Shahrzad Mojab **Fundamentalist and Capitalist Wars on Women**[1]

Several months have passed since the terrorist attacks on the people of the United States. Much has been said and written on the tragedy and its aftermath. September 11 has brought into sharp focus the web of contradictions that make up our world. The Bush Administration has launched the second major war of the post-Cold War era. The first major war was on Iraq a little less than ten years ago. Since the second major war in Afghanistan, thousands have been killed and many die everyday, and many are on the verge of starvation; even the strictly censored and self-censored mainstream media talk about a catastrophe. Parents sell their children and prostitution is rampant. However, I am not going to focus on official discourses or mainstream media misrepresentations of the war. While I have to refer to the dominant discourses as a starting point, I try to offer some critical remarks on the politics of activists who oppose the war, who are against racism, and are concerned about the violation of our civil liberties. It is time to critique the position of those to the left of the centre.

The terrorist attacks and the ongoing war have highlighted many contradictions of the new capitalist world order. However, while contradictions are prominent, and as a result must be easier to understand, debates are often obscured in mythology and myth-making.

If most of the people on the planet had no knowledge about Afghanistan, now the majority see what they had never seen before: the destruction of its people and resources. If the majority did not know about the Taliban's terrorization of the women of Afghanistan, now they see the televised images of women brutally obscured in shrouds called burqa. The rise to power of the Taliban was a catastrophe for the women of Afghanistan. Women resisted this tyranny in solitude; it is only recently that we hear about RAWA (Revolutionary Association of Afghan Women) and

other secular Afghan women's groups in the mainstream media, while the Afghan women's press in exile regularly reported on the oppressive situation of women of Afghanistan. The United States played a leading role in bringing the misogynist Taliban monsters to power (see, among others, Ellis 2000 and Newell & Newell, 1981).

We know that all contemporary wars have been patriarchal wars. I believe that the anti-war movement here in Canada and elsewhere in the West has a tendency to ignore the gendered nature of this war. It also has a tendency to ignore the role of religion in this brutal exercise of misogynist power. The anti-war movement is not interested in learning about the symbiosis of capitalism and fundamentalist misogyny. The anti-racism movement is justifiably concerned about the current racist attacks against Muslims and Middle Eastern people and communities in Canada. However, it fails to reject both racism and religious misogynism. This is a serious weakness; it amounts to silence about patriarchy and misogyny. Let me elaborate.

Many of us have rejected the simplistic claim that the current war is one between civilization and barbarity, between freedom and tyranny, or between democracy and despotism. We know that these constructions of reality are not only simplistic but also serve the policy of war, imperialism, and domination. According to this type of propaganda, there are two sharply polarized, highly conflictual camps. In one camp, there lies the United States and the 'Free World.' In the other camp, there is Islamic fundamentalism, bin Laden, the Taliban regime and their supporters. While the left has rejected this simplification or misrepresentation, there has not been enough emphasis or clarity on the alternative. I argue that it is important to emphasize that the two sides, the US administration and Islamic fundamentalists, do not form a binarism. They are not on the opposite sides of a conflict. They do not form a contradiction. Historically and politically, Islamic fundamentalism and Western capitalism form a symbiosis, not a contradiction. The two sides coexist and mutually benefit from this coexistence, much as slavery and capitalism or democracy and racial apartheid coexisted in

the United States for about three centuries.

Islamic fundamentalism and capitalism coexist, cohere, coincide, collude, and correlate. There is, at the same time, a real divide on the global level. There is a polarization, a contradiction, a conflict between the two sides. One the one side we have the extreme right including racial supremacists who set fire to refugee and immigrant homes in Germany and Britain; Christian fundamentalists who blow up abortion clinics and assassinate doctors in Canada and the United States; the terrorists of Oklahoma City; the KKK and the neo-Nazis who are armed to the teeth. There are also the Islamic fundamentalists of the Taliban regime now out of power in Afganistan and those in power in Iran; ultra-orthodox Judaists who advocate the enslavement of women and the uprooting of Palestinians; the rule of global capitalism, which creates poverty, and kills some 35,000 children every day; the military-industrial complex which sold 798 billion dollars of arms in 2000, and creates weapons markets and generates wars. These are all on one side. On the other side, however, are the majority of the people of the world, who are threatened with hunger, unemployment, poverty, prostitution, war, massacre, genocide, gendercide, ecocide and dictatorship. This side includes people from the West and the East.

Where do the 'Great Powers' stand in this polarized world? The practice of major Western powers is a guide. These states have generally opposed social movements which struggle for justice, freedom, equality, and democracy. If there is any doubt about the symbiotic relationship of Islamic fundamentalism and Western powers, the history of US relations with the Islamic states of Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Afghanistan will dispel such uncertainties (Ali, 2002). The United States, Britain and France have colluded with Islamic groups, whether in their fundamentalist or non-fundamentalist forms, to achieve two major goals.

One is using Islam against social movements for democracy, independence, and socialism in North Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia and South Asia. For example, the most serious offensive against the struggle for democracy was Western support for Islamic groups during the anti-

monarchy revolution in Iran in 1978 and early 1979. The United States, Britain and France were scared by the possibility of leftists, socialists and democrats achieving state power in Iran. Thus, they directly and indirectly supported Khomeini when they failed to save the Shah. The coming to power of the left in Iran would have enhanced revolutionary struggles throughout the Middle East, just as the nationalization of the British-owned oil industry in the early 1950s in Iran had destabilized other Western puppet states in the region. This explains why the US conducted a coup d'etat against the democratically elected government of Premier Mossadeq in 1953 and re-installed the Shah of Iran.

