

Faces of Feminism in Transnational Media Space

Vera MACKIE

My Forbidden Face

In 2002, an autobiographical account of the life of a young woman under the Taliban regime in Afghanistan was published by an international feminist publisher.¹ The story of the young woman's life had originally appeared in the French fashion magazine, *Elle*, and included an account of her escape from Afghanistan before the fall of the Taliban regime. The front and back cover of the paperback book are completely taken up with a photograph of a burqa, the veil worn by women in Afghanistan, a woman's eyes dimly visible through the mesh which makes up the face of such veils.² Superimposed on the illustration are the words of the title 'My Forbidden Face'. Images of veils in blue/purple shades, and the mesh which hides the face, have now become a convenient visual shorthand to indicate Afghan women, the oppressiveness of the former Taliban regime, and even as a metonym for the nation of Afghanistan. The title of this memoir, *My Forbidden Face*, is one symptom of the obsessive attention paid to the covering and uncovering of women's faces in accounts of the recent history of Afghanistan specifically, and more generally in accounts of the lives of women under Islamic regimes. The image of the veiled woman has been deployed in popular media accounts, and in some accounts whose authors would claim to be speaking from a feminist standpoint.³ There has also, of course, been feminist resistance to the deployment of such imagery; and Muslim women have affirmed their own agency with respect to the wearing of the veil.

In this article I will analyse some recent media representations which deploy the figure of the veiled and unveiled woman, and outline the genealogy of this figure. The media representations I analyse in this article come from the media of the United States and its allies, including Japan and Australia, in the 'war against terrorism'. The period under examination spans roughly a year: from the attack on the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001, to the focus on Afghanistan as the region where members of the terrorist group Al Qaeda were assumed to be in hiding, through the period of intensive bombing of Afghanistan, the subsequent capitulation of the Taliban regime, terrorist attacks in other places such as Bali, and the early period of reconstruction of the nation of Afghanistan. The photographs and news reports often emanate from a few transnational media organizations, and are disseminated through newspapers, cable and satellite news, broadcast news, and internet news outlets. There is a certain uniformity of themes in these media sources, whether read in New York, Tokyo or Melbourne, which I refer to as 'transnational media space'. Before examining the use of the conventional images of veiling and unveiling in transnational media space, let us consider the genealogy of the narratives of veiling and unveiling.

The Genealogy of Unveiling

Images of the veiled and unveiled woman, and the use of the image of the woman as metonym for the land and the nation have a long history.⁴ The veiled woman has been used as an overdetermined metaphor for the 'Orient' from the earliest stages of European domination of the non-Western world. The connection between knowledge of the 'Orient' as a field of academic discourse and domination over the geographical region known as the 'East' has been documented by Edward Said and other scholars. Literary and artistic representations have also been constitutive of this field.⁵ The desire to know a particular geographical region and to conquer its land has been figured as a desire to know its women. To European eyes, the practice of keeping women veiled and secluded acted as an impetus for the desire to enter forbidden spaces and reveal what was hidden there. The harem came to be seen as the epitome of forbidden space, and a series of texts, paintings and photographs enact the desire of crossing the threshold into that space. Similarly, the sight of a veiled woman becomes intimately connected to the desire to unveil that woman. There is thus a series of linked associations: the land to be known and conquered, the forbidden space to be entered, and the veiled woman to be unveiled. The veil, as explained by Meyda Yegenoglu, 'is one of those tropes through which Western fantasies of penetration into the mysteries of the Orient and access to the interiority of the other are fantasmatically achieved'.⁶

As Yegenoglu's explanation suggests, there is also an element of fetishism in the fascination with veiling and unveiling. The word 'fetish' was adapted from anthropological discussions by Freud, and originally referred to an object which held particular religious power. In psychoanalytic terms, fetishism is a perversion whereby an object, such as an item of clothing, provides sexual satisfaction in place of genital sexual activity. The object comes to serve this function because it displaces the

male's anxiety about castration, an anxiety which would be reinforced by the sight of the female body which lacks the phallus. Several critics have also identified the mechanism of fetishism as operating in filmic and photographic representation, a point which will become relevant as we survey photographic representations in recent media sources.⁷

Psychoanalytically speaking, the photograph has prompted comparison with the structure of the fetish ... in so far as the camera image marks the conjunction of a look, an arrest, and an illusion of presence that belies the object's real absence [T]he interest of the photography/fetish homology for feminism resides in the social and cultural instrumentalities of photography; most specifically in the medium's tendency to emblemize repetitively the status of women as objects of the photographic gaze, bearers of meaning rather than makers of it In other words, the urgency of feminist interrogations of photography rests on the acknowledgement of the complicity of the camera in sustaining and perpetuating certain kinds of viewing relations that are themselves reflective of the unequal order of sexual and social relations.⁸

The overdetermined symbol of the veiled woman has been invoked in a range of contexts. When scholar and translator Edward Lane, on approaching the shores of Egypt, said that he 'felt like a groom about to lift the veil from his bride', the sexual and fetishistic connotations of unveiling were not far from the surface.⁹ A series of classic works bear titles which are variations on the theme of 'Unveiling'.¹⁰ French colonial officials and Algerian men fought over the veiling and unveiling of Algerian women,¹¹ and Frantz Fanon devoted attention to the veil in his discussion of the psychoanalytic dimensions of colonialism, as outlined by Yegenoglu.

