Legitimizing Empire:
Racial and Gender Politics
Of the War on Terrorism

Usha Zacharias

*I am a citizen of the earth. I own no territory. I have no flag.... My world
has died, and I write to mourn its passing.*

— Arundhati Roy ("The End of Imagination," an essay written after
India's nuclear test in May 1998).

MANY OF THE IDEAS EXPRESSED IN THIS ARTICLE EMERGED FROM DIALOGUES
with friends and activists who shared the experience of living on the
wrong side of right America. An all-too-brief meeting with the brilliant
Sunera Thobani, the "first brown woman who spoke out," inspired many of the
ideas in this article, as well as the conference on "Afghan Women and Transna-
tional Activist Networks" held at Mt. Holyoke College. Given the dramatic
changes in political contexts during 2002 and 2003, I am rearticulating some of the
arguments upon which this article, as an initial reaction to the war, was based.

From the ashes and public grief of the month of September in the year that
erased history, America's ruling coterie wrested a new flag. Inscribed with the
image of the smoke-wrapped World Trade Center, the new flag represented the
imagined community of a whole new nation, a remasculinized America, a new
race whose politically correct color composition was homogenized through the
monoculture of patriotism. Flying this flag, patriotic America went to war in
October 2001 to bomb one of the poorest nations in the world. At the World Trade
Organization negotiations in Qatar in November 2001, corporate America
extracted more gains from impoverished countries even as it sought to fast track
free trade and laid off thousands at home. In March 2002, military America
declared hostile intentions toward an "axis of evil" that includes Iran, Iraq, and

Usha Zacharias is Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication, Westfield State College
(Westfield, MA 01086; e-mail: Usha_Z@yahoo.com). Her research focuses on the political agency of
working women within the state, class, and community. Through her fieldwork among the Dalits
(former "Untouchable" caste) in India, she has explored the issues of minority agency, citizenship, and
oppression. Her article "Trial by Fire: Gender, Power, and Citizenship in Nationalist Narratives"
appears in *Social Text* (Winter 2001). This article is dedicated to her father.

the little communist nation of North Korea. In addition, the new nuclear policy places China, Syria, Sudan, and Libya on the expanding list of dangerous nations.

The Bush administration's war envisaged a politically renewed project of global expansion of U.S. military power allied to its capitalist agenda as we move into the resource crunch of the 21st century. The intimidation of non-Western nations in Africa (Libya, Sudan), the Middle East (Iran, Iraq, Syria), and Asia (China, Afghanistan, Pakistan, North Korea) is part of a larger project of economic and cultural recolonization in collusion with the dominant classes and antidemocratic groups in these nations. The U.S. foreign policy tradition of supporting antisocialist repressive regimes in Asia and the Middle East has acquired a dangerous and aggressive edge in the Philippines and Indonesia, where insurgent movements have been crushed with fresh vigor after the U.S. military presence in the region. Anti-Muslim sentiment has run high in India after September 11, legitimating the bloodbath initiated by Hindu fundamentalists who slaughtered over 600 Muslims in March 2002, even as the state has enacted a new "antiterrorism" ordinance that outlawed groups fighting for social justice. The new war ensures the strategic presence of U.S. bases and forces throughout the world even as its corporate salesmen demand more and more profit-making provisions at the negotiating tables of the World Trade Organization.

By enforcing an international political culture that suppressed dialogue, debate, and dissent, and by strengthening national security states and repressive regimens in the non-Western world, the United States and its neoconservative allies across the world challenged political and civil rights that were won by anticolonial and antiracist movements over the last century. The conservative think tank project of building an American empire is dangerous not just to Americans who have been bearing the brunt of corporate privatization and militarism since Ronald Reagan, but to democratic movements and alliances for social justice the world over. It constitutes an attack on large sectors of Americans who have been struggling for class equality, racial justice, and gender reforms by silencing or bringing them under a new cultural regime of imperialist nationalism. In this article, I analyze how racial and gender politics was central to the empire-building project initiated from ground zero as reflected in the media.

