Analyzing Discourses on Islam and Women's Rights:
Influences on Post-9/11 Peacebuilding Efforts in Afghanistan

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Abstract

This article investigates to what extent misconceptions regarding Islam and women's rights, as prevalent in Western discourses, influenced both the war on terror and post-9/11 peacebuilding efforts in Afghanistan. Using an analytical approach that combines elements of Orientalism, Western liberal feminism, Islamic feminism, and intersectionality, this paper examines the multi-dimensional narratives surrounding women's rights in Afghanistan. This paper explores the historical backdrop of women's rights in Afghanistan, investigates the strategies surrounding women's rights during the war on terror and post-9/11 peacebuilding, provides an overarching view of the prevalent misconceptions in Western discourses, and synthesizes these discussions to analyze women's rights in the post-9/11 Afghan context.

This article states that these two key misconceptions of Islam and women's rights in Western discourses, the rhetoric of 'Islam oppresses women' and the portrayal of 'Muslim women as passive victims' in need of liberation, played a central role in framing the war on terror and subsequent peacebuilding efforts in Afghanistan. Specifically, this paper discusses how IC aid actors, particularly the U.S. and its allies, exploited the above misconceptions about Islam and women's rights both to justify the post-9/11 invasion of Afghanistan and to position themselves as 'liberators,' thereby creating a binary narrative that portrayed Muslim societies as 'oppressors' during post-9/11 peacebuilding efforts. The discourses of Afghan women's rights issues tended to be used by the IC aid actors, especially the U.S., as a symbolic 'tool' to justify and legitimize their military intervention and post-9/11 peacebuilding efforts. This paper points out that the above binary perspectives of Western discourses on Islam and women's rights not only served as justifications for the post-9/11 intervention in Afghanistan but also oversimplified

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the multi-dimensional realities of Muslim societies, casting the West as the 'savior' and Muslim societies as inherently oppressive. In this regard, Western liberal feminists often universalize women's experiences, overlooking cultural nuances, while Islamic feminists provide a more nuanced lens, highlighting the diversity of women's experiences rooted in Islamic teaching.

As for the above arguments, this paper underscores the importance of transcending binary narratives, not to deny the harsh realities faced by Afghan women but to present a more nuanced, empirical representation of their lives. It contends that the above binary discourses often sideline the multifaceted insights provided by Islamic feminism, which offers a nuanced perspective on the diversity of women's experiences within various Islamic societies. In this regard, this paper asserts that the introduction of Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of 'intersectionality' into this discourse illuminates the multifaced identities of Afghan women, emphasizing the interconnectedness of identity markers like gender, race, class, and religion. Moreover, intersectionality has the potential to act as a bridge between the Western liberal feminists and Islamic feminists' ideologies, underscoring that advocating for women's rights is not a straightforward path but a complex journey reflecting the various experiences of the women it seeks to empower. While intersectionality originated within Western academic discourse, it has since transcended its origins, becoming a universally applicable framework to address global complexities of identities and inequities.

In conclusion, the above two misconceptions about Islam and women's rights in Western discourses were pivotal in framing the war on terror and subsequent peacebuilding efforts in Afghanistan. These misconceptions led to an oversimplified understanding of Afghan women's experiences. This paper advocates transcending binary narratives to embrace a multi-dimensional understanding of Afghan women's identities and experiences. It stresses moving beyond binary narratives and spotlighting the intricate interplay of factors shaping various experiences of Afghan women in their specific socio-political and cultural contexts.

I. Introduction

The war on terror and post-9/11 peacebuilding efforts in Afghanistan spotlighted Afghan women's rights through the international community (IC) humanitarian assistance, aiming to advance women's rights and implement gender

perspectives in Islamic-based society; however, Afghan women are currently facing severe oppression under the Taliban regime (The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women [UN Women], 2023). This paradox underscores the need to rethink the IC's narratives on women's rights in Afghanistan.

This article addresses the research question of 'to what extent have Western misconceptions of Islam and women's rights, rooted in Orientalist and liberal feminist perspectives, shaped the narratives and strategies employed by IC aid actors in the war on terror and post-9/11 peacebuilding in Afghanistan?' Utilizing an analytical framework that blends elements of Orientalism, Western liberal feminism, Islamic feminism, and intersectionality, this paper delves into the multi-dimensional analyses of the narratives surrounding women's rights in Afghanistan. It states that misconceptions, particularly the beliefs that 'Islam oppresses women' and 'Muslim women are passive victims' requiring liberation, rooted in Orientalist and liberal feminist perspectives, significantly influenced the narratives of IC aid actors.

Specifically, this paper discusses how IC aid actors exploited misconceptions about Islam and women's rights, not only to legitimize the post-9/11 Afghanistan invasion but also to frame the IC aid actors as 'liberators,' establishing a binary perspective that cast Muslim societies as 'oppressors' in post-9/11 peacebuilding efforts. While this paper firmly opposes the oppressive actions of the Taliban, it contends that binary discourses often sideline the multifaceted insights provided by Islamic feminism, which offers a nuanced perspective on the diversity of women's experiences within various Islamic societies (Ahmed, 1992; Mahmood, 2005). Introducing the concept of 'intersectionality,' as posited by Crenshaw (1989), this paper seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of Muslim women's varied experiences by intertwining the perspectives of Islamic feminism and intersectionality. Crenshaw (1989) highlighted the intricacies of Black women's experiences, emphasizing that identity categories like gender, race, class, and religion are interconnected and must be considered holistically. Although intersectionality has Western origins, it has since evolved into a universal

framework for addressing global complexities of identities and inequalities (Collins & Bilge, 2020).