As we learn from Fanon, 'the Algerian woman, in the eyes of the observer, is unmistakably "she who hides behind a veil".' Fanon continues, 'This enabled the colonial administration to define a precise political doctrine: "If we want to destroy the structure of Algerian society, its capacity for resistance, we must first of all conquer the women: we must go and find them behind the veil where they hide themselves and in the houses where the men keep them out of sight".'¹²

As Fanon points out, the veil could also be the site of resistance, a convenient shield for women supporting national liberation struggles. Simply continuing to wear the veil was an act of resistance, but the veil could also hide weapons or secret communications.¹³ In the colonial context, then, the veil also came to be seen as a symbol of national tradition, of nationalist resistance to colonial domination. Nations such as Turkey, Algeria and Egypt each negotiated the relationship between nationalism, veiling and unveiling in distinctive ways.¹⁴ The veil is also the site of contestation in many contemporary Islamic nations, as reflected in the changing meanings attached to the veil in Iran under the rule of the monarchy and under the Islamic revival of Ayatollah Khomeini. In multicultural nations with significant Muslim minorities, the veil has become the subject of controversy in places as diverse as France and Singapore, for example in debates about girls wearing

headscarfs when attending mainstream schools. This is the history which is reflected in the use of the image of the veiled woman in news reporting of the most recent military conflict in Afghanistan.

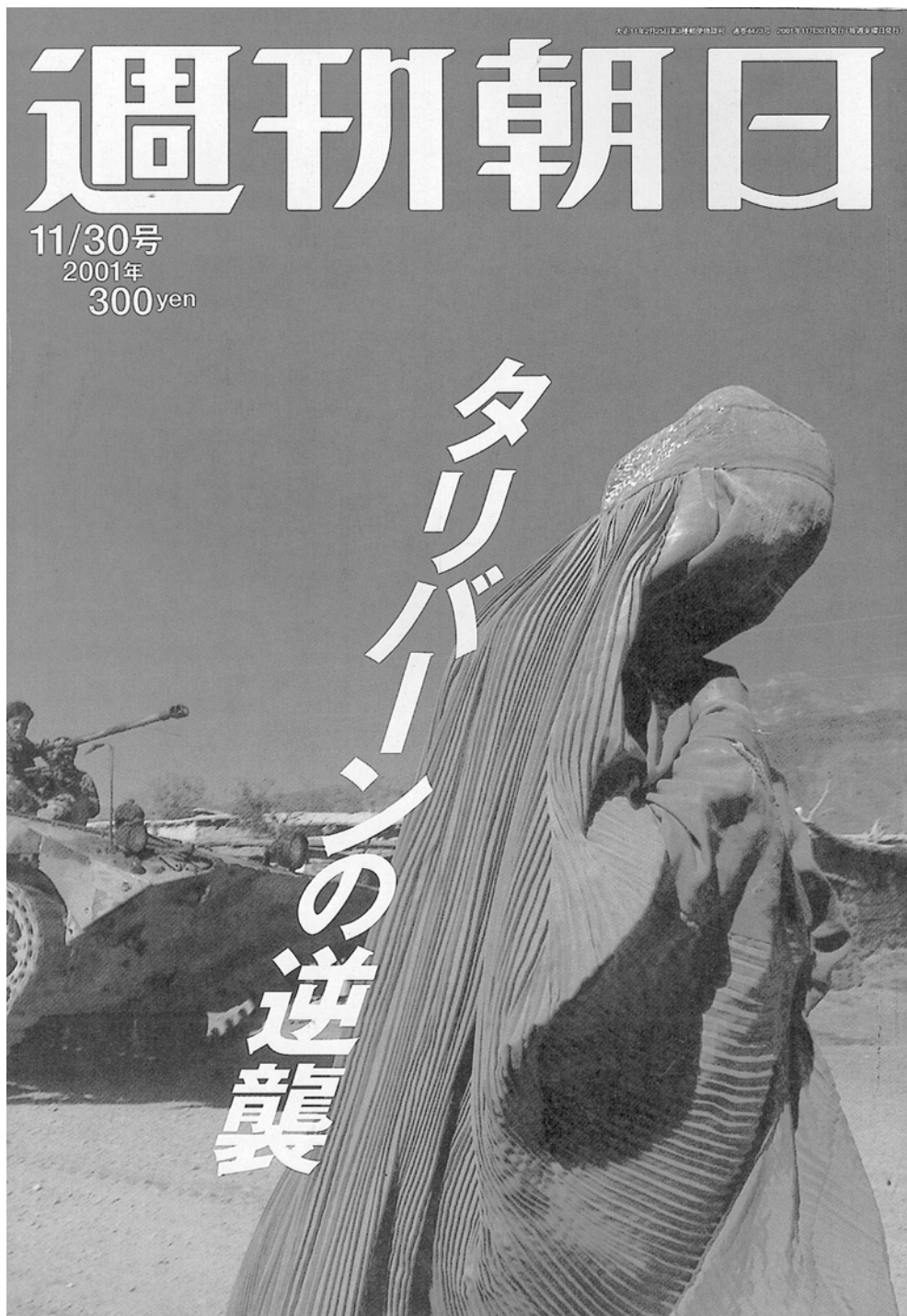
Afghanistan Unveiled

The cover of the weekly news magazine, *Shūkan Asahi* (Weekly Asahi), of 30 November 2001 bears the caption, 'Taribān no Gyakushū' ('The Taliban Strike Back'). The cover photograph includes a military tank, a woman in the distinctive blue burqa, and a brilliant blue sky which exactly matches the colour of the woman's veil. There is no suggestion that the woman is the one who is actually 'striking back' here. Thus, we can only assume that the function of the figure of the veiled woman in this photograph is to indicate the location of this news story in Afghanistan. Without the figure of the woman, this could be a military tank from any nation, and the precise location of the blue sky and desert landscape would be unidentifiable.¹⁵

This is just one example of the way that the veiled woman is deployed in a series of metonymical associations. The woman can stand for the people of Afghanistan, the land of Afghanistan, and by extension the nation-state of Afghanistan. The deployment of a female figure as metonym for the nation, however, means that any narratives of the invasion of the nation, attacks on the nation, defeat of the nation, and what has been termed the 'liberation' of the nation, are also expressed in terms of gendered metaphors. The veiled woman stands in for the mystery of the Middle East; the desire to unveil the woman stands in for the desire to achieve full knowledge of this nation; the unveiling of the woman is a metonym and metaphor for achieving knowledge of the nation; and the unveiling of the woman at the hands of a Western man is a metaphor and metonym of the 'saving' of the nation from the oppressive Taliban regime by the armed forces of the United States and its allies.

