Some Thoughts on Afghanistan

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I spent a life-changing year in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in the 1990s, a visit that formed my intellectual perspective and inspired my career trajectory. Thus, I have long been fascinated by other people – especially women – who have spent time amid other cultures, and then experienced mixed feelings on returning to their native countries. Lately I have been reading the work of two adventurous women journalists, a generation apart from each other: British Yvonne Ridley (born in County Durham in 1958) and Dutch Bette Dam (b. Leeuwarden, 1979).

As well as writing for many of the best-known British newspapers, Yvonne Ridley has also done controversial work as a politician and peace activist. In her 2001 book *In the Hands of the Taliban*, Ridley detailed the ten days she spent in Taliban captivity. She had been caught by the extremists soon after the American invasion while dressed in a burqa, trying to get a scoop. Her book was written at top speed after her detention. As such, she sometimes reveals her complex and contradictory personality. Despite proud working-class roots and leftist politics (she would later take a prominent role in George Galloway's Respect Party), she was working for the right-wing paper *The Daily Express* when she was captured. She had also sent her daughter to an elite boarding school in the Lake District, suggesting political hypocrisy. Other signs of her identity confusion at this early stage of the twenty-first century are that she counts among her ex-lovers an Israeli, a colonel from the Palestine Liberation Organisation, and a British policeman (the peace activist-to-be herself also joined the United Kingdom's Territorial Army for a time). She writes with pleasure about binge-drinking and bacon sandwiches. A couple of years later, she would convert to Islam. I think of Walt Whitman's lines from his poem "Song of Myself": "Do I contradict myself? | Very well then I contradict myself, | (I am large, I contain multitudes)." Ridley contains multitudes for sure, and, despite her inconsistencies, she makes a warm and compelling storyteller. But the West does not want to hear her story, in journalism at least. She is unfairly seen as an apologist for the Taliban and Islam.

Ridley can be reductive about Afghans, asserting with an essentialism that recalls the British colonial martial race theory, "Afghan men are born fighters ... Fighting is a national pastime and has gone on for centuries" (39). A feminist, she hints at a worrying savior complex, for example generalizing: "dressed as an Afghan woman, I was trapped in a world of silence" (123). But if at first Afghanistan "did nothing" for her (137), by the book's final pages she is starting to develop a more textured stance on this varied nation of plains and mountains; Pashtuns, Hazaras, and Uzbeks; jingle trucks and the destruction of art; rugged barrenness and lush orchards. She is amazed to find herself "being treated with kindness and respect" by her captors (162). In turmoil during her incarceration, she recalls Christian

tenets and says the Lord's Prayer. But she also promises that, when she is freed, she will make a point of studying the Islamic faith. This is a pledge she makes good on once she returns to London. The rest, as they say, is history.

I now want to explore the Dutch journalist Bette Dam's book *A Man and a Motorcycle: How Hamid Karzai Came to Power* (2014). Dam is a more consistent and self-reflexive traveller than Ridley. Early on, she muses: "For a moment it seemed odd that I, a Westerner, wanted to write his [Karzai's] story. Who was I to presume that I could comprehend this society?" (5). Whereas Ridley is able to believe two contradictory things at once with utter certainty, Dam is alert to shades of grey. For instance, she avers: "Thus began the Battle of Chora, reported in the media as a 'battle against the Taliban,' but in reality the distinction between friend and foe was completely blurred" (203).

Aged just 26, she went to Afghanistan for the first time in 2006. Five years after the US invasion, she found the country caught up in a complex power nexus, with many Western and local governments jockeying for power. Dam looked on aghast as members of the Press corps ensconced themselves in those international bases which had sprung up like weeds all over the nation. According to Dam in her impassioned 2019 TEDTalk, most journalists were selling instead of telling the news (n.p.). They were (and are) fervent believers in the commodity of the West's story of a global war on terror. Dam argues, then, that mainstream media produce conflicts, instilling fear in the hearts of their reporters, soldiers, and NGOs. They peddle this story within the binary of safety in the compound, while behind the barbed wire lurks what is constructed as an irredeemably evil and unknowable Taliban and al Qaeda.

Dam's journalistic truth-seeking and contempt for established narratives is reflected in novels. In James Meek's *We Are Now Beginning Our Descent*, a war reporter based in Afghanistan declares: "You stay in one country for more than a few months, you start to know so much about it that the editors aren't sure what you're talking about any more. They want you to get some of your ignorance back. You've moved too far from the readers" (53). As such, Meek suggests that only the most superficial contextual knowledge is demanded of foreign correspondents. Meanwhile in Zia Haider Rahman's *In the Light of What We Know*, a text to which I will return later, a character observes that Afghanistan's American occupiers "justify their invasion of Afghanistan with platitudes about freedom and liberating the Afghani people" (325). In her knowledge of Afghanistan, Dam has soared past most Western editors and readers, rejecting the usual pieties about saving Afghans. She left the compound (or echo chamber), was given unprecedented access to Karzai and his cronies, and made many Afghan friends.