In this context, this paper underscores the imperative to look beyond binary narratives. It emphasizes that the study's contribution lies in advocating for a multi-dimensional understanding of Afghan women's identities and experiences, challenging stereotypes, and revealing diverse realities of women's lives in Afghanistan. This paper emphasizes the need to move beyond binary narratives, shedding light on the nuanced complexities of Afghan women's identities and experiences. The paper's strength lies in its advocacy for a broader understanding of Afghan women's identities and experiences, effectively challenging stereotypes and illuminating the varied realities of their lives in Afghanistan. Through the lens of intersectionality, this paper accentuates the importance of transcending binary perspectives to provide a nuanced understanding of Afghan women's diverse lives and identities.

II. Historical context of women's rights in Afghanistan

Afghan women's rights have historically been a focal point of political struggles, caught between varied conceptions of modernity and cultural norms (Kandiyoti, 2005; Johnson & Leslie, 2004). Ethnic and tribal divisions, such as Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, and Aimaq, coupled with diverse interpretations of Islam, have impeded the formation of a unified national identity and centralized state (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003; Moghadam, 1997). The following brief history of women's situation in Afghanistan demonstrates that Afghan women's rights issues are much more complex than the formulation of pre- and post-9/11 peacebuilding; additionally, Afghan women's rights have been highly politicized throughout modern Afghan history.

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Afghanistan's leaders recognized the importance of women's rights and improved their social system to promote women's rights. In the 1880s, Abdur Rahman Khan initiated efforts to centralize Afghanistan's government and introduce social reforms, a legacy continued by his son Amir Habibulla, marking one of the early instances

of social reform in the Muslim world. For example, Abdur Rahman Khan introduced progressive changes, including altering customary laws to raise the female marriage age and ending the forced remarriage of widows to their deceased husband's kin (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003). Regarding women's rights in Afghanistan, the 20th century was important. In the 1920s, King Amanullah, focusing on women's rights, introduced a constitution promoting women's liberation from traditional norms following Afghanistan's victory over the British in 1919. He founded the first female school in 1921 and a female-only hospital in 1924, marking significant strides in women's social inclusion and liberation (Hans, 2004; Haqmal, 2012; Magnus & Naby, 1998). In this era, women's emancipation became central to Afghanistan's modernization (Hans, 2004). However, efforts to transform gender relations fluctuated between forced modernization and conservative backlash from mullahs and tribal leaders. By 1928, tribal leaders resisted King Amanullah's women's liberation efforts, viewing them as "too western" and against Islam (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003, p. 5). Consequently, no substantial reforms in women's rights occurred for the next two decades.

In the 1940s and 1950s, Afghan women were encouraged to join economic development as professionals like doctors and teachers, experienced increased modernization, and reduced traditional practices under Prime Minister Mohammad Daoud Khan, who later became the first president of Afghanistan. In 1964, women could acquire the right to vote in the third Constitution. During the 1970s, the Soviet-backed People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) fostered a second wave of women's rights reforms, leading to enhanced education, employment, and parliamentary representation for women in the country (Moghadam, 1997; Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003). However, the PDPA's rapid advancements in women's rights and social reforms elicited backlash from mullahs and tribal leaders, as they overlooked societal and religious sensitivities in Afghanistan's rural areas (Marsden, 2002).

The Saur Revolution in 1978 and the subsequent Soviet occupation in 1979 introduced social and economic reforms for women but also sparked a

prolonged war in Afghanistan. The Mujahideen, resisting Soviet influence and defending traditional Afghan culture, gained power in 1992 and established an Islamic state (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003). In 1996, the Taliban ruled Afghanistan. The era of Mujahideen and the subsequent Taliban rule was marked by severe oppression and violence against women, such as restrictions on access to health care, humanitarian aid, and education, the prohibition of women's movement, and the deprivation of job opportunities (United Nations Economic and Social Council [ECOSOC], 2000). Post-2001, the U.S.-led intervention and post-9/11 peacebuilding efforts spotlighted Afghan women's rights, promoting gender equality and empowerment. However, the Taliban's resurgence in 2021 reversed many of these gains, reinstating severe restrictions on women (UN Women, 2023).