For many years before the so-called 'war against terrorism', non-governmental organisations had been circulating information about the oppressive conditions suffered by women under the Taliban regime. Apparently they were prevented from receiving an education or working outside the home and their freedom and mobility were severely restricted. Regular reports and petitions were circulated by e-mail for several years before the so-called 'war against terrorism' commenced. In those years, there was no move to intervene in this situation from the United States, its allies, or the United Nations. However, some time after the decision to bomb Afghanistan had been made, the figure of the veiled and oppressed Afghan woman was invoked, and 'First Lady' Laura Bush emerged from her own domestic space to make what was then a rare public speech calling for support for the 'war against terrorism' in the name of 'saving' Afghan women.

When the 'war against terrorism' was deemed to have achieved a measure of success, and the Taliban were in retreat, the new national symbol was the newly unveiled woman. The international news media ran special editions on 'Kabul Unveiled' and 'Afghanistan Unveiled'.¹⁶ On 15 November 2001, the Tokyo edition of the *International Herald Tribune* reported on the defeat of the Taliban, and the story was illustrated with the photograph of an unveiled young woman, surrounded by a crowd



[FIGURE 1]

Photograph by Yannis Behrakis, Reuters, which appeared on the cover of *Shukan Asahi*, 30 November 2001, reproduced with permission.

of other women still covered by the distinctive blue burqas, under the headline 'free to lift the veil'.¹⁷ The headline's invocation of the concept of 'freedom' was entirely congruent with the justification for the 'war against terrorism'. 'Freedom' was identified as being one of the core values of the

United States and its allies, and the veil also provided a convenient visual metaphor for the concept of 'un-freedom' which was identified with Islamic regimes.

Yannis Behrakis, who took the photograph, would later reflect: 'It was November 14, a day after the Taliban had fled Kabul. I was walking through the city in the early morning looking for signs of change. A group of about 100 women waited outside a bakery for food coupons. It was an extraordinary moment. I saw an unveiled face of a woman in a sea of burqas and shot a single frame. Then I put the camera down and stared at her. She had a mysterious smile; she looked back at me with a brave and resolute face. The morning sun seemed gently to stroke her cheek for the first time in five years. I was suddenly overcome by a feeling that I was witnessing colossal change. Her face sent back to me a wave of hope for the people of Afghanistan.'¹⁸

Free to Lift the Veil



Yannis Behrakis/Reuters
young Afghan woman showing her face in public on Wednesday in Kabul for the first time in years. Many women are hoping for such rights as the ability to walk outside without being escorted by a male relative

[FIGURE 2]

Photograph by Yannis Behrakis, Reuters, which appeared in the *International Herald Tribune* (Tokyo Edition), 15 November 2001, p. 1, reproduced with permission.

In the photographer's account, his own desires seem to be displaced on to the 'morning sun' which 'stroke [s] her cheek for the first time in five years'. In what is becoming a convention of the genre, one unveiled woman is surrounded by other still-veiled women, promising future scenes of unveiling. This and similar photographs appeared in all of the print media, while the electronic media were characterised by an obsessive repetition of scenes of unveiling. Many of these scenes of unveiling were obviously staged for the benefit of the news media.

In reporting on the faces of the newly unveiled women, another theme which emerged was that of cosmetics. Many of the scenes of unveiling were staged in beautysalons, and women were shown applying cosmetics and having their hair styled. There were scenes of market places where cosmetics had miraculously appeared for the first time in years. The prohibition of cosmetics was seen as just one more symptom of the oppressiveness of the Taliban regime, and cosmetics were seen as a sign of freedom and liberation, in a curious inversion of feminist discourse.¹⁹ In this reportage, there is a chain of associations, from liberation, to the application of cosmetics, to dolls, and to the circulation of the image of woman as commodity. The market scenes also include shots of stallholders selling photographs of female movie stars – in this case the images come from the Indian cinema.²⁰ In another inversion of feminist discourse, the circulation of commodified images of women is seen as an index of liberation.

These images of the veiled and unveiled woman, and the use of the image of the woman as metonym for the land and the nation have a long history, as I have briefly outlined above. As we have seen, the veiled woman has been used as an overdetermined metaphor for the 'Orient' from the earliest stages of European domination of the non-Western world. When the international news media invoked the trope of veiling and unveiling, they could thus draw on a series of conventional narratives which meant that the work of interpretation had already been done. A mere glimpse of the veiled woman invokes a ready-made narrative of middle-Eastern despotism, oppression of women, and a call to 'save' these women.²¹

The news media functioned as a magnet, attracting a whole series of stories about veiling and unveiling, some of which had little direct connection with the main news story of the war in Afghanistan. The cumulative effect of these stories was to create a discursive field of statements about veiling and unveiling. This contemporary discursive field has much in common with the colonial discourse of an earlier time, which is 'maintained by a reiteration or citation of certain statements and representations', which 'guarantee its "factual" status, its "naturalness", while simultaneously concealing the conventions upon which it is based'.²²

