Women Issue in Afghanistan: A Cosmetic Cover for Occupation

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Contents

- "Beauty Without Borders"
- Missionaries of Beautification
- Demise of the Beauty Academy

"Only the terrorists and the Taliban forbid education to women. Only the terrorists and the Taliban threaten to pull out women's fingernails for wearing nail polish." — Laura Bush, November 2001

FOLLOWING THE U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in October of 2001, the Bush administration belatedly latched on to the plight of Afghan women under the Taliban as a rationale for military action. As part of their ideological arsenal, they deployed the heretofore retiring First Lady to present a humanitarian face to military intervention. Addressing the nation by radio on November 17, 2001, Laura Bush connected misogyny to terrorism, noting, "The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women."

She credited the United States with helping to liberate Afghan women: "Because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes. They can listen to music and teach their daughters without fear of punishment." The First Lady continued by enumerating the rights of women circumscribed by the Taliban, a list which included the denial of basic healthcare, access to education, and, significantly, the right to wear cosmetics. [1]

Mrs. Bush's articulation of beauty consumer practices with resistance to a brutal form of patriarchy would become a recurring theme in mainstream accounts. According to Ellen McLarney, Afghanistan provides "a fertile ground for the capitalist imagination: emancipation from the stranglehold of communist ideology on local and regional markets, emancipation from an oppressive religious regime, emancipation from 'backward' social and cultural practices, emancipation of the Muslim women." [2]

Together, McLarney notes, these dicourses coalesced around the figure of the Afghan woman, whose body became a symbol of liberation through the consumption of cosmetic and sartorial commodities associated with the new capitalist economy.

Two years after the First Lady's radio address, conditions for Afghan women were still dismal: maternal mortality rates among the worst in the world; deficiencies in healthcare and nutrition among women and children; violence, political intimidation and attacks on women and girls on the increase; and girls' rights to education curtailed in areas that experienced a surge in religious fundamentalism.

Yet in the American psyche, the link between feminist empowerment and the use of make-up endured, inspiring a group of intrepid beauticians, mainly American but including one British woman, to open a beauty academy in Kabul in 2003. Their efforts are chronicled in Liz Mermin's

documentary “The Beauty Academy of Kabul.”

“Beauty Without Borders”

The idea to open a beauty academy in Kabul originated in 2002 with Mary MacMakin, a long-time resident of Afghanistan and founder of PARSA, a vocational training program in cottage industries for Afghan war widows. MacMakin consulted with Terri Grauel, a beautician who had been hired by *Vogue* to style MacMakin’s hair for a photo shoot, and together they approached beauty industry officials for contributions to jumpstart the enterprise. [3]

Paul Mitchell, *Vogue*, and Estée Lauder responded generously, giving beauty products and cash donations. Commenting on *Vogue*’s $25,000 donation, editor-in-chief Anna Wintour identifies the venture’s goals: “Through the school, we could not only help women in Afghanistan to look and feel better but also give them employment.” [4]

This pedagogical mission exports U.S. beauty practices and western commodities, thus cultivating both a new market for beauty products and capitalist ideology that conjoins female appearance and economic uplift as empowerment for Afghan women. [5]

These efforts are given a humanitarian makeover in the venture’s name, “Beauty Without Borders,” which trades on the public’s awareness of the heroic efforts of Doctors Without Borders to provide medical aid in conflict zones and organizations such as Sociologists Without Borders and Architects Without Borders that contribute their professional expertise to social justice efforts around the world.

While the mission statement describes the commercial side of the venture in terms of production, distribution, and accounting, cosmetic industry executives elsewhere emphasize the consumption angle, suggesting that “the beauty school could not be judged a success if it did not create a demand for American cosmetics before too long.” [6]

Mermin’s documentary offers a subtle critique by juxtaposing scenes in the beauty academy with those in the students’ home beauty parlors, without the presence of an editorializing narrative voiceover. The film shows how the American women’s construction of feminism is contingent on Afghan women’s embrace of American-style beauty standards and practices.

According to Kathy Peiss, such a construction is not unique to the Afghan context, appearing before in media coverage of women and market reforms in Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, and China during the 1980s and 1990s. “Identified in socialist ideology as a corrupt bourgeois practice oppressive to women,” she observes, “cosmetics-use then marked a turn away from totalitarianism to Western-style individualism and autonomy.” [7]

Missionaries of Beautification

The American women understand their work as a beautifying mission that will socially uplift and economically empower Afghan women and compel their entry into modernity. Such a view requires them to abstract Afghan women into individual subjects from their familial and social contexts, universalize a bourgeois form of feminism dedicated to capitalist empowerment, and conceive of modernity as rooted in American consumer practices.