Racial Politics of the New Flag

The patriotic flag of the burning World Trade Center hoisted by the neoconservative network symbolized a racially recoded nation with new determinants for national belonging. Immigrants and economic refugees were now tested against principles of inclusion and exclusion that policed the changing imagined boundaries of the "racialized nation-state" (Thobani, 2002). The Patriot Act joined the older history of exclusionary laws and practices that mark the formation of the White Nation, such as anti-black racist laws, the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the 1921 Immigration Act that filtered out Asians and poor Europeans, the 1924

Immigration Act that excluded Japanese immigrants and provided ethnic quotas, and the infamous internment of Japanese Americans after Pearl Harbor (Kirk and Okazawa-Rey, 1998). With the Patriot Act, the boundaries of inclusion/exclusion are tested by political loyalty to the conservative forces at work in the American state. Rhetorically, the media orchestrated efforts to construct a politically pure body that avowed allegiance to the state in body, mind, and soul. The quest for infinite justice and enduring freedom, it appeared, required patriots cleansed of physiognomic, political, and blood impurities.

Accompanying the "political Puritanism" of the New Right was a technology of political disciplining through overt xenophobia and racial surveillance. Under its civil label, racial profiling and arrests as a way of enforcing political discipline became an integral part of state and commercial institutions (1,000 Muslim immigrants were jailed as of November 10, 2001, according to Serrano, 2001). Racial logics gained legitimacy in commercial enterprises (airline discrimination cases), public spaces (socially sanctioned hate crimes, with over 200 reported the first week after September 11), the media (Fox channel broadcasts), and even video games (a new game called Ethnic Cleansing showed a white Ku Klux Klan male blowing away blacks, Hispanics, and Asians, as reported by "ABC News" on March 20, 2002). The media's orchestrated paranoia and the widely publicized FBI tips line encouraged all "legitimate" Americans to internalize a racial surveillance technology. Any markers of cultural difference became immediately suspect in this new climate of physiognomic and sartorial scrutiny for racial evidence.[1] Institutionalized, state-sponsored xenophobia lifted the onus off interpersonal racial scans and made racism colorless and omnipresent. The history-began-on-September 11 racial logic won back civil rights gains without debate or dissent as it silenced immigrants and legitimated detainment on tenuous grounds.

Interpersonal racial scrutiny within the homeland was accompanied by foreign news coverage and foreign policy pronouncements that cast populations in so-called Islamic nations into their perennial position of "America haters." This strategy denied average Americans a chance to ask and to get answers to the legitimate question: How did this happen? What caused this event? Such logic was replaced in popular culture by the simpler question: Why do they hate us? The easy-to-digest answer popularized by the administration and voiced by George Bush was: we're free, we're democratic, we're relatively richer; we've pursued happiness and made it. They're poor, they're angry, they're undemocratic, they're unfree, and therefore they're jealous, because we have so much and they have so little. The angry mob images from Iran, Iraq, Palestine, or Pakistan that often appear on television's microsecond news clips justified this logic. The images of the poverty, desperation, and anger of the rest of the world, and of America's tame civic culture, stability, and wealth are longstanding public pacifiers used to eclipse the U.S. history of suppressing freedom, democracy, popular socialist movements, and mass mobilization of dissidence in the Middle Eastern nations during

the Cold War and after the fall of the Soviet Union. Anti-Americanism and racial otherness were discursively linked so that racial others appeared as primary political suspects.

The new logic of national inclusion and exclusion that policed the homeland's immigrants also hid America's own transnational interests. Advocating the cleansing of America of disloyal citizens was Ashcroft's logic, which ran: if they want to stay here, they have to follow the rules, and they have to cooperate closely with the law. The statement conveniently hides the fact that there is nowhere in the world in which America is not present. U.S. warplanes and military bases are all over the globe, with 60,000 troops stationed in over 100 nations at any given time (Arkin, 2002); its corporations and sweatshops are everywhere, on the hunt for cheap profits; its contaminated wastes and hazardous material are everywhere else. Even the World Trade Center is now everywhere. As the U.S. debates the aesthetics of new monuments to replace it, 30,000 tons of World Trade Center scrap landed at an Indian port two months ago, possibly contaminated with asbestos, PCBs, cadmium, mercury, lead, and dioxins. The rest reached China, South Korea, and Malaysia, making a total of 1.5 million tons of scrap dumped in Asian markets (Jayaraman and Bruno, 2002). The U.S. has refused to sign international treaties prohibiting the export of hazardous waste materials to the Third World, and U.S. companies refused to insure those who handled the scrap, thus making Asian workers vulnerable to possible exposure to hazardous material. In short, U.S. global dominance, which protects its own racially inflected strategic and corporate interests (environmental racism in this case), continued unchallenged under the rhetoric of the new focus on homeland security.