Woman in Uniform

This discursive environment of stories about veiling and unveiling gave new life to a story which had actually been developing for some years. Lieutenant-Colonel Martha McSally was an elite member of the United States Air Force, who had been posted to Saudi Arabia in 2000, after serving

in Kuwait for some years. It had apparently been the practice of the United States Air Force to require female personnel to be fully covered in an *abaya* – a full-length black robe – when they left the Air Force base to mingle with local people in the streets of the town surrounding the base.²³ Many would see this as a simple matter of cultural sensitivity. McSally, however, interpreted this as an attack on her freedom as an individual, and invoked the Constitution of the United States of America in her challenge to the military authorities. Eventually, she sued Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld. Her view is explained in a newspaper article :

It violates her religious freedom by forcing her, as a Christian, to adopt Muslim dress and it discriminates against women because male personnel can wear the same civilian attire as they would in the US, she says.²⁴

In many ways, McSally could be seen as a symbol of a particular form of liberal feminism, a woman who had succeeded in the masculine world of the air force. She was the first female pilot to fly a combat sortie for the US Air Force, when she took to the skies over Iraq. At the time of her suit against Rumsfeld, she was the most senior female jet pilot in the US military. McSally apparently interpreted feminism and freedom in universalist terms. Her claims to freedom to dress as she wished were independent of environment or cultural context. Eventually, her challenge to the military authorities was upheld, and she was able to claim the ‘right’ to walk the streets of Saudi Arabia unveiled.²⁵

Curiously enough, she stated no objection to the other ways in which the military institution restricts the individual freedoms of military personnel. She was only concerned with regulations which treated her differently from her male colleagues. Once again, this is a very literal-minded interpretation of ‘equality’. Equality, in these terms, means that men and women must be treated in exactly the same way, irrespective of their different histories, social positionings, and embodied experiences.

The photographs of McSally which accompanied the news stories provide an enormous contrast to the photographs of the veiled (and newly unveiled) women of Afghanistan. In her military uniform, with closely cropped hair, her face free of cosmetics, almost indistinguishable from her male colleagues, she provides one contrast to the image of the veiled woman who, according to this discourse, functions as the index of the oppressiveness of her national political regime. Indeed, in all of the photographs of the veiled woman, there is an implied contrast with another, more liberated woman, implicitly a ‘Western’, or ‘Westernised’ woman. Occasionally this contrast is made explicit. One of the photographs in Steve McCurry’s photographic collection, *Portraits* (to be discussed in more detail below), includes a photograph of a young woman, veiled, but carrying a shopping bag which is emblazoned with the face of a heavily made-up Western woman with ‘big hair’.²⁶

For McSally, too, there is an implied contrast between herself and the veiled women of the Islamic countries. McSally’s actions suggest that she has a horror of any suggestion that she has anything in common with these iconic figures of oppression. Her horror of the veil is an anxiety about the

possibility of her own identity being assimilated to that of the oppressed non-Western woman.

...when she arrived in Saudi Arabia she was instructed to don an abaya over her flak jacket. 'I mean, nobody could see me. I cannot explain to you how humiliating it is to wear that thing. I sat there and realised that, not only is this policy wrong, but it makes no sense. This is so not necessary right now'.²⁷

As mentioned above, this story had little direct relationship with the war in Afghanistan, but the discursive environment which developed around the reporting of the war in Afghanistan meant that any stories which included tropes of veiling and unveiling were suddenly newsworthy. As we shall see below, other responses to the deployment of the tropes of veiling and unveiling are possible, but first let us continue our exploration of the deployment of the figure of the veiled woman.

The Afghan Girl

Afghanistan has suffered under a series of conflicts in the latter half of the twentieth century. In geopolitical terms, Afghanistan is placed at one of the crossroads of 'East' and 'West' (in both senses of that somewhat outdated opposition): between Europe and Asia, and between the former Soviet bloc and the Euro-American sphere of influence. Afghanistan is close to the former Soviet Union, close to the oil-producing countries of the Middle East, and a major node for the trade in the products of the opium poppy. An earlier war had placed Afghanistan under the control of the Soviet Union, and after the breakup of the Soviet Union, the country had come under the control of a series of factions, culminating in the regime of the Taliban. There was thus an extensive archive of reportage about Afghanistan, and an extensive archive of photographic representations of the land, the people, the various conflicts, and of the refugees who had fled the war-torn region.

Steve McCurry is a freelance photographer who specializes in photographic essays for such publications as *National Geographic*. On an assignment in the mid-1980s, he had taken a photograph of a young Afghan woman in a refugee camp in Pakistan. The photograph had come to take on iconic status, first appearing on the cover of *National Geographic* in June 1985, then on the cover of a collection of classic photographs from *National Geographic*, and then being recycled in a range of other contexts, such as a fund-raising campaign for refugees. At this time, the name of the 'Afghan Girl' was unknown to most viewers and even to the photographer himself. Such photo-journalism does not provide stories of fully-present individuals, but rather creates a series of 'types'. The features of this genre are apparent in a collection of McCurry's photographs which first appeared from the art publisher Phaidon in 1999, and has been reprinted several times.²⁸ Each right-hand page of the volume takes the form of a photograph of one individual (occasionally more than one person, for example, a mother and child). The facing page simply provides the location and date of the photograph. Very few of the photographs are of identifiable individuals. The photograph of the still-anonymous 'Afghan Girl' appears on the cover of this collection.²⁹

