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Review of Robin L. Riley, *Depicting the veil: Transnational sexism and the war on terror*, London: Zed Books 2013, vi + 182 pp. ISBN 978-1-78032-128-8

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The veil has captured Westerners' attention for centuries as the cynosure of the Orientalist gaze. For a long time, when the West dwelled in Victorian times, the Arab veil was a symbol of an unconscionable excess of eroticism. Nowadays, public opinion dictates the opposite and the headscarf – its current less mystifying designation – is seen as a tool of angry Muslim men used to oppress feeble Muslim women. Both the veil and the headscarf have been well-documented and theorized as crucial in symbolizing the Otherness of Islam to the West.

Robin Lee Riley follows in this longstanding tradition. Central is her concept of transnational sexism, defined as 'the deployment, use, and propagation of ideas about Muslim women to Western audiences' (p. 2). Riley critiques both the invisibility and visibility of Muslim women in the so-called War on Terror, arguing that representations of women are 'deployed mostly to further patriarchal goals' (p. 14). Riley uses a variety of sources including tabloid news, quality newspapers, magazines and popular culture in a selective reading of the depiction of veiled and non-veiled Islamic women around the globe.

Chapter one, 'Rescuing Afghan women', is an essay-style *J'Accuse* that argues that Western media present Afghan women as in need of rescue. According to Riley, the image these outlets convey is one of gender segregation, women's hunger, and Western generosity. Rescuing poor brown women from the hands of evil brown men served as a frame to legitimize US involvement in Afghanistan. Riley here includes representations of Pakistani women. Not all women are depicted as victims, as Riley also examines Afghan women who are represented as religious fanatics themselves.

Chapter two borrows its title from an American reality franchise called 'Real Housewives'. It discusses the wives of Osama Bin Laden (comparing them to US reality star family the Kardashians) and the wife and daughters of Saddam Hussein, but the analysis also entails civilian Iraqi women, Iraqi women unjustly taken prisoner, Iraqi microbiologists Rihab Taha and Huda Salih (in Western media often nicknamed Mrs. Anthrax and Dr. Germ), female suicide bombers,

and female Iraqi refugees. Notwithstanding the diversity of these women in terms of position and class, Riley argues that the dominant frame about Iraqi women depicts them as frightening or plain-right evil. She concludes the chapter by pointing out that 'ordinary' Iraqi women are absent in media coverage.

Chapter three focuses almost exclusively on Aesha Mohammadzai and Aafia Siddiqui. Mohammadzai is a young Afghan woman whose mutilated face was featured on the cover of *Time Magazine* in 2010, making her 'the most visible woman in the war on terror' (p. 76). Riley argues that the consequence of Mohammadzai's visibility was one of objectification and sexualisation, rendering 'women living in Afghanistan and Iraq during occupation under hyper-patriarchy ... particularly vulnerable to rape' (p. 89). Siddiqui is a US educated Pakistani woman known as 'Lady Al Qaeda'. Riley mystifies the story of Siddiqui and appears to maintain that she fell victim to 'a series of misapprehensions' (p. 104). The chapter oddly ends with a reading of US drama series *Law & Order*, which she accuses of paying little attention to cultural and religious differences in the depiction Muslims.

Chapter four shifts the attention to 'Western women in the deployment of the empire' (p. 16), which refers to then First Lady Laura Bush, Tony Blair's wife Cherie, female administrators from the US and UK like Hillary Clinton, and female US soldiers. Riley argues that:

"Women who are highly placed in both [UK and US] governments are undertaking the work of empire building. All of these 'liberated' Western women end up being little more than hand-servants to their husbands', bosses', or father's colonial and militaristic aims" (p. 114).

Their motivation, Riley maintains, is to feel superior. The chapter also includes a reading of the motion picture *Sex and the City 2*, in which Carrie, Samantha, Miranda and Charlotte travel to Abu Dhabi, and the Showtime drama series *Homeland*, which centres on the War on Terror. To Riley, *Homeland's* female protagonist Carrie Mathison is the 'embodiment of what transnational sexism suggests is the superior women; she is white, blond, and sexually available to men' (p. 142).

The short final chapter does not offer a wrap-up of a central argument or some conclusions, but instead asks further questions about the intended liberation of Muslim women. Riley calls for 'honest inquiry' (p. 149) into the role of gender and sexuality in the techniques and practices of Western interventionism. Perhaps, she suggests, media literacy might help future generations to ask questions about sources of information and the ways gender is being used and manipulated.

Unfortunately, Riley has not taken her own advice to heart. The main pitfalls of the book are its methodological shortcomings. Her source material is extremely diverse, but this remains unacknowledged in the body text. *The Daily Mail*, *The Sun* and lesser known tabloids from Australia cannot be compared one-on-one to *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*, but Riley lumps all journalistic sources together, and throws in some popular culture to match. Riley does not explain or justify her corpus selection, nor does she elucidate how she went about in her readings. She appears to engage in journalism studies (that is, asking questions about news values, frames and their effects), but she does not engage with existing literature in that field nor undertakes systematic empirical

work. As such, she offers no explanation for the differences in frames between, for instance, Afghan women (victimized) and Iraqi women (vilified), or for the many contradictory representations she presents. The constant conflation of very different practices and geographies, such as the debate about the burqa in Europe and veiling practices in Afghanistan, further diminish the validity of her claims.

The book also falls short conceptually. Transnational sexism remains a vague construct and, again, is not defined in dialogue with existing work on the veil or sexual nationalisms. Yes, colonialism, imperialism and patriarchy shape contemporary cultural practices and drive military occupations, but instead of unmasking these mechanisms, Riley offers them as easy explanations. Any form of critique on the position of women in the Muslim world is equated with reinforcing the Western rescue frame. All women, both Western and non-Western, appear without agency or agenda; they are all victims of 'hyper-patriarchy', although Riley does seem to suggest that 'our' patriarchy is better than 'theirs'. In the process, she contributes to Orientalist notions of us versus them, reinforcing the very clash she set out to dismantle. Most annoyingly, Riley ends up essentializing Muslim women herself. Throughout the book, the reader cannot escape the impression that it is in fact Riley as a Western feminist adopting a superior position that wants to liberate Muslim women.