to her parents in almost a week now...there were no telephones to contact them and there was no way to get to the area. She was beyond terrified at this point...she was certain they were all dead...for me, April 9 was a blur...whether you loved Saddam or hated him Baghdad tore you to pieces. Baghdad was falling. Baghdad was burning...I can’t understand how anyone who values independence will celebrate it (pp. 29& 246-48).

These varying and complex accounts of the war go a long way in challenging the simplistic mainstream narrative of oppressed Iraqi women applauding their liberation under a western army. Immediately following the invasion, one of the most glaring effects of the occupation on women was the increase in their economic hardship due to unemployment and the disruption of social services. Women were disproportionately affected by Bremer’s deBaathification seeing as a large number of professional Iraqi women employed by the state were members of the Baath party, not necessarily as a result of their political affiliation but rather as a necessity for career advancements under the regime. Additionally, the disruption of social programs such as food rationing has only exasperated the living standards of poor women many of whom are widows or single parents (Chew, 2008, p. 76).

As the war progressed, the disruption of basic needs such as water and electricity put women at greater risks of violence seeing as it forced them to engage in what Peterson calls the coping economy. The coping economy is an economy of survival, “it is about how to guarantee social reproduction and meet basic needs” in times of conflict and eroding social stability (Peterson, 2009, p. 48). What is important to note about the coping economy is that it “involves[s] expectations that women will keep households functioning” even in times of conflict (Peterson, 2009, p. 48). Not only does this entail a significant proportion of pressure and responsibility,

coping economies cause women to participate in various previously unlikely activities which can range in their risk exposure- for example anything from prostitution to petty trade. This is exemplified by reports released by a number of human rights organizations, which document an increase in prostitution, especially in urban cities such as Baghdad, and an increase in the number of Iraqi teenage girls working in neighbouring Syrian brothels, particularly following the first siege of Fallujah (Chew, 2008, p. 77).

Furthermore, as violence on the streets of Iraq deteriorated- with some of the worst human rights abuses committed by the occupation forces- the effect these compounded factors had on the daily lives of Iraqi's cannot be overstated. Women increasingly became victims of abductions⁹ rape¹⁰, and collective punishment¹¹. Although the vast majority of the sexual violence was committed by Iraqi men, the coalition forces largely ignored the threat faced by women and instead focused their efforts on the threats against the occupation forces (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2009, p. 79).

Meanwhile, a growing number of women- those fortunate enough to still be employed- found it increasingly difficult to perform their jobs as the rise in sectarianism and religious conservatism meant professional women received death threats for their activities outside the home. Although the threats vary in severity according to class, location and a number of other factors¹² the point to take from here is that targeted assassinations of professional women and

⁹With some groups specializing in abductions for sex trafficking, which entails sending young Iraqi's to neighbouring Gulf States (Al-Ali, 2007, p. 228).

¹⁰For instance Chew (2008) reminds her readers that Iraqi women were raped, detained and tortured by U.S. forces, though such events have received minimal media coverage (Chew, 2008, p. 78).

¹¹Occupation forces began arresting the female relatives- wives, daughters, mothers- of suspected criminals or terrorists in an effort to get the male relatives to surrender (Chew, 2008, p. 78)

¹²For example female university students were amongst the earliest group to report being harassed by Iraqi men for not covering their hair or for dressing in western clothes, while the same threat spread to women of all ages and occupation later. Women in Basra- again, especially university students- reported being harassed by males for

female leaders sends a clear message to the remaining female population, thus intimidating women with much needed expertise and experience from participating in the rebuilding of their country¹³ (Peterson, 2009 p. 51). Similarly, the deteriorating security and the disruption of daily routines has forced Riverbend to quit her job, much like millions of others like her. The increasing insecurity and the gendered violence experienced by women in Iraq has also forced a number of progressive parents to place undue restrictions on their daughters such as forcing them to cover their hair, quit school and so on in a desperate attempt to keep them safe¹⁴ (Eisenstein, 2008, p. 42).

It is not only violence on the streets that has threatened Iraqi women's rights post-invasion but rather also the increasing political conservatism displayed by Iraqi politicians. One of the early signs was when, in December 2003, decree 137 was passed under rotating chair Al-Hakim. This decree sought to replace the progressive personal status law with sharia based laws, which would be administrated independently by religious leaders depending upon the sect one belongs to (Kandiyoti, 2007, p. 6). Although the law was vetoed in the last minute a similar issue was to arise once again in 2005, this time in the context of redrafting a constitution. The new Iraqi constitution drafted in 2005 was criticized for its vague wording regarding women's right and the personal status code (Kamp, 2009, p. 206). Most controversial are articles 2¹⁵ and 41¹⁶.

not covering their hair and dressing modestly as early as 2003. By 2006 the Islamic militants' demands went beyond stipulating dress codes to challenging the visibility of women in public. For further details see Al-Ali *Iraqi Women*, pp. 240-41.

¹³This is what happened to Riverbend. A "computer science graduate" who worked in Baghdad "as a programmer/network administrator in an Iraqi database/software company" before the war started (P. 22). She adds, "I loved my job [and] I was good at my job. I came and went to work on my own...and I made as much money as my two male colleagues and got an equal amount of respect from the manager" (Riverbend, 2007, p. 22).