Now Dam has written a biography (2021) of Karzai's opponent, Mullah Omar. This book is sensational because Dam was the first to discover the whereabouts of the elusive Taliban leader before his death in 2013. Emma Graham-Harrison wrote a viral article for the *Guardian* in which she argued that Dam's book "exposes an embarrassing failure of US intelligence" (n.p.). Dam says the Americans' historical blunder should not surprise us. As soon as she started asking about Mullah Omar on the street, Afghans had answers, but

Western journalists were too embedded to be talking to the right people or asking the right questions.

Nine days after 9/11, on 20 September 2001, President George W. Bush responded to the World Trade Centre attacks by addressing a joint session of Congress. He lamented that in the space of a "single day" the country had been changed irrevocably, its people "awakened to danger and called to defend freedom" (n.p.). The murders of almost 3,000 people generated anger in him and a drive for retribution. The attackers, whom Bush termed "enemies of freedom," were apparently motivated by envy as well as hatred:

> They hate what they see right here in this chamber: a democratically elected government. Their leaders are self-appointed. They hate our freedoms: our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other. (Bush n.p.)

In this passage alone, "freedom" is utilized in four instances, and in the approximately 3,000 word-long speech from which it is taken, the same word is invoked thirteen times. Given that the speech was a major statement of Bush's intent following the wound of 9/11 and that the US government used the code name "Operation Enduring Freedom" to describe its war in Afghanistan, it is clear that freedom is a crucial concept to the US and its allies. This is unsurprising, since the Statue of Liberty on Liberty Island in New York Harbour has long served as a symbol of freedom and the vaunted American myth of social mobility.

But what does freedom consist of, is it a universal value, and does everyone – men and women, and people from different classes, races, or religious backgrounds – experience it in the same way? In her essay "Terror: A Speech After 9/11," Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak thinks not. She caustically gives the example of a"'fresh-faced" American woman soldier piloting a US aircraft carrier. This is empowering for the individual woman's sense of freedom, as she says to viewers, "If I can drive an aircraft carrier I can drive any truck." Spivak recounts that a male CNN correspondent remarked on this that "No one will be able to make sexist jokes about women drivers any more." Spivak calls this "the most bizarre example of single-issue feminist patter" and asks sardonically, "All women?" before concluding that "The 'women of Afghanistan' are coded somewhat differently" (84). In other words, the idea of the oppressed, unfree Afghan woman was politically appropriated as a category to justify imperial projects of violent intervention.

In 2014, Bangladeshi-born writer Zia Haider Rahman published his captivating debut novel, *In the Light of What We Know*. The book deals in part with 9/11 and its aftermath. One of Rahman's two protagonists, Zafar, takes a job in Afghanistan soon after the outbreak of war in 2001. He states that the American occupiers rationalize their occupation (and here I mobilize the same quote I looked at earlier when analyzing the work of Bette Dam) "with platitudes about freedom and liberating the Afghani people" (Rahman 325). Having studied law and worked for a US bank, Zafar is in some ways part of the so-called American relief effort. And yet he is simultaneously not part of it, due to his Bangladeshi background

and brown skin. Because of this, coupled with his working-class origins, he sees through the rhetoric of freedom as empty and platitudinous.

Later, Rahman's Zafar describes a raucous, sexually charged UN bar in Kabul, concluding: "It was a scene of horror. This is the freedom for which war is waged" (Rahman 360). Here, he unpicks what Americans mean by "freedom." The concept bathetically involves a person being free to drink alcohol and explore his or her sexuality – whether married or single is unimportant. To the occupiers, freedom is about individual choice in the free market. This means little to the majority of Afghans. The influx of new bars and nightclubs during the occupation is a popular, positive development in the minds of the local elite class but, as Zafar points out, "the poor are disgusted" (368).

From freedom's sister word, liberty, comes the verb "liberate," another word for saving. This idea of liberation and saving brings us to Lila Abu-Lughod's book, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (2013). The anthropologist tackles ideas about freedom in relation to the realms of race, class, and gender. A feminist with heritage partly in the global south, Abu-Lughod suggests that Western feminists see themselves as "saving" their benighted Muslim sisters. Abu-Lughod had written her original essay "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?" in 2002 against the backdrop of the initial phase of the War in Afghanistan. She took as her point of departure the toxic but hilarious George W. Bushism "women of cover," which conflated the politically nuanced American term "women of colour" with the issues surrounding Muslim dress and its supposed subjugation of women (Abu-Lughod "Saving" 783). In this essay, Abu-Lughod provided a fine-grained reading of the veiling debate. Rather than the universal symbol of oppression that many Americans assume it to be, the burqa is a Pashtun garment that can provide empowerment to the wearer – indeed, one anthropologist describes it as "portable seclusion" (Papanek, qtd. in Abu-Lughod, "Saving" 785). The problem is not necessarily tradition or culture but has more to do with militarization, as Deniz Kandiyoti has pointed out: "What to Western eyes looks like 'tradition' is, in many instances, the manifestation of new and more brutal forms of subjugation of the weak made possible by a commodified criminal economy, total lack of security and the erosion of bonds of trust and solidarity that were tested to the limit by war, social upheaval and poverty" (Kandiyoti 10). Abu-Lughod herself disagrees with any enforcement of the wearing of burqas, but observes that many women wear these garments voluntarily and have no wish to discard them.

