

The Marriage of Sexism and Islamophobia; Re-Making the News on Egypt

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I find myself intermittently infuriated and nauseated by the news coverage of the sexual assault on a female CBS reporter in Tahrir Square during the celebrations the day that Husni Mubarak resigned. This coverage has ranged from the disappointing silence of Al-Jazeera to the blatant racism of Fox News. What actually happened that day to Lara Logan, chief foreign correspondent for 60 Minutes, is not yet known and I have no interest in speculating over the lurid details of a sexual and physical assault, particularly while the victim remains in recovery. In this post, I want to focus on how much of the coverage of this “affair” has revealed the ways in which female bodies are a site that marries Islamophobia to Sexism. This marriage, in turn, reproduces one of the most enduring colonial tropes; the native (and in this case, foreign) woman who needs to be rescued from uncivilized and misogynist men. [1] Cue the- oh so civilized and feminist military invasions and/or occupations of British controlled India, and US controlled Afghanistan and Iraq. In addition to being a discourse that is used to legitimate war, this use of female bodies (and increasingly, gay bodies) as a mark of civilizational status has also been cynically mobilized to continue colonial projects in apartheid South Africa and contemporary Israel.

But let’s get back to Tahrir Square. Or actually, to New York City, where in the subway on my way to class, a woman with pursed lips was reading the hyperbolic NY Post, which many consider the perfect subway reading material because you can pass the time without fear of getting engrossed and missing your stop. For two days last week, the Post (which is owned by the same parent company as Fox News) ran the same picture on its front page, with an only slightly modified headline.

These headlines may be composed of only one and three words, respectively, but in fact they are highly coded and dense messages that convey multiple layers of meaning. What we “read” in them includes statements such as 1) Arab men are sex crazed animals 2) Blonde and beautiful women should know better than to surround themselves by these sex crazed animals, 3) See? Those revolutionaries you were celebrating are all potential rapists- they hate women. The use of the words “animals” and “beasts” to describe the male protesters at Tahrir square, who are all rendered potential rapists within this discourse of the sex crazed Muslim/Arab mob, highlights what is perhaps an uncomfortable truth about political discourse in the United States today. In the contemporary US, it is socially acceptable to vilify Arabs and/or Muslims, just as it is OK to be outspokenly racist against this group of people. We have seen the normalization of this racialized discrimination in many instances, most recently during anti-Muslim discourse unleashed over the planned Islamic center near the World Trade Center Site.

The coverage of the vicious attack against the CBS female reporter also reveals how sexual assault can be packaged into a commodity in order to sell both newspapers and Islamophobic/Sexist ideologies. Perhaps more critically, it reveals how the assault of a white woman by brown men demands international attention, while the daily assaults on brown women by brown men and on white women by white men almost never constitute “news.” Immediately after word of “the assault” broke, right wing commentators gleefully used it as evidence of how they had been right about Islam, about the dangers posed to the “free world” by the Egyptian uprising, and how somehow, this

female reporter got what she deserved and /or should have known better. The vitriolic commentator Debbie Schlusel perhaps said it best . . . [2] "As I've noted before, it bothers me not a lick when mainstream media reporters who keep telling us Muslims and Islam are peaceful get a taste of just how "peaceful" Muslims and Islam really are. In fact, it kinda warms my heart. Still, it's also a great reminder of just how "civilized" these "people" [or, as I like to call them in Arabic, "Bahai'im" (Animals)] are; . . . And yet they still won't admit that THIS. IS. ISLAM. Lara Logan was among the chief cheerleaders of this "revolution" by animals. Now she knows what Islamic revolution is really all about." [3]