As Vijay Prashad (2002) points out, the U.S.-European axis of power played an integral role in the fabrication of Middle Eastern regimes. Soon after oil was discovered in the early 1930s, the British propped up monarchic rule in Saudi Arabia and Iran. During the Cold War, Prashad points out, the U.S. participated in the destruction of popular leftist social movements from North Africa to west Asia. In 1949, the CIA backed a military coup deposing the elected government of Syria, and in 1953, the CIA helped to overthrow the democratically elected Mossadegh government in Iran, which had taken the step of nationalizing the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (Blum, 1986). It destroyed the Egyptian Communist Party, sponsored Saddam Hussein to silence the Iraqi Communist Party and destroy the Kurdish socialists, and backed Osama bin Laden against the Soviet-backed communist regime in Afghanistan. America's September 11 innocence blocks out this history. The social silence in the U.S. about the country's foreign policy and its intertwined history with other nations is not an accident; it is integral to the smooth and efficient conduct of this policy. It is not an accident that many Americans imagine their historical privileges to be self-generated, U.S. economic power to be self-created by a nation of free individuals, and the nation's freedom and democracy to be self-fashioned by cowboys riding into the sunset to conquer

evil empires. The necessary condition for this silence is a social system in which race is the invisible currency of privilege in a historical period when the state, as corporate ally, has demolished the rights of the weakest of the working classes. Racial profiling of nonwhite or racial others invisibly enhances the social privileges that whiteness can secure under the name of an orchestrated fear. The media itself participated in the construction of whiteness by picturing the white family at the heart of the reconstructed homeland, as in the self-promotional ads run in the *New York Times.* A retro-style ad featured two white children, a boy and a girl, holding a flag, just returning from fishing, complete with an innocent, endearing pup. "Make sense of the times," the copy ran, leaving the audience in no doubt as to whom the newspaper would make sense. The rhetoric that interwove family and nation concealed the significant rise in single women-headed families in the U.S., even as it clearly affirmed a heterosexual patriotic nation.

Racism within the internal boundaries of the newfound "homeland" had an inevitable corollary in racial otherness as constructed outside the national boundaries. The constructions of the Islamic "other" in animalistic, primitivist terms obscured the political context of the Cold War, which critically reshaped Afghanistan's history. After September 11, anti-black racism was resignified as anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant racism as in the popular Internet hate phrase, "sand nigger," although, curiously enough, Middle Eastern peoples are classified as white in affirmative action forms. Historically, anti-black and colonial racism gained legitimacy with animalistic descriptions, which were now repeated in the construction of the Afghans (Thobani, 2002). The primitive cunning of ancient Islamic tribes, their goat-like ability to scale hilly terrain, their preference to burrow into mountainsides and hide in deep caves so that the only way to get at them is to smoke them out — all are examples of imagery and vocabulary that animalize the other race, making them sub-human (*Ibid.*). Animalization of the Islamic other drew on a legacy of representational logics featuring animalistic imagery that justified the colonial enterprise (Shohat and Stam, 1996: 137). The media construction of the Afghan pre-modern mythic collective, with their society torn apart by "warring" primitive tribes and "fierce" local loyalties, put them in an unreal world of another time, even as the Cold War politics that formed the context for the war culture was left out of the reports. In addition, Afghanistan has the world's lowest life expectancy and literacy rates, and the world's highest rates of infant, child, and maternal mortality (Human Rights Watch Report, 2000), making Afghans in U.S. pop media culture into poor, desperate, and more accurately, sub-human. The sub-humanness attributed to the poor everywhere (including welfare recipients and the homeless in the U.S.) contributed to making Afghan lives worthless. Images of Afghans scurrying to grab American food drops while risking mine explosions (and exposing themselves to cluster bombs that were initially packed in the same yellow color as food) eclipsed the fact that the U.S. bombing had actually halted ongoing U.N. relief efforts to stem the tide of hunger.