This ideology underwrites the statements of one instructor, Sheila McGurk, who expresses an

evangelical zeal in the beautifying mission and the restorative power of meditation. We first see her as she enters the school and announces, “I hope they’re ready for me. It’s going to be a little different!” After arranging the students in a circle, she begins imparting meditation techniques:

“We all have so many things in our mind. We are so busy in our lives. It’s good to try to rest the mind for a few minutes so we can be very focused on the work we have today. So please breathe here, the center of the woman. In. Out. Simple. Close eyes. No talking. When you find your life very busy, very troubled take two minutes and practice the breathing and you will find that you will be more calm. And more important, you’ll be at peace with yourself because we are touching women all day. We are not just cutting their hair. We’re not just perming their hair. We are healing them. We’re making themselves feel better about themselves inside. You are going to play a very important role in healing this city.” [8]

In this soliloquy, humanitarian intervention becomes the beautifying mission. By increasing the self-esteem of individual Afghan women, McGurk maintains, beauticians provide an important form of spiritual aid which will radiate outwards and have a positive impact on others.

With eyes closed and her breathing deliberate, she models the technique while most of the students keep their eyes open, stifle their laughter, and sport ironic smiles at her instruction and example.

That McGurk fails to comprehend the domestic challenges facing her students becomes apparent later in the film when one Afghan woman complains of her overly aggressive husband and children, and the inordinate amount of cooking and cleaning demanded of her at home.

Another stylist, Debbie Turner, most explicitly articulates the link between modernity and the consumption of beauty products. With her short spiky bright red hair and vibrant choice of makeup colors, Turner literally embodies artifice and cosmetic consumption, practices that she urges on her Afghan students. She tells them:

“I want to say something to you guys about being a hairdresser ok. There needs to be something special about you that makes you different than the woman who is the secretary or you know office worker. You can’t have fuzzy perms and bad hair color and bad haircuts. It is your job as hair dressers, the most progressive hair dressers in Afghanistan to set the new trend for new hairstyles, new hair color. It is your responsibility. You’re the first class. 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?”

Cosmetic consumption, in Turner’s opinion, helps individualize the women by making them “different.” Skillful perms and good haircuts not only advertise the beautician’s professional talents, but they herald a “progressive and modern” look for the New Afghan women. Several students spiritedly challenge her advice, pointing out that makeup can ruin skin, “mascara looks funny,” and they face familial prohibitions against using cosmetics.

The Home Beauty Salons

The documentary’s footage of the home beauty salons demonstrates that the beautification missionaries’ prescriptions, however well intentioned, miss their mark. Scholars such as Cynthia Enloe argue for the political nature of beauty parlors as highly feminized spaces that provide women in times of “foreign military occupation, governmental flux, masculinized rivalries, and increasing sexual violence the most secure political place” to exchange analyses and survival strategies. [9]

In Afghanistan, restrictions on women’s employment under the Taliban resulted in many professional women making a career shift to the beauty industry; clandestine salons enabled former

doctors, teachers, and civil servants to supplement their family incomes through hairstyling and cosmetic application. [10] The home parlors show the large gap between the beauty school curriculum and the material realities of the Afghan women's working conditions.

Much of the Kabul Beauty Academy curriculum involves techniques that require electricity and running water such as blow-drying hair and giving shampoos, two amenities that the home salons generally lack. [11] The physical contrast between the beauty school and the home salons also embodies differences in beauty standards: where the beauty school features a picture of Greta Garbo, in all her understated elegance, and a few other white women, the home salons display pictures of glamorous Afghan, Iranian, and South Asian women and a few Bollywood posters for films like "Dil to Pagal Hai" ("The Heart is Crazy") and "Gangaajal" ("Ganges Water").

The pictorial contrast highlights different attitudes towards makeup use, with Afghan women preferring stylized make-up over the natural look. The footage in the home salons acts as a reminder that Afghan women have longstanding beauty practices of their own; for instance, several girls request "boy cuts," a staple haircut in the region, the preferred method for removing facial hair is threading.

Scenes of the Afghan women either in or near their home beauty salons also highlight the political nature of these spaces. Sitting in the joint-family courtyard outside her home salon, one student, the daughter of a doctor, describes her background:

"I was born in Kabul. Life was good. When the fighting started and houses were bombed, life got worse. Three months after the Taliban came, I got married and went to Pakistan. When the Taliban left we came back, along with America…. We're happy the Americans took Afghanistan and the Taliban left. We couldn't wear nail polish. We had to wear socks. I saw them cut off hands. And feet. I saw three women in burkhas doused with gasoline and set on fire. I think we've done enough [of the interview]. Enough." [12]

In this scene, the horror of her memories seems to overcome the woman and she terminates the interview with a smile that is at once polite, firm, and sorrowful. Another student, filmed in her sitting room, explains how women would seek their services: "Under the Taliban, women would get their hair and makeup done and wear their burkhas. They would cover their faces and hide. Our work would be ruined."

Her daughter interjects: "We'd get scared whenever a man knocked at the door and said he was a Talib. Usually, he'd just be bringing his wife in for a perm." "Yes," her mother agrees, "they'd just get their hair done. Yes, of course, they did. But secretly, without the men knowing."