¹⁴ For instance, Riverbend (2005) also informs her readers that her 14 year old cousin, a straight 'A' student, had to quit school since the occupation began seeing as her parents were concerned for her safety (p. 17).

¹⁵Article 2 "states that 'Islam is the official religion of the state and is a basic source of legislation', and that 'no law can be passed that contradicts the undisputed rules of Islam'" (Kamp, 2009, p. 206).

Articles 2 and 41 have prompted critiques to argue the current constitution challenges the “unified set of laws applied since 1959” (Kamp, 2009, p. 208). Additionally, especially secular, Iraqi women activists have argued that the present constitution increases sectarianism and makes new mixed marriages a virtual impossibility- while leaving existing ones in a highly vulnerable position. What is more, it will promote sentiments of communalism at the cost of an increasingly fragmented Iraqi citizenry, all the while ensuring the continuation of sectarian violence (Ai-Ali & Pratt, 2009, p. 136). Most significantly by decentralizing family laws “the state accommodates social and religious differences, while encouraging the loyalty of communal leaders to the state. Family law becomes a part of a ‘social contract’, trading communal autonomy for women’s rights” (Kamp, 2009, p. 207).

Nonetheless throughout all this, it is useful to remember that Iraqi women were not simply victims or reacting to circumstances around them but rather fighting to be active agents in their lives and their country’s future, albeit in the face of mounting obstacles. For instance, Iraqi women were at the forefront of local community efforts following the invasion, mobilizing to meet their practical needs. Their actions range from forming groups and organizing cleans ups of the neighborhood schools¹⁷, to cooking and taking care of hospital patients that have been abandoned by the staff (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2009, p. 126). Additionally, Al-Ali and Pratt (2009) draw their readers’ attentions to the intense campaigning against decree 137 by Iraqi women both inside and outside Iraq who mobilized into action almost immediately following the announcement of the decree (P. 93). The decree did not pass largely as a result of the hard work of Iraqi female activists.

¹⁶Article 41 “states that ‘Iraqis are free in the adherence to their personal status according to their own religion, sect, belief and choice, and that will be organized by the law’” (Kamp, 2009, p. 206).

Why military invasions cannot liberate women:

Presently, the situation of extreme violence, instability and uncertainty faced by Iraqi women is ongoing. A report recently published by Human Rights Watch (HRW), entitled *No One is Safe*, details that arbitrary arrests, torture, sexual abuse and collective punishment Iraqi women still endure post-liberation. The report accurately concludes that the gendered violence institutionalized by Saddam's regime have been exacerbated by the occupation forces and continued until this day under Al-Maliki's watch (No one is safe, 2014, p. 73). If the war did not liberate women then for whom was it fought? Al-Ali and Pratt (2009) propose, rather than the liberation of Iraqi women, the 2003 invasion of Iraq had more to do with the "remasculinization" of the U.S. in the wake of the attacks of 9/11" (p. 69). At the same time, Chew (2008) draws her readers attentions to the U.S.' desire to "guarantee the economic interests of the [its] elites" (pp. 80-1). While, similarly, Riverbend (2005) informs her readers "I always say this war is about oil...but it is about huge corporations that are going to make billions off of reconstructing what was damaged during the war" (pp. 36-7). Although the U.S. was motivated by a variety of reasons to invade Iraq, it becomes clear, when one compares the results of the occupation with the earlier justifications, there were other much pressing priorities for the U.S. than the liberation of Iraqi women.

However, more importantly, Imperialism cannot liberate women since, as chew (2008) demonstrates, it "perpetuates and relies upon gendered inequalities" (p. 75). Not only that, imperialism and military occupations increases the oppression of women by compounding domestic and foreign patriarchy and creating a sort of hyper-patriarchy (Chew, 2008, p. 77). However, the possibility of liberation through occupation is nonetheless a seductive idea as it, at least in theory, offers what is a quick solution to an otherwise seemingly impossible problem.

Yet, imperialism and war are rarely ever intended to liberate anyone- and least of all women (Eisenstein, 2008, p. 25). At the same time, “there are more women being militarized [today] for and against imperial power...[as] imperial democracy mainstreams women’s rights discourses into foreign policy ” (Eisenstein, 2008, p. 27).

However, the authors argue, real power for liberation comes from the grassroots. Only when the oppressed and exploited participate in the process of their liberation can the endeavor be successful. Chew (2008) puts this nicely when she says “the goal of liberation can be reached only when the exploited exercise the power to actively create it” (p. 87). Most importantly, the scholars discussed in this paper criticize mainstream feminism for becoming a narrow and short sighted struggle about equality with men on an interpersonal level. Feminism in this case is women joining the military, women’s liberation is individuals like Condoleezza Rice becoming one of the most powerful and influential woman of the modern time (Chew, 2008, p. 87) & (Eisenstein, 2008, p. 27). Instead, the authors urge their readers to direct their attention to institutional patriarchy. This fight, although probably a longer and tougher one, is one that cannot be fought individually and when achieved will have lasting effects for large groups of people- both men and women- everywhere.

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