The Gender Card

Studies in the cultural politics of colonialism have shown how racial politics is almost invariably tangled with a politics of gender; in fact, one is necessary for the other. The very separation of the races is based on the cultural and social policing of interracial gender and sexual boundaries, as well as interracial interactions. As feminist scholars have pointed out, war is an integral part of capitalist patriarchal culture; it silences and disempowers women, excludes them from decision-making processes, ties their rights to nationalist objectives, and demands a misogynistic, masculinist culture of emotional steel from both men and women. The Taliban's repressive gender politics emerged from a decades-long culture of war (Rashid, 2001), just as America's global military aggression emerged from another type of war culture that capitalism, the media, and the state perpetuate. Refusal by the U.S. to pursue a lengthy process of justice, to avoid dialog, negotiation, and peaceful alternatives come from a culture of hypermasculinity that fears feminine tactics as expressions of weakness. Without violent, white masculinity as a cultural norm, as Jackson Katz has noted, and without a U.S. military budget that is 10 times greater than that of any European power, the media-packaged, state-structured war cries that followed September 11 would have been less coherent. *Guardian* reporter Bunting (2001) noted how in Britain, women and men differed significantly in attitudes toward a possible war (only 38% of women supported war, while 55% of men did), even as women writers were wiped off the pages of newspapers and consigned to human interest and personal columns. War rhetoric framed the oncoming American attack in terms of competing masculinities and patriarchies of the crypto-Christian military state versus Islamic *jihadis*. The signifying axis of this rhetoric was the all-powerful religious and mythical symbol shared by the Judeo-Christian-Islamic traditions, that of the angry male Creator of the Universe, now ready to rage against and punish a race of sinners or nonbelievers. Islamic and American masculinity was defined in polar terms of good versus evil, terrorists versus legitimate warriors, irrational versus rational, innocent versus cunning, threatening versus protective, and fanatic versus sane (Said, 1979). Racializing such qualities, or making them seem intrinsic to one race or the other, once again functioned as a rhetorical device in war propaganda.

Castigating Islamic men and masculinity as repressive and irrational was one way the administration tried to take on what postcolonial scholars such as Spivak ("Can the subaltern speak?") have described as the white man's burden, that of saving the brown woman from the brown man. Shrouded in the *burqa* and held up as a symbol of the oppressiveness of Islamic societies, Afghan women silently legitimated America's new war. As Saba Gul Khattak (2002) points out, the U.S. representation of Afghan women as an oppressed, illiterate, passive lot, "stripped of rights and of consciousness is as colonial as the British idea of the white man's

burden." These fully covered women contrasted with America's own commercial culture of the commodificiation and spectacularization of women's bodies as a social norm. Implicitly, American women, or rather, their clothing, became the cross-cultural standard for women's freedom. This move achieved two things simultaneously: it showed American women how free they were under U.S. patriarchy, contrasting with the actual powerlessness of American women in decision-making processes with regard to the new war. It recruited women into the administration's nationalist agenda and gave the state what Thobani (2002) has called a quasi-feminist character, where the state could be seen as the champion of women's rights, if not at home, at least in Afghanistan, the mythical elsewhere. The *burqa* covered up the key role of the United States in funding and aiding the Taliban — as late as May 2001, the Bush administration gave $40 million to the Taliban (Scheer, 2001), a move strongly opposed by international feminist groups — and in creating the Mujahideen in collaboration with the Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) of Pakistan to counter the Soviet Union during the 1980s (Rashid, 2001; also see Brzezinski, 1998). On U.S. television, *burqas* also concealed the fact that under the Soviet-sponsored regime, by early 1990, women held 70% of teaching jobs, 50% of government jobs, and 40% of medical posts in Afghanistan, and that these women were forced back into homes due to the patriarchal war culture initiated by the U.S.-backed Mujahideen in 1992, and subsequently the Taliban from 1996 (Rashid, 2001).