Given the media's insatiable desire for scenes of veiling and unveiling at this time, it is unsurprising that the photograph of the 'Afghan Girl' was revived in the context of stories of the most recent war in Afghanistan. What is interesting, however, is the turn that this particular story then took. McCurry embarked on an expedition to find the nameless 'Afghan Girl' that he had photographed in a refugee camp so many years before. The search for the 'Afghan Girl' then became the subject of countless news stories in the print media and electronic media, a cover story in *National Geographic*, and a documentary film made for the National Geographic Television and Film EXPLORER channel which has subsequently screened on television stations around the world.³⁰

Seventeen years later, the 'Afghan Girl' was, of course, a mature woman. The girl who had shown her face to the photographer had now spent some years shielding her face behind the burqa, but the photographer now had the privilege of staging her unveiling once again, and the privilege of providing the images of this unveiling to the world's news media. The woman had always had a name, of course, but it was now for the first time known to the photographer and the readers of *National Geographic*. She was Sharbat Gula, a married woman with three children, and had returned to Afghanistan three years ago.

McCurry's quest reveals the 'deep structure' of the unveiling stories. There is a desire, it seems, on the part of the journalists and photographers to take part in what might almost be called a 'primal scene' of unveiling. However, the desire can never be satisfied with any single enactment of the scene of unveiling, so that there is an obsessive return to, and repetition of, the scene of unveiling. In the cover photograph which appears on the *National Geographic* of April 2002, the structure of this desire is revealed in a photograph where the 'Afghan Girl' appears simultaneously veiled and unveiled. The mature woman stands, her face and body covered by the burqa, but in her hands she holds the photograph of herself as a young woman, her piercing green eyes gazing directly at the viewer. The viewer has the pleasure of seeing the woman unveiled, but can fantasise about a further scene of the unveiling of the woman holding the photograph.³¹

McCurry's quest for the 'Afghan Girl' in some ways re-enacts the narratives of European exploration of the non-Western world, once again suggesting the metonymic relationship between woman, land and nation. It is appropriate that the search for the Afghan Girl should be staged for the *National Geographic*, the magazine which has for decades participated in the exoticisation of the non-Western world and the valorization of narratives of exploration, scientific research and anthropological fieldwork. The television documentary was part of the National Geographic Channel's significantly named 'EXPLORER' series. The story about Sharbat Gula also repeats some classic Orientalist clichés, such as the image of timelessness, of being outside history until the intervention of the European viewer.

She is 28, perhaps 29, or even 30. No one, not even she knows. Stories shift like sand in a place where no records exist.³²

When I saw the film, I was surprised by how still and quiet it appeared. At that point the

Soviets had been in Afghanistan for five years. So, it was a specific moment in time. Yet it was a timeless moment.³³

The desire for knowledge is also enacted in scientific terms. Ophthalmologists and forensic scientists are called in to verify the truth of the claim that this really is the same ‘Afghan Girl’ who had been photographed by McCurry seventeen years before. They compare the patterns of the irises of the eyes of the Afghan Girl in the photograph and of the mature woman Sharbat Gula.³⁴ In reading of the scientific investigations into the ‘truth’ of the features of the face of the Afghan Girl, I could not help but be reminded of the stories about the use of scientific technologies to probe the caves of Tora Bora, where the Al Qaeda operatives were thought to be hiding out during the ‘war against terror’ in late 2001.³⁵ Both sets of stories imply an opposition between the superior scientific technologies of the United States and its allies, and the ‘underdevelopment’ of people who hide out in caves. Strangely enough, Sharbat Gula now lived in the mountains near Tora Bora.

McCurry’s story has also come to exemplify a genre of news story which I would like to call the ‘Lost Girl’ genre. McCurry’s quest has many similarities with the stories which tracked the fate of Kim Phuc, the young Vietnamese girl who appeared in an iconic photograph of the Vietnam War, naked and fleeing from a bomber plane, her face reflecting the horror of the experience of napalm bombing. Kim Phuc defected to Canada, and did not appear in the international media until the late 1990s. Another journalist has related her search for Kim Phuc in a book entitled *The Girl in the Picture*.³⁶

From Burqa to Beret

In September 2002, *Time* magazine issued a special issue in commemoration of the first anniversary of the attack on the twin towers of the World Trade Center which had been the catalyst for the war in Afghanistan. An article in this issue brings together many of the themes of the veiling and unveiling of women that we have explored thus far.³⁷ The article focuses on a female member of the Afghan armed forces, who has been able to return to active duty after the ‘liberation’ of her nation.

In discursive terms, she is a ‘double’ of the figure of Lieutenant-Colonel McSally, although no specific reference is made to this individual. The story of the female member of the Afghan armed forces is introduced with the now obligatory narrative of unveiling, although this time the woman herself is presented as the agent of her own unveiling.

When a woman wearing a blue burqa showed up near the Kabul airport three days after the Taliban fled the capital last November, no one gave her a second glance. But heads turned when she marched up to the Northern Alliance soldiers guarding air force headquarters and demanded to be let in. ‘Go home, Auntie’, said the guards, shooing her away. ‘Get out, go home.’ The petite woman didn’t budge. ‘I am not your aunt!’ she shouted, tearing off her burqa and tossing it to the ground. ‘I train soldiers. I am Khato!’ Hearing that name, the

guards apologized and, too flustered even to salute, opened the gates. Khatol Muhammadzai is the highest-ranking woman in Afghanistan's air force and the country's first and only female parachutist. That day, after more than five long years of forced retirement, Khatol had come back to work.³⁸

With the fall of the Taliban regime, she no longer has to wear the burqa. Not only can she replace the burqa with a military beret, she can also display her made-up face in public.