The second major goal is: using Islam against the Soviet Union during the Cold War period. In 1978, the West was interested in bringing Islam to power in Iran in order to prevent the extension of Soviet influence in the country and region. This was part of the American project of creating a Green or Islamic Crescent on the southern borders of the former Soviet Union. This crescent would have saved Iran from 'communism,' and would have encouraged Islamic dissent in the Soviet Union's central Asian republics and Azerbaijan. A few months after Khomeini came to power, the new pro-Soviet government of Afghanistan asked for Soviet military support, and Soviet troops arrived in Afghanistan in December 1979. This was the beginning of an Islamic *jihad* against the Soviet Union and its client regime in Afghanistan. The US had no problem with this *jihad*; it financed this Islamic *jihad* and participated in it as a secular capitalist crusader. Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, Iran, the US, Britain and individual Muslims were all partners in a war that destroyed the people and the country. The monsters called the Taliban, the Northern Alliance, bin Laden and the West were all products of this holy alliance.

Although the left understands this history, it is less clear about the fact that the target of most Islamic forces are the peoples of the Middle East, especially, women, secular democrats, and communists. Islamic reactionaries want to achieve state power, and some of them, like Khomeini and the Taliban have tried to export their reign of terror to other

countries in the region. There is no convergence of interest between the peoples of the Middle East and reactionary Islamic groups. There is no convergence of interest between any form of Islamic fundamentalism or political Islam and the women of the region. The student movements, women and the youth of Iran have already called for the separation of state and religion. They have revolted not only against the Islamic regime but also against the official religion, which stones women to death, and executes gays and lesbians.

The left's opposition to war is in the best traditions of the peace movement. It is not difficult to realize how much more suffering this war has entailed. The left predicted the consequences of the Gulf War, and the ten years of post-War period have confirmed those fears. It is important, however, not to ignore the unbridgeable gulf that divides Islamic reactionaries and the peoples of the Middle East. Middle Eastern peoples suffer from their own despotic regimes as well as Western powers that support these regimes. The US intends to replace the Taliban with another puppet regime, Islamic or non-Islamic.

One issue that complicates the debate is the racist attacks on Arabs, Muslims, and those who were perceived to belong to one of these groups. The official remedy has been media talk shows, official pronouncements, conferences, and letters to the editor, which distinguish between good Islam and bad Islam. The Islam of the terrorists is bad and the rest of Islam is good. This has led even to the invitation of *imams* and *mullas* to secular schools to teach others that most Muslims are good Muslims.

We should indeed oppose all forms discrimination against Muslims. It is important, however, not to underestimate the unleashing of Islamic fundamentalism against the peoples of the Middle East, and especially women. It is, I believe, useless to propagate the pacifism of Islam or the contributions of Islam to Christianity or to world civilization. While such lessons are not harmful in themselves, they cannot address the problem of racism.

A more effective way to oppose racism and war is, I believe, to deal with the ties that bind Islamic fundamentalism and the exercise of capitalist power. This

can be easily understood by focusing on women and remembering that fundamentalism and capitalism share the following features: both are patriarchal, militaristic, despotic, imperialistic, and misogynist. Both, too, cultivate a culture of violence; Islamic fundamentalists turn the entire nation into spectators of public execution and stoning of adulterers. The treatment of women in Afghanistan should be considered an attack on all human beings all over the world. Some of the activists on the left have been persuaded by theories of cultural relativism and many varieties of postmodernism, which ignore or justify the oppression of women under the guise of respect for difference. These positions are, I believe, misogynist. How can one have any respect for a culture that enslaves women?

There is a century of feminist and women's movements in the Middle East.[2] In 1909, a Member of the Iranian parliament introduced a bill in support of women's suffrage rights. The British press covered the event and together with an American resident of Tehran claimed that Iran was ahead of the West in advocacy of women's rights. The women's movements of the Middle East were predominantly secular. Instead of presenting Islam as a woman-friendly or feminist religion, the left should avoid such misrepresentations and look at the international women's movements as a real convergence of the interests and destinies of the East and the West. Patriarchy is universal, and resistance against it is universal too. The struggle against racism and neo-fascism can succeed only if it is conducted on the solid bases of social movements such as the struggle of women against both religious and secular fundamentalism. What I propose is not illusion; it is not an impossibility.

Three years ago, a group of women in Uruguay in South America showed us how to struggle for building a new world. Although they did not know much about Afghanistan, they had heard about what the Taliban regime had been doing to women. They decided to protest in solidarity with the women of Afghanistan. They went to the downtown Plaza Cagancha and discarded their dress, and demonstrated completely naked. They said that it was against their culture to go naked in the public, but they did

so in order to express their anger and solidarity with Afghan women. Here is what they wrote in their leaflet (**La Republica**, Montevide, Year XI, 9 February 1999, No. 3,768):

"The Latin American women can't ignore what the Afghan sisters are going through since in 1996 the forces of the fundamentalist Taliban took over power. The victims of this crazy act of the fundamentalists are once again women. Converted in hostages, they have lost all their rights. The ones that are not killed prefer to let themselves die, because it's the only form of freedom.... How many women should die before the world reacts? Where are the organizations of the human rights? What do the governments do that say they are democratic? We are confronted with a crime of humanity. The victims are women but the rights to life make us all (women and men) responsible. No more to the genocide of the women of Afghanistan. We are tired of death. We are the ones that bring life to this world and we want life."

I think the left needs the courage, determination and the depth of understanding of these women of Uruguay. This is how the lines can be drawn between oppressors and the oppressed and that is how the oppressed of the world can unite against both fundamentalism and capitalism.

Endnotes

1 This paper is based on my lecture at the University of Toronto, November 12, 2001.

2 There is a vast body of literature covering the history of women's movement in the Middle East. For an introduction to this prolific literature see Joseph (2000) and for Iran, the country which I have studies extensively, see Mojab and Hojabri (2000).

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