The 1970s and particularly the 1980s saw the growth of repressive gender ideologies, a natural corollary of fundamentalist Islamic ideologies in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region under the sponsorship of the U.S. in its Cold War objective of ousting the Soviet Union. Pakistan's intelligence agency, the ISI, played a critical role in recruiting male fighters from the refugee camps for Afghans along the North West Frontier Province border; even as within its own borders, Pakistan's military ruler General Zia ul Haq imposed new, repressive gender policies. Backing Pakistan against Soviet-leaning India, and using religious ideology to battle Soviet socialist ideologies, the U.S. sponsored an armed fundamentalist Islamic culture that took root in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The ISI also exploited the discontent in Kashmir, developing it into a full-scale battlefield between India and Pakistan by setting up Islamic extremist groups. One way for an economically deprived Afghan man to make a living, Khattak (2002) points out, was to go to a refugee camp on the Afghan-Pakistan border, get training from the ISI by declaring affiliation to a political party listed by the ISI, and then join the anti-Soviet battle in Afghanistan. Extremely strict codes of behavior, such as prohibitions on going out in public or going to school, enforced through circulation of *fatwas*, were imposed on women. The hyper-patriarchal practice that reacted against Soviet modernizing, atheistic ideologies gave psychological assurance to men going into battle that the women they left at home would not go out or write to anyone else. As Khattak remarks, "Afghan patriarchal culture became a

convenient scapegoat, while the massive donor support that buttressed this 'culture' received a free pass." After the U.S. reinstated the Northern Alliance with half a million tons of bombs, Northern Alliance soldiers are reported to have attacked and raped Pashtun women in northern Afghanistan with impunity. As a feminist scholar from Iran remarked at a post-September 11 conference, "the only difference between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance is in the length of their beards."

In the mainstream U.S. media, the agency of Afghan women remained invisible. Khattak (2002) points out that women ran thousands of ghost schools for girls in people's homes while the government looked the other way. During the latter part of their rule, the Taliban had agreed to open girls' schools in Kandahar and Kabul, to allow women to run bakeries of the World Food Program, and turned a "blind eye to the shuttlecock *burqa* rather than insist on the Arab-style *hijab*." Testifying to women's agency in Afghanistan is the formerly Maoist, and now feminist organization, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA). Formed as a rebellious group against the Soviet regime, RAWA ran literacy projects, secretly educated women, set up women's health clinics, and formed women's networks that took extreme risks right under the nose of the Taliban.

New Alliances

In conclusion, I refer to the responses of feminist groups from two nations, India and Afghanistan, to suggest how transnational feminist alliances (of all genders) are more relevant than ever in the new international political context. In a statement reacting to the October 2001 bombing of Afghanistan, RAWA condemned the Taliban's "medievalistic domination" even as they called the Northern Alliance "hungry wolves" who would ride into Kabul under cover of U.S. guns. Military intervention, they argued, would only empower fundamentalist forces in the region and even in the world (RAWA statement, issued October 11, 2001). Similarly, a joint statement issued by many feminist groups in India in October 2001 argued that religious fundamentalism — Islamic, Hindu, and Christian — and military aggression are two sides of patriarchy that reverse the gains made by women's struggles. They condemned state practices of using national security as an ideological platform to increase militarization, pointing to the inflated military budgets of these nations. Both RAWA and Indian feminists called for anti-fundamentalist, nonmilitary solutions for all conflict. In the context of rising fundamentalisms and the new corporate and military imperialisms that arise across national boundaries, we need to build new, imaginative alliances on antiracist, transnational grounds of gender justice.

NOTE

1.   The north Indian Sikh turbans, confused with Osama bin Laden-style turbans, led to the murder of an old man, the arrest of another, and widespread fear in immigrant communities (Amritjit Singh, Zubeda Jalalzai, and Dan Moos, "America Must Show Respect for Its Diversity," www.mediamonitors.net; Sikh Media Watch and Resource Task Force Press Release, September 17, 2001; www.sikhmediawatch.org).

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