The general rises every day at 4.30 a.m. to say her prayers; then she sweeps the floors, has a breakfast of nan bread or green tea and gets ready for work. She leaves for work at 8.30 a.m., always immaculately turned out-lipstick and eyeliner carefully applied, tie knotted perfectly on her olive drab shirt, hair pulled up and arranged under her maroon beret. Inside her black army boots, her toenails are painted a glossy red. But Khatol, a Pashtun, still chooses to wear her burqa while shopping, so that she will not be overcharged in the bazaar. 'The burqa is the culture of Afghanistan. With or without it, I am Khatol,' she says.³⁹

This figure seems to meld two different versions of liberation. Like McSally she is a woman who has succeeded in the masculine world of the military. However, in terms of the narrative structures of reporting on post-Taliban Afghanistan, her cosmetics are also seen as an index of her liberation as a properly feminine woman. The story of Khatol is the logical endpoint of the stories of the 'liberation' of Afghan women from the oppressive regime of the Taliban, apparently through the agency of the troops of the United States and its allies.

Most of the media reporting of the Taliban regime, the war in Afghanistan, and the post-Taliban Afghanistan thus operated according to a series of conventional cultural tropes of the veiling and unveiling of women. The use of these conventional tropes not only constituted the identity of the Afghan woman in the eyes of media consumers, they also worked to constitute the subject position of the first world observer. The Afghan woman is constituted as an abject figure to be 'saved' by the intervention of the United States and its allies.

The figure of a woman in a burqa could stand as a symbol for Afghanistan with no further explanation needed. Journalists and intellectuals – many of them male – assumed it was legitimate to comment on the desirability of women in Afghanistan wearing the veil or renouncing it. Through these discursive practices Japan took a place alongside Europe the USA and Australia, with an unquestioned belief in its right to comment on and intervene in the politics of this Middle-Eastern nation. In geopolitical terms, too, Japan acted alongside Europe and the USA, in supporting the 'war against terrorism' and hosting the conference on the reconstruction of Afghanistan in January 2002. The uniformity of the views expressed in the media of the United States, Australia, Britain, Japan and a host of transnational media organizations is the reason for my referring to these sources as 'transnational media space'. These media representations not only constituted Afghanistan as the object of study, cultural representation, and military and political intervention, but also contributed to

the uniformity of opinions expressed among the allies in the so-called ‘war against terrorism’.

Headscarf Day

It is also, however, possible to discern alternative narratives of the meaning of the veil. Soon after the attack on the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001, women on university campuses on the East coast of Australia and the West coast of the United States voluntarily donned veils in solidarity with Islamic women.⁴⁰ The logic behind this gesture of solidarity did not depend on an assumption that the veil was a symbol of oppression. Rather they understood that women who entered public space in Anglocentric societies wearing the veil were likely to suffer discrimination because they would be identifiable as belonging to an Islamic community. The women who donned the veil in solidarity recognized that identifiably Muslim women were likely to suffer harassment in public places by non-Islamic members of the Australian and American communities.⁴¹ In Australia in November 2002, this developed into an attempt to declare a Headscarf Day, where women all over the country were enjoined to wear the veil as a visible performance of their desire to express solidarity with Muslim women. Although the response to this call was quite limited, at least one female parliamentarian was willing to be photographed wearing a veil as a gesture of solidarity on this day.⁴²

Another group of women may perhaps be placed in the context of such gestures of solidarity. ‘Women in Black’ started with a group of women wishing to express their protest at the fate of women who had suffered violence in the conflicts surrounding the break-up of the former Yugoslavia. Soon, this developed into a worldwide movement whereby women dressed in black and stood in public places, their silent vigil expressing their protest at the violence suffered by women in situations of military conflict. In their practices of donning black clothes, including black veils which hide their faces, they could be interpreted as contributing to feminist attempts to provide new significations for the veil.⁴³ The ‘Women in Black’ movement had started at the time of the war in the former Yugoslavia, but took on new significance in the wake of the September 11 attack and the subsequent war in Afghanistan.⁴⁴

As early as the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there had been women who challenged the patriarchal and misogynist readings of the harem and the veil. European women travelers were often able to enter the spaces where women were secluded, and they challenged the masculine view of the harem as a sexualized space. In the accounts of European women, the spaces inhabited by women are presented in innocent and domestic terms. Some European women’s accounts also spoke favourably of the protection afforded by the veil.⁴⁵ In the most recent discussions of the veil, a range of feminist and anti-feminist responses can be identified. Lieutenant-Colonel Martha McSally’s fear of the otherness represented by the veil may be contrasted with the desire for solidarity displayed by the women in some parts of the world who donned veils as a gesture of solidarity.

I would like to close this article with an example of a media representation which opens up a space

for the creation of alternative meanings for the image of the veiled woman. This photograph comes from an Australian broadsheet newspaper and depicts a group of young Australian Muslim women.⁴⁶ They are school students; they wear the veil over their jeans, sweatshirts and running shoes; and they are engaged in the quintessentially masculine sport of rugby. The young women are running, smiling, and active. This photograph juxtaposes the veil with the image of active young sporting women. One of the girls is described as ‘a warrior princess with a difference,’ and she explains the feeling of playing sport while wearing the veil:

‘I like wearing the scarf when I’m running—it doesn’t make you hot, it makes you cool. It whooshes in the wind,’ Zena said.⁴⁷

The novelty of this particular photograph allows us to make some comments about the conventional associations of the veil. The photograph shows women who are active rather than passive; who are at home in the outdoors rather than being secluded in private space. This image of the veiled woman as an active agent engaged in joyous physical activity in the outdoors has a deconstructive function, in opening up alternative trajectories of the representation of the veiled woman.



