

permitted to embrace all aspects of their identity and are denied power when others are given the opportunity to define who they are. It is important to understand the unique ways in which the identities of women in the military are threatened by an inability to move beyond conventional understandings and stereotypical notions of woman and soldier.

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Of Chadors and Purple Fingers: US visual media coverage of the 2005 Iraqi elections

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On January 31, 2005, newspapers landed on front doorsteps across the United States, emblazoned with pictures of Iraqi women in black chadors casting their votes in the first election since the US occupation of their country. These pictures appeared above the fold, catching Americans' eyes as they walked past newspaper stands. All of the major American news websites also featured women in veils, often holding up their purple-stained fingers. And millions of Americans saw more voting women in chadors on the evening news. Why was US media coverage of the Iraqi elections so dominated by images of women in chadors? What was being communicated? And what are the implications of the massive circulation of such images?

Old logics die hard. European colonialism was in large measure justified through discourses about liberating "Eastern women." Many have noted how the Bush



administration took a cue from its predecessors by emphasizing how the US invasion would relieve Afghan women of their plight. Just as colonial men were fascinated and repelled by veils, so did Americans fixate on the Afghani burqa as a symbol of women's oppression.¹ Not surprisingly, this logic has been transferred to Iraq. It is realized through photographs of women in veils. Images of women voting far exceeded those of men. Images of women in head-to-toe black chadors far outnumbered those in colorful headscarves or with no covering.² The mere proliferation of these pictures, combined with the dominant US discourse that the election evidenced the success of the war on terror, communicates the message that the war was a good deed undertaken for women, and that they will be the main ones to reap its benefits. The election—rather than being the culmination of months of murder and destruction, behind-the-scenes negotiating and manipulation, and the rise to power of religious elites—was really about Iraqi women. In their anonymous repetition, images of unnamed women in veils become signifiers of the beneficence of the Americans and the necessity and validity of military intervention.

The specific composition of the media images works to cement the logic of liberation, in its particularly individualistic American vision: the elections are constructed as a pivotal liminal period through which women pass on their way to freedom. The images of women waiting to vote showed them in large groups, often from behind, creating the overwhelming sense of an anonymous mass of black. No close-ups of women, no focus on facial expressions, no small groups of women in black chadors or other clothing.

In contrast, the images of women after they voted emphasized them as individuals (though still unnamed). Not only that, they are all showing their purple fingers to the camera. No images of women chatting about the experience, in groups leaving the polling stations, walking home with their families (including men), or trying to get the ink off to decrease their risk of personal danger. Once experiencing the election, women become individuated, well on their way to "freedom."

These images emphasize the act of voting to the exclusion of all other aspects of women's lives. What were the decisions, concerns, and coercions that went into their

selection of candidates? What about class, regional, or other distinctions that may have affected women's votes? What about the structural oppressions they face, many of them exacerbated by the occupation? The images collapse all Iraqi women into one category, and suggest that their only problem, which the invasion has "remedied," was that they couldn't vote in "free" elections.

Accompanying texts work to limit the range of potential meanings attributable to an image (Roland Barthes 1977). In this case, captions and articles further direct audiences towards one interpretation: the election equates to liberation for Iraqi women. One cover newspaper photo especially revealed how captions push viewers to see images according to this equation. New Jersey's *The Star Ledger* featured an image of a veiled woman raising her stained finger with other fingers, whose owners are outside the picture frame. The caption reads, "Iraqi women proudly show off their ink-stained fingers after voting at a polling station in the Salhiya district of Baghdad yesterday." The word "proudly" appears with many images, and its celebratory connotation is significant. Is every woman in these pictures "proud," given that many have actually voted in prior elections? Are they posing for the photographer, who perhaps said, "Show me your purple finger.?" Maybe they are "sticking it" to the Americans, and saying they will vote despite the occupiers' security failures, and who they want to see win.

The narrative of women's pride in liberation is maintained through exclusion and excision of Iraqi men. One of the hands in *The Star Ledger* photograph goes unrecognized as belonging to a man. On the right, there is an arm in a leather jacket reaching into the mass of fingers. It is unmistakably the kind of leather jacket worn by many Middle Eastern men in the winter months. Perhaps other hands in the photograph are those of men as well; this may have been a family going to vote together. But there is no room for these interpretations.