Even Bill O'Reilly, that staunch feminist who was sued in 2008 for sexual harassment in the workplace and later settled the case out of court, chimed in, asking the question, "Is the danger to women journalists in the Muslim world worth the risk?" For her part, as if revealing a secret she was privy to because she is a woman, fellow right wing commentator Michelle Malkin said of the attacks on Logan: "It's monstrous, and as many women in particular will tell you, this is business as usual for many parts of the Middle East." In fact, what most feminists (male and female) will tell you is that sexual assault and sexual harassment has much less to do with culture or geography than it does with the uneven distribution of power (and the normalization of those power relationships) within patriarchal societies. Meanwhile, the US State Department continues to issue statements urging the Egyptian government to find Lara Logan's attackers. While The US State Department is, arguably, only doing its job by trying to protect its citizens and reporters, we should hardly rush to commend the state department's stance on women's rights. After all, Egyptian activists have been fighting for years against the sexual harassment that was pervasive under the US allied Mubarak regime. Furthermore, America's most important Arab ally, Saudi Arabia, is not exactly known for its belief in gender equality or equity. The messages, again, are unspoken but clear: The US State Department will not tolerate gender discrimination and violence by its enemies, but it will tolerate gender discrimination and violence by its friends. Similarly, the United States will use the plight of women to invade Afghanistan and Iraq (once those regimes stop playing nice with the Americans), but will remain silent about increased levels of violence and discrimination against women in US occupied Iraq and Afghanistan, and within the borders of United States itself. [4]

Sexual harassment and abuse is a problem for many women in the Middle East. In fact, it is one of the most effective ways of regulating and policing gendered codes of behavior in countries such as Lebanon, Israel, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. But as anyone actually interested in furthering the cause of bodily rights can tell you, sexual harassment and abuse is a problem for women and a technology of gender policing (which too-often has violent results for gender variant people) not only in the Middle East, but also in places like Europe and North America. Furthermore, sexual assault is not what would "naturally" happen when a woman appears within a large group of Arab men (a subtle way of blaming the victim), just as sexual assault is not what "naturally" happens when women begin joining traditionally male institutions such as the US military, where a CBS report has revealed that one in three female soldiers will experience sexual assault while serving in uniform [5]. The stark differences between the reporting on the sexual assault of a US journalist and the seemingly endemic (and seemingly condoned) sexual abuse in the US military highlights the cynical ways in which women's rights have been used by sexist and patriarchal institutions and societies to bludgeon other sexist and patriarchal institutions. In the case of Egypt and the larger Muslim world, it speaks volumes as to the racist deployments of the culture concept. As Lila Abu Lughod has pointed out, while culture is highlighted as causality for racially (and culturally) coded groups of people, for differently coded peoples culture is spoken of as something innocuous that you can step in and out of, like a pair of pants. Therefore, while the sexual assault of Lara Logan can be attributed to the "misogynist culture of Islam," the sexual assault of 1 out of 3 women wearing the US military uniform is always only the result of deviant behavior by deviant individuals. While rampant [6] domestic violence in the Arab world is due to the devaluation of female life within Arab and Muslim

“culture”, the fact that there are approximately 4.8 million instances of domestic violence a year in the United States says nothing about that society. While the vicious sexual assault on a female reporter can be used to discredit a popular and democratic uprising, the 600 rapes and/or sexual assaults that occur on average every day in the United States [7] should not invite us to critically rethink the state of our union. This is not the logic of feminism or justice or human rights. It is the logic of racism, sexism, power, and war.

by Maya Mikdashi

P.S.

* From Jadaliyya, 14 Feb 21 2011:

<http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/700/the-marriage-of-sexism-and-islamophobia;-re-making-the-news-on-egypt>

Footnotes

[1] Gayatri Spivak has most famously analyzed this colonial trope, coining the term “white men saving brown women from brown men.”

[2] <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2011/02/15/60minutes/main20032070.shtml?tag=exclsv>

[3] On the other end of the spectrum, Nir Rosen, a journalist known for his courage in reporting the news from the Middle East in a tenor almost unheard of in mainstream media, revealed in a series of tweets about Logan the level to which misogyny is normalized across the political spectrum in the United States. However, the disproportionate attention his comments have received when compared to the just as, if not more offensive comments of Schlüssel or O'Reilly highlights the ways in which the very real problem of misogyny and racism in the media has been hijacked politically to discredit “unpopular” stances such as Rosen’s strong record of being against the policies of Israel and against the US invasion and occupation of Iraq.

[4] For an extremely provocative rethinking of the ways in which violence against women is discursively constructed to promote US interests, see Lila Abu Lughod, “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?”

[5] <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2009/03/17/eveningnews/main4872713.shtml>

[6] There are no reliable statistics on the rates of domestic violence in the Arab world, and in fact most studies that use statistical analysis urge readers to assume the numbers are much larger due to the fact that much physical and sexual abuse is not reported.

[7] See on ESSF: [Violence Against Women in the United States: Statistics](#)