On the burst: Noor al Houda players go up the middle on girls' rugby league trial day at the Sydney suburb of Greenacre yesterday

Picture: Matt Turner

In league of their own, girls can be ‘anything we want’

[FIGURE 3]

‘In league of their own, girls can be “anything we want”’, *The Australian*, 27 March 2002, reproduced with permission.

Notes :

1. This article has developed from a keynote address on 'Transnational Feminism: Past and Present', presented at the Colloquium on 'The Possibilities of Transnational Feminism', held at Ochanomizu University in March 2002. I wish to express my thanks to Ochanomizu University for the opportunity to visit the Institute for Gender Studies from October 2001 to March 2002, and my gratitude to the staff who facilitated the one day seminar on 'The Possibilities of Transnational Feminism'.
2. Latifa, *My Forbidden Face: Growing Up under the Taliban: A Young Woman's Story*, London: Virago, 2002.
3. Among the many recent books which deploy this trope, see: Batya Swift Yasgur, *Behind the Burqa: Our Life in Afghanistan and How We Escaped to Freedom*, Hoboken: Wiley, 2002; Harriet Logan, *Unveiled: Voices of Women in Afghanistan*, New York: Regan Books, 2002; Cheryl Benard, *Veiled Courage: Inside the Afghan Women's Resistance*, Sydney: Random House, 2002; Kay Rasool, *My Journey Behind the Veil: Conversations with Muslim Women*, Melbourne: Lothian Books, 2002; Jan Goodwin, *Price of Honour: Women Lift the Veil of Silence on the Islamic World*; Reuters, *Afghanistan: Lifting the Veil*, New York: Prentice Hall, 2002, in particular, Rosalind Russell, 'Behind the Burqa', pp. 172–203. See also countless newspaper and magazine articles, including: Amy Waldman, 'Women Unveil Their Secret Defiance', *International Herald Tribune*, 20 November 2001, p. 3; Jane Sullivan, 'Shrouds, Veils and Mystery', *Sunday Age*, 28 April 2002, p. 10. There was also an earlier wave of books about the oppressiveness of Islamic regimes, and the recent wave of books about Afghanistan revives some of the conventional themes of these books. Geraldine Brooks' mid-1990s book about Islamic women manages to avoid mentioning the veil in the title, but the use of the word 'hidden' still manages to suggest a secret to be uncovered: Geraldine Brooks, *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women*, New York: Anchor, 1995.
4. On the genealogy of the image of the veiled woman, see: Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986; Sarah Graham-Brown, *Pictures of Women: The Portrayal of Women in the Photography of the Middle East, 1860–1950*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1988; Joan Copjek, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1995, pp. 65–116; Meyda Yegenoglu, *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998; Nilufer Gole, 'The Forbidden Modern: Civilization and Veiling', in Londa Schiebinger (ed.) *Feminism and the Body*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 465–491.
5. See: Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978; Rana Kabbani, *Europe's Myth's of Orient*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986; Lisa Lowe, *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalisms*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991; Reina Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation*, London: Routledge, 1996.
6. Yegenoglu, *Colonial Fantasies*, p. 39.
7. For definitions of the fetish, fetishism, and fetishisation, see: Edward Erwin (ed.) *The Freud Encyclopedia: Theory, Therapy and Culture*, New York: Routledge, 2002, pp. 414–416; Elizabeth Wright (ed.) *Feminism and Psychoanalysis. Critical Dictionary*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1992, pp. 41–45, 113–120, 327–331. See also: Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in Brian Wallis (ed.) *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, New York: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984 [1975], pp. 361–373.
8. Abigail Solomon-Godeau, 'Photography', in Wright (ed.) *Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1992, p. 330.
9. Edward Lane, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, New York: Dover, 1973.
10. Charles Forster, *Mohammetanism Unveiled*; Ruth Francis Woodsmall, 'Lifting the Veil', in *Woman in the Changing Islamic System*, Delhi: BILMA Publishing House, 1983 [1936]; Frantz Fanon, 'Algeria Unveiled', in *Studies in a Dying Colonialism*, New York: Grove Press, 1965 [1957]; Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, Cambridge, Mass., Schenkman, 1975.

