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# "Who are the girls?": reflections on ethnicity, culture, and the idea of 'girlhood' in 'Commentary and criticism'

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## ***Who are the girls? Reflections on ethnicity, culture and the idea of ‘girlhood’***

**Shakuntala Banaji**

Nothing crystallizes the mind like the threat of impending violence. The weeks after September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 and leading up to the inexorable bombing of Afghanistan by the USA, Great Britain and various other Western allies were no exception to this unsurprising but unwritten adage.

Leading journalists and academics in the United Kingdom, North America and across the globe were called upon by the media to discuss the idea that a bombing, which was actually being administered not as support but as chastisement to the Afghani people, was supposedly a long-awaited liberation of the destitute, oppressed and suffering women of Afghanistan. In the UK, writers who had been sympathetic to the left-wing movements of the late sixties and early seventies, whose feminist politics was a badge of honour, found themselves being asked difficult questions about whether they were in support of a war which would liberate the girls of Afghanistan from their oppression, or against it. No more Veils. No more hiding. A return of schools and education. The return of the right to work. The bombs will bring a democratic paradise, and the ones who will gain most will be the girls, I heard, on the news and talk shows and in-depth interviews, read in the papers and on the Internet and in journals and a sudden spate of academic tracts. Of course, there were dissenting voices. But these were the usual suspects. And some of them were men. People who thought that ‘bombing women out of their burkhas’ might not be such a very democratic, feminist idea.

A year after the supposedly rousing defeat of the Taliban by American missiles, I read an article<sup>1</sup> by the journalist Polly Toynbee, described by the British newspaper the *Guardian* as ‘one of the most robust liberal supporters of the war’. In this article she asked questions about whether the bombs had done a good job after all. Whether the women were happier now, the people more free: ‘So was it worth it after all? The daisy-cutters and the cluster bombs, the misguided missiles butchering wedding parties while al-Qaida slipped away?’ Everyone she spoke to seemed to say that ‘the Americans’ had done a good job. But not content with this, Toynbee correctly dug deeper. If we’ve done a good job, she asked, why are most of the women and girls still wearing burkhas? Granted they are traumatized by the long horrors of their recent history – they tell her about years of never seeing the sun, months of beatings and abuse by drunken husbands; granted they are afraid – men control the economy still – and poor – the war has not created jobs – and there is little money forthcoming from the attacking nations for any changes in civil lives: But why don’t they get together and challenge the system, now that they have been freed? And her answer is one that cannot be paraphrased, but must be quoted:

Once the shutter of religion falls, the rest is silence. The women are indoctrinated so deep with it that their own inferiority is branded on their brains. Every time sophisticated Muslims in the west use sophistry to explain that the prophet was

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<sup>1</sup> This article appeared in the *Guardian* on Wednesday November 13 2002 on p2 of the Comment & features section.

actually a great liberator of women, every time they fail to condemn outright some of the Koranic laws themselves and demand reformation, they help condemn women across the Islamic world to this self-immolating damage. (Toynbee, The Guardian, Wednesday November 13 2002  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2002/nov/13/afghanistan.comment> )

So what's the point of this long preamble?

I have little interest in discrediting a single feminist journalist from the UK. Of course, the words here are stark, and some would say offensive: 'indoctrination', 'sophisticated Muslims', 'inferiority', 'self-immolation', 'branded on their brains'. The feminist group, The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) and other groups, who worked secretly for so many years from within Afghanistan, might be forgiven for seeing red. However, I can't deny that there are times during my interviews about gender and sexuality, culture, news and film, with some young women and girls from across South Asia and its diasporas – Buddhist girls, Hindu girls, Jain girls, Muslim girls from all regions – when, in the depths of my mind, I have felt a similar frustration, a similar angst as they've told me piously about the reasons why they would 'accept an arranged marriage' or that if they 'caught their own daughter walking with a boy they would disown her, kill her'. But for every one girl who told me things like that, there were ten others who said different, more complicated things. Revelations about wanting to change aspects of their collective or individual lives and wanting to learn to accept others, confidences about identifying with their parents – even sometimes authoritarian ones – but also fretting against them and wanting to escape, hints and suggestions about their messy, contradictory feelings towards their religion, class, sexuality, family or media and 'the west'. And such messy, contradictory talk and practice does not make for easy assumptions of indoctrination and religious domination versus liberation and autonomy. But then, perhaps Afghanistan is a special case, and Afghani women and girls have been stripped of the right to a subtle interpretation of their words and experiences.