Demise of the Beauty Academy

To be sure, graduates of the program realize a substantial increase in their income. One student reports that while her husband earns 1,700 Afghanis a month, she can make 3,000 Afghanis from a single bridal client. As women's earning power increases, they often gain higher status in the family, though this might not translate into any reduction in their household responsibilities.

However, whatever advantages accrue to the overall improvement of the condition of Afghan women through this venture, they are dependent on individual entrepreneurs. While it is difficult to argue against the claim that women's economic empowerment benefits society as a whole, the social value which results from women taking up other professions such as those in healthcare, engineering, the civil services and teaching, for example, is much greater insofar as these professions nurture human

capital and aid in building Afghanistan's infrastructure.

Since the release of the film, the beauty academy has closed. Turner assumed charge of the venture, and moved its location to a building in her home compound which she shared with her Afghan husband, a former fighter under the warlord General Dostom. She describes her experiences in a "memoir," *Kabul Beauty School: An American Woman Goes Behind the Veil*, published under the name of Deborah Rodriguez and co-written with Kristin Ohlson.

Receiving an $80,000 advance from Random House for the memoir, which Columbia Pictures optioned, Turner embarked on a tour in the U.S. to publicize her book. The memoir has generated controversy among her fellow instructors, who accuse her of magnifying her role in the venture and sensationalizing her experiences. [13]

More troubling are charges by the Afghan students that the book has endangered their lives. Though the book has not been published in Afghanistan, portions of interviews with Turner have aired on Afghan television and pictures of the women in the salon without head scarves have circulated in the country. NPR correspondent Soraya Sarhaddi Nelson reports that the beauty academy received threatening phone calls and a visit from two women in an unmarked car with armed guards who ominously admonished the women for "maligning Afghan culture." [14]

Shortly after the end of her book tour, Turner, to her students' dismay and husband's bewilderment, abruptly left Afghanistan, announcing that she would not return. Thousands of dollars in debt for rent, the school eventually closed and several of the women are now leaving Afghanistan with their families out of a fear for their safety. The documentary suggests, to paraphrase Liz Mermin, that the worst aspects of the school are a metaphor for U.S. foreign policy, combining many good intentions with very little knowledge. [15]

It is difficult not to read the ignoble demise of the Kabul Beauty Academy as a metaphor for U.S. policy in Afghanistan. With a great deal of fanfare, good intentions, and little actual knowledge of the local culture in spite of decades of meddling in the country's internal affairs, American experts descended on Afghan soil. However long and deep the American commitment to rebuilding Afghanistan proves to be, and with what consequences for Afghans, remains an open question.

P.S.

* From Against the Current (ATC) 142, September-October 2009:
http://www.solidarity-us.org/node/2368

Footnotes

[1] Laura Bush. "George W. Bush: Radio Address by Mrs. Bush." The American Presidency Project. November 17, 2001. http:www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/print.php?p1d=24992. Accessed 15 July 2009.

[2] McLarney, Ellen. "The Burqa in Vogue: Fashioning Afghanistan." *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*. Vol. 5, No. 1 (Winter 2009): 2-3.

[3] David M. Halbfinger. "After the Veil, a Makeover Rush." *The New York Times*. 1 September 2002. http://www.nytimes.com/2002/09/01/style/after-the-veil-a-makeover-rush.html. Accessed 15 July 2009.

[4] Qtd. by Halbfinger.

[5] Beauty Without Borders. “Program Mission.” 2003. http://www.heavenspa.com/clientmanager/Live/Sites/index.asp?CID=194. Accessed 15 July 2009.

[6] Halbfinger.

[7] Kathy Peiss, “Educating the eye of the beholder—American cosmetics abroad.” *Daedalus*. Vol. 131, No. 4 (Fall, 2002): 101.

[8] Liz Mermin (director). *The Beauty Academy of Kabul*. Magic Lantern Media Inc. 74 minutes. 2004.

[9] Cynthia Enloe. *The Curious Feminist: Searching for Women in the New Age of Empire*. (Berkeley: U of California Press, 2004).

[10] Bari Pearlman. “Beauty School Drop-In.” *Filmmaker: The Magazine of the Independent Film*. 22 March 2006. http://www.filmmakermagazine.com/archives/online_features/beauty_academy.php. Accessed 15 July 2009.

[11] Pearlman.

[12] Mermin.

[13] Abby Ellis. “Shades of Truth: An Account of a Kabul School is Challenged.” The New York Times. 29 April 2007. http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9402E5DA123EF93AA15757C0A9619C8B63. Accessed 15 July 2009.

[14] National Public Radio. “Subjects of ‘Kabul Beauty School’ Face New Risks.” Story by Soraya Sarhaddi Nelson. 1 June 2007.

[15] National Public Radio. “Setting Up a Salon in the Land of Burkas.” Farai Chideya’s interview with Liz Mermin. 8 May 2006.