Abu-Lughod next challenged George W. Bush's wife Laura Bush's November 2001 speech, in which Bush implicitly assumed that Afghan women would automatically be delighted to be rescued by American troops. Abu-Lughod writes:

> It is deeply problematic to construct the Afghan woman as someone in need of saving. When you save someone, you imply that you are saving her from something. You are also saving her to something. What violences are entailed in this transformation, and what presumptions are being made about the superiority of that to which you are saving her? (788–89)

Abu-Lughod encouraged readers to think about women who may or may not want or need saving, but who, more importantly, demand social justice. Finally, she advocated respect for difference, while not endorsing cultural relativism – the idea that everything can be understood and justified in the context of its culture. She demonstrated that it is no self-contradiction to dislike the Taliban, while simultaneously rejecting crude online petitions that claim to act against "Muslim men oppressing Muslim women" (787). What we should say is: a plague on both their houses.

Abu-Lughod also scrutinizes the repercussions from one notion of freedom being extolled above all other values. She questions whether women's clothing can symbolize freedom or unfreedom, and whether forces that put limits on every individual's free will mean that, as Wendy Brown puts it, "choice … is an impoverished account of freedom" (qtd. in Abu-Lughod, "Saving" 19). Abu-Lughod seems to suggest that the binary opposition of free and unfree is at the heart of twenty-first century versions of Orientalism. She argues that American feminism is deceived by the "powerful national ideology" (20) of freedom and fails to recognize the unequal power relations that underpin this ideology.

Rather than accepting the premise that Western freedom contrasts with imprisonment by Islam, Abu-Lughod deftly communicates that believing Muslims have their own ideas about, and goals for, liberation. The Islamic scholar Abdal Hakim Murad, also known by his birth name of Tim Winter, similarly writes that Islam represents "radical freedom, a freedom from the encroachments of the State, the claws of the ego, narrow fanaticism and sectarian bigotry and an intrusive state or priesthood" (Murad n.p.). Abu-Lughod's delineation of a dominant narrative of freedom recalls a statement made by Salman Rushdie regarding the World Trade Centre attacks in October 2001:

> The fundamentalist believes that we believe in nothing. … To prove him wrong, we must first know that he is wrong. We must agree on what matters: kissing in public places, bacon sandwiches, disagreement, cutting-edge fashion, literature, generosity, water, a more equitable distribution of the world's resources, movies, music, freedom of thought, beauty, love. These will be our weapons. Not by making war, but by the unafraid way we choose to live shall we defeat them. (393)

This somewhat tongue-in-cheek list is a salad of trivial things, ideals, and rights. It also neatly illustrates that many apparent freedoms are culturally specific shibboleths that might alienate not just "fundamentalists," but a good number of non-Western, non-Christian, non-male people (not to mention many Western vegetarians, including me, would be put off by the bacon sandwiches!). It becomes apparent that ideas of freedom are culturally located. Notwithstanding Rushdie's claims, liberty does not equate to wearing miniskirts rather than burqas.

To conclude, the notion of liberty in Western thought, since the time of Hobbes's *Leviathan*, has meant a freedom from external constraints and the right of individual self-determination. In Middle Eastern and Central and South Asian thought, by contrast, freedom – hurriyya in Arabic, azadi in Pashto, Farsi, and Hindi–Urdu, and স্বাধীনতা (Sbādhīnatā) in Bengali –

typically possesses political, communitarian connotations. It would be wrong to suggest that Muslims have not hotly debated the concept of freedom over the centuries. In the Sufi tradition, freedom has been compared to "perfect slavery" (Bostom n.p.), which indicates not only that slavery in the Arab world was, in Amitav Ghosh's words, a relatively "flexible set of hierarchies" (260), but also that the institution was often used as a metaphor for understanding "the relationship between Allah the 'master' and his human 'slaves'" (Bostom n.p.). Most of the writers I have discussed provocatively challenge Western perceptions of what freedom entails when they construct characters who express and embody freedom in relational and subversive ways. The issue of clashing cultural understandings of liberty highlighted by this paper is particularly pertinent in the light of Abu-Lughod's analysis of the rhetoric of "freedom" used to justify the War on Terror. Single-issue feminism has typically overlooked non-Euro–American traditions when defining "women's lib." The War in Afghanistan has led to the privileging of a Western dichotomy of freedom versus unfreedom. Lila Abu-Lughod interrogates and genders this binary. In a post-9/11 context, Ridley, Dam, and Rahman robustly challenge the two choices. We should not forget, though, that ideas of political freedom are more crucial in the Muslim world now than ever before. This is easily perceptible in the advent of the Arab Spring (later mournfully becoming known as the "Arab Winter"). The chant against the Egyptian regime that Ahdaf Soueif evokes clearly encapsulates and calls forth that ever elusive and changeable idea of liberty: "They said trouble ran in our blood and how'd we dare demand our rights | Oh dumb regime | understand | what I want: | Liberty! Liberty!' (Soueif n.p.).

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