Of late, I have reviewed numerous (feminist) articles and heard innumerable papers read (in the west and in India) that speak about the commercialization of teenage girls' culture (in the west and in India, but using the words 'global' and 'globalised') in much the same terms as I might speak about the Israeli bombing of a wedding party in Palestine. This disapproval leveled primarily at advertisers and manufacturers but also, more subtly but still distinctly at girls who want to 'grow up fast', or 'wear lipstick and high heels', or buy the 'latest ipod' or 'ape western girls', in itself is not a new phenomenon; neither is the fact that different feminists get exercised about different issues to do with women's experiences and identities – I still count myself a feminist; they still count themselves as feminists. It would be puerile to make hierarchies of suffering in order to prioritize one cause over another, perhaps. So, what's the problem?

The problem, that I am trying to put my finger on, is not just one of scale – although the *scale* of something does indeed change it as an experience in the sense that wearing a veil to a wedding in Delhi and then not wearing it for weeks or months might give you a different perspective on the veil to wearing it morning, noon and night wherever you are

in Kabul. The problem is really one of *perspective* and, more specifically, the two, opposing and equally false notions, that either one has to take up an absolutist stance of what is and what is not a politically correct and socially healthy life for a girl and argue for this as a standard against which all girlhood is then judged or that one takes up a completely relativist stance and believes in the existence of different paradigms, within some of which it is 'okay' for girls to wear high heels and bikinis or veils and facial scarring at eight years old because that's part of 'their culture'. I have heard academic and activist colleagues, from both the left and the right, use both these sets of arguments with surprising regularity precisely because they fit neatly into a 'liberal' paradigm about human society and politics.

And this brings me to the tricky and complicated terrain on which researchers and academics tread when they write articles and books about (any social or political aspect) of 'girls' lives, whether this be consumption, adolescent sex or clothing, child labour or school uniforms. For two key questions, in my view, that need to be stated and explored in more than a descriptive manner by everyone involved in this field are: *who are you?* And, equally importantly, *Who are the girls?* And if, in answering these questions, we can get beyond the 'us' and 'them' perspective, and certainly far beyond the 'a girl is a girl is a girl' perspective, then we might at last get to a position where we can think about the extremely complex ways in which both authoritarian power and personal autonomy work for different individual young women and children – whether these girls be thirteen year old Tamil Tiger recruits in Sri Lanka or Bangladeshi council estate dwellers in East London.

The intersections between faith, belief and politics as well as everyday experiences that are, often, equally applicable to boys and girls, cannot be ignored in the interpretation of social and political phenomena. If there's one thing I have learnt from teaching both boys and girls from a wide cross-section of classes and ethnicities and cultures in the last fifteen years, it is that the experiences many adults assume are the most culture-specific are often the least so, and the ones they elide and erase as if these are universal can sometimes be the least so. Thus the notion that a British-Asian girl under her burkha feels totally differently about herself to a Japanese girl in a baby-doll outfit or a White Dutch girl having a beer on a park bench is utterly mistaken, as is the notion that chastity means nothing to girls from some ethnicities and is the be all and end all of life to girls from others. I set out today, intending to write about the absence of academic work in the area of girls' studies that addresses the experiences of non-white, non-middle-class, non-western girls and to question the reasons for this silence, this apparent assumption of a one-size-fits all girlhood and a even more homogenous feminist response. I find, however, that I have ended up writing a plea of a certain type of research, because, if anything, the one thing that would be more damaging than the shocking absence of Muslim and Hindu or Palestinian and Tamil or Saudi and Turkish girls in research articles would be their presence in work which circumscribed and caricatured their experiences, contexts and words.