11. Marnia Lazreg, 'Gender and Politics in Algeria: Unravelling the Religious Paradigm', *Signs*, Volume 14, No 4, Summer 1990.
12. Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, pp. 37–38, cited in Yegenoglu, *Colonial Fantasies*, p. 40.
13. Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, pp. 61–62.
14. Lazreg, 'Gender and Politics in Algeria'; Deniz Kandiyoti, 'End of Empire: Islam, Nationalism and Women in Turkey', in Deniz Kandiyoti (ed.) *Women, Islam and the State*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991; Yegenoglu, *Colonial Fantasies*, pp. 126–144; Gole, 'The Forbidden Modern: Civilization and Veiling', pp. 465–491.
15. *Shûkan Asahi*, 30 November 2001, cover. The cover of the *Shûkan Asahi* is cropped from a wider shot originally taken by a photographer from the Reuters New Agency; the addition of the title of the magazine and the placement of the diagonal caption 'Taribân no Gyakushû' make for an aesthetically interesting composition which to some extent overrides the content of the photograph. The original photograph by Yannis Behrakis appears in Reuters, *Afghanistan: Lifting the Veil*, p. 115. The caption here states that this is a Northern Alliance tank, suggesting even further distance from the original content of the photograph and its deployment by the *Shûkan Asahi*.
16. John Stanmeyer, 'Photoessay: Kabul Unveiled', <www.time.com/time/photoessays/afghanwomen/8.html>, accessed 22 February 2002; 'Beneath the Veil: Inside the Taliban's Afghanistan', <<http://www.cnn.com/CNN/Programs/presents/index.veil.html>>, accessed 24 February 2002.
17. 'Free to Lift the Veil', *International Herald Tribune* (Tokyo Edition), 15 November 2001, p. 1. The same photograph is used to illustrate Jane Sullivan, 'Shrouds and Mystery'.
18. Reuters, *Afghanistan: Lifting the Veil*, p. 196.
19. Feminists have often seen cosmetics as a sign of the pressures exerted on women to conform to male-defined standards of physical beauty.
20. John Stanmeyer, 'Photoessay: Kabul Unveiled', <www.time.com/time/photoessays/afghanwomen/8.html>, accessed 22 February 2002.
21. Patrick Wolfe has commented on the 'historical purchase of the "white men saving brown women from brown men" sentence, which as the crocodile tears that fell with the bombs on the women of Afghanistan attest, captures a feature of transnational domination that continues into the present.' Wolfe is referring to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's use of the phrase 'white men saving brown women from brown men' in her account of the debates over the practice of *sati* (the immolation of a widow on her husband's funeral pyre) in colonial India. Patrick Wolfe, 'Can the Muslim Speak? An Indebted Critique', *History and Theory*, 41, October 2002, p. 380; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 287.
22. Yegenoglu, *Colonial Fantasies*, p. 38.
23. Toby Harnden, 'Female Top Gun Targets US Air Force', *The Age*, 17 January 2002, p. 11.
24. Harnden, 'Female Top Gun Targets US Air Force', p. 11.
25. Ann Gerhart, 'Pentagon Drops its Saudi Dress Policy: Female Personnel no Longer Have to Wear Gowns While Off Duty', *International Herald Tribune*, 24 January 2002.
26. 'Kabul, Aghanistan, 1991', in Steve McCurry, *Portraits*, London and New York: Phaidon, 1999 (unpaginated).
27. Harnden, 'Female Top Gun Targets US Air Force', p. 11.
28. McCurry, *Portraits*. A poster of the 'Afghan Girl' and a series of greeting cards bearing some of McCurry's portraits are also available.
29. I was able to identify Aung San Suu Kyi, the Dalai Lama, and actor Jimmy Stewart, but their photographs were simply captioned as 'Rangoon, Burma, 1995', 'Dharmasala, India, 1997' and 'Los Angeles, USA, 1991', in McCurry, *Portraits* (unpaginated).
30. Cathy Newman, 'A Life Revealed', *National Geographic*, April 2002, unpaginated Special Report with photographs

by Steve McCurry.

31. *National Geographic*, April 2002, cover.
32. Newman, 'A Life Revealed', unpaginated.
33. Steve McCurry, 'I Could See her Eyes through the Camera Lens. They're still the same,' *National Geographic*, April 2002, unpaginated.
34. Bill Allen, 'From the Editor', *National Geographic*, April 2002; 'The Eyes Have It', *National Geographic*, April 2002.
35. See: Eric Schmitt and Steven Lee Myers, 'U.S. Sets Its Sights on Afghan Caves: New Data from Ground Forces and Russia Help Aim Bombs', *International Herald Tribune* (Tokyo Edition), 7 November 2001, p. 1; Andrew C. Revkin, 'With the Latest High-Tech Sensors, U.S. Can 'See' Inside Caves', *International Herald Tribune* (Tokyo Edition), 23 November 2001, p. 1; 'Caves of Afghanistan', <www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2001/trade.center/interactive/caves.afghanistan/content.html>, accessed 24 February 2002.
36. Denise Chong, *The Girl in the Picture: The Story of Kim Phuc, the Photograph, and the Vietnam War*, New York: Viking, 2000.
37. Hannah Bloch, with photographs by Lynsey Addario, 'The Afghan Woman: From Burqa to Beret', *Time*, 11 September 2002, Special Issue, pp. 76–78.
38. Bloch, 'The Afghan Woman: From Burqa to Beret', *Time*, p. 76.
39. Bloch, 'The Afghan Woman: From Burqa to Beret', *Time*, p. 78.
40. Patricia Uberoi, personal communication.
41. See press reporting of Muslim women's experiences of discrimination. For example: Carol Nader, 'Muslim students brace for unwanted terrorism anniversary', *The Age*, 5 September 2002, p. 6.
42. See: <www.netspace.net.au/_avigail>. This was both controversial and brave in the Australian context, just one month after Australians had died in the terrorist bombing of a nightclub in Bali.
43. On 'women in black', see <<http://www.igc.org/balkans/wib>>.
44. Germaine Greer also added her voice to this way of thinking about veiling when she advocated wearing the veil as a protest against impending war with Iraq in a public lecture presented in Melbourne in September 2002. Andra Jackson, 'Take to the streets veiled, urges Greer', *The Age*, 2 September 2002, p. 3. This prompted discussions of the meaning of the veil in the Australian media which are still continuing at the time of writing.
45. On European women's accounts of the harem and other spaces of seclusion, see: Leila Ahmed, 'Western Ethnocentrism and Perceptions of the Harem', *Feminist Studies*, Volume 8, No.3, Fall 1982; Billie Melman, 'Desexualizing the Orient: The Harem in English Travel Writing By Women, 1763–1914', *Mediterranean Historical Review*, Volume 4, No. 9, December 1989; Sara Mills, *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism*, London: Routledge, 1991; Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism*.
46. Louise Milligan, 'In league of their own, girls can be "anything we want"', *The Australian*, 27 March 2002.
47. Louise Milligan, 'In league of their own, girls can be "anything we want"'. By a fortuitous coincidence, the young woman's name is similar to the heroine of a popular fantasy television series, *Xena: Warrior Princess*.