The accompanying article text insures the limitation of meaning even further, as it opens with the following, "Pushed in wheelchairs or carts if they couldn't walk, the elderly, the young and women in veils made their choices in Iraq's first free election in a half century." The language here is nothing short of triumphant. But how is ultimate freedom—the future of all voting Iraqi women—visually marked in this logic? By casting off the veil.

Three days after Iraqi women risked their lives to vote, President Bush delivered his first State of the Union address of his second term, broadcast on national television. As proof of the success of his administration's policies, Bush called the nation's attention to Safia Taleb Al-Suheil, who was seated next to the First Lady on the balcony of Congress. The camera panned to her, showing her coiffed hair and smart checkered suit. Bush quoted Al-Suheil's thank you to the Americans for getting rid of "the *real* occupation" [Saddam]. He continued, "Three days ago in Baghdad, Safia was finally able to vote for the leaders of her country . . ." Al-Suheil rose to tremendous applause, and gave the victory sign.³ Tellingly, she was called by her name. The message was clear: because of US military intervention, Iraqi women will vote, become liberated, take off their chadors, and gain individual subjectivity.

Joining the applause for Al-Suheil were a group of white, male Republican congressmen triumphantly waving their fingers in the air, stained purple by themselves at comparatively no cost. A photo of this scene is highlighted on the White House website along with a photograph of Al-Suheil flashing the victory sign, and both images circulated in print media as well. The irony is astounding. While the administration explicitly critiqued other Arab governments by applauding the decision

that 25 percent of the provisional Iraqi legislature would be female,⁴ the US Congress remains overwhelming male.

Just as Iraqi women bear the burden of gender oppression and war, so do American women. While a sustained critique of war's impact on American women has yet to be written, commentators have noted that the war has not brought an end to women's problems in Iraq, and that, as in all cases of extreme instability, it may have actually exacerbated them. Certainly, the way the election was handled ensures the power of religious leaders whose interpretation of Islamic law is not the most enlightened towards women.⁵ Eliminating Saddam's rape squads and encouraging women's political participation are good things, but will the election really change women's lives?

After Bush's speech, commentators gushed over what they declared was the most moving moment of the evening—when Janet Norwood, mother of a killed US soldier, and the only other person to be singled out by Bush that night, stood up to be recognized and engaged in a tearful embrace with Al-Suheil. Photos of this moment appeared the next day on websites and in newspapers across the country. *The Washington Post* did a special story on it, rhapsodizing that it was "magic," and an "indelible moment that sums up so much in so little."

It most certainly did sum up so much, but not for the reasons that every outlet from *The Washington Post* to Fox News assumed. Norwood was holding her son's dog tags during the hug, and they became caught on Al-Suheil's jacket. In an awkward moment before the television cameras, the women tried to disentangle themselves from this material evidence of what war really means. It was poignantly symbolic of their connection—both through constructed images of women's liberation, and through their shared burden of patriarchy and the costs of war. Whether or not these women cover their heads is, in the end, totally irrelevant.

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NOTES

1. For an excellent discussion of colonialism, the US war in Afghanistan, and the burqa, see Lila Abu-Lughod (2002).
2. Western fascination with the chador aligned with the fact that women who wear such covering are in the majority in districts where there was significant voter turnout—in Shiite areas and in the south. Nonetheless, images of Christian and Kurdish women (who generally do not wear the chador) were notably absent.
3. It is likely that this language draws on the common misunderstanding that women in all majority-Muslim countries do not have the right to vote. The implication is that women never voted in Saddam's Iraq, and that they can thank the invasion for securing them this right.
4. Safia Taleb Al-Suheil was not chosen just because she is unveiled. *The Progressive Review* reported that she had left Iraq in 1968, that the circumstances of her father's death are not clearly linked to Saddam Hussein, that two years prior the Coalition Authority flew her into Baghdad to hold a

women's conference, and that she has associations with some well-known American conservatives. See <http://prorev.com/2005/02/who-was-that-iraqi-woman-in-balcony.htm>

5. The support was not really universal. Bremer, for example, opposed quotas. Meanwhile, the US State Department gave a grant to the Independent Women's Forum (IWF) to train Iraqi women in democracy. The IWF receives other money from conservative family endowments, has conservatives on its board of directors, supported Clarence

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