Regarding women's rights in Afghanistan, Moghadam (1997) highlights two core factors shaping women's rights in Afghanistan: the entrenched patriarchal norms and the weak central state, ineffective in instigating modernization due to its tribal and feudal foundations. Although efforts to uplift women's status emerged during the 1920s and 1970s, Afghan women met resistance from traditional forces (p. 76). In this regard, contrasting Afghanistan with Japan illuminates the intricate interplay of state power, societal norms, and international influences shaping women's rights narratives, drawing valuable insights from Japan's post-WWII transformation to understand better Afghanistan's unique challenges for women's empowerment within its distinct cultural and political context. In Japan, although also rooted in patriarchal norms, women's legal and societal status was enhanced, especially in the post-WWII era, due to constitutional reforms and societal evolution (Mackie, 2003). In contrast, weak central authority and traditional norms thwarted Afghanistan's modernization efforts and women's rights developments (Moghadam, 1997). Unlike Japan, where legal and societal transformations encouraged women's rights issues, Afghanistan has faced a lack of governance and societal acceptance in the progression of women's rights (Moghadam, 1997; Molony & Uno, 2005).

III. Characteristics of women's rights issues' strategies in the War on Terror and post-9/11 peacebuilding

Following the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. and its allies immediately invaded Afghanistan to combat Al-Qaeda, marking the commencement of Bush's global 'war on terror.' This led to the military occupation of Afghanistan under Operation Enduring Freedom, characterized as 'intervention-reconstruction-withdrawal' operations enforced by the U.S., the United Nations (UN), and donor countries (Richmond, 2009a; Richmond, 2009b). Regarding characteristics of women's rights issues in the post-9/11 context, this section mainly analyzes the implementation method and why women's empowerment was focused rather than the outcomes of such policies.

Firstly, the George W. Bush administration's war on terror strategy significantly influenced building a platform for women's rights issues' strategies in post-9/11 peacebuilding. The following arguments demonstrate that the Bush administration highlighted the 'war on terror' as a form of ideological war, and the issue of Afghan women's rights became a global concern in the post-9/11 context. The initial strategy post-9/11, outlined in the 2002 *National Security Strategy* (NSS) by the Bush administration, focused on the global scale of the war on terror and the prevention of weapons of mass destruction reaching terrorists (United States Department of Defense [USDD], 2002). This also underscored the necessity of 'preemptive action,' a strategy entailing early interventions to counter terrorist organizations and hostile forces, significantly influencing the war on terror paradigm (USDD, 2002). Moreover, it proposes that promoting a circle of democracy is 'a moral imperative,' resulting from not 'a clash of civilizations' but 'the clash inside a civilization' (Huntington, 1996; USDD, 2002). Therefore, in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the U.S. was primarily focused on the war on terror, and the absence of women's rights in Afghanistan did not influence the decision to invade. Following the initial strategy, the Bush administration underscored international cooperation in promoting democracy, human rights, and free markets as essential components of the war on terror and post-9/11 peacebuilding (USDD, 2006a; 2006b; White House Office of Communications,

2015). What is important here is that the initial focus on defeating Al-Qaeda and counter-terrorism expanded to a broader objective of instilling a liberal peacebuilding template, including the promotion of democracy, human rights, and market economy in post-9/11 Afghanistan (Quie, 2012; Schütte, 2015).

In this regard, the post-9/11 era saw the Taliban's abuse of women and Afghan women's rights becoming a central global concern. The Bush administration condemned the Taliban's restrictions on women and highlighted the importance of international community support. For example, the United States Department of State [USDS] (2001) emphasized that while Islam has its tradition of protecting women's and children's rights, "Islam has specific provisions which define the rights of women in areas such as marriage, divorce, and property rights." Moreover, "the Taliban regime cruelly reduced women and girls to poverty, worsened their health, and deprived them of their right to an education"; thus, post-9/11 intervention in Afghanistan provided that "Kabul and other Afghan cities liberated from the Taliban, women are returning to their rightful place in Afghan society" (USDS, 2001). Concurrently, First Lady Laura Bush stated that the war on terror was a fight for women's rights and dignity (Gerstenzang & Getter, 2001). In this way, the fight against terrorism was discussed in the 'war on terror' context as the struggle for women's rights and dignity. Therefore, the Bush administration's perspectives on Islam and Muslim women significantly influence Afghan women's rights discourse.

Secondly, the IC intervention triggered the development of women's rights issues in Afghanistan. In this regard, attempts at women's empowerment had proceeded top-down rather than bottom-up approaches, from the IC aid actors to the Afghan government based on liberal ideologies. After the U.S.-led intervention in Afghanistan in the Bonn Agreement in 2001, the U.S.-led coalition attempted to establish a new government in Afghanistan based on Mujahideen, one of the tribal groups, and their alliance (Ahmand & Avoine, 2016). One of the important contributions of the IC support is that it has led to the development of legal and political frameworks for women's rights empowerment in Afghanistan. In 2001, the Ministry of Women's Affairs, the first ministry of women's rights

issues in Afghanistan, and the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission were established based on the Bonn Agreement (Reddy, 2014).

Moreover, in March 2002, the UN initiated the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), focusing on assisting Afghanistan in establishing sustainable peace and development. UNAMA's objectives included promoting human rights, good governance, gender-sensitive peacebuilding, transitional justice, and protecting civilians, especially women and children (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan [UNAMA], 2023). Due to the U.S.-led intervention and international humanitarian aid, the Afghan government addressed women's rights issues. Notably, the Afghan government had constant pressure from the IC aid actors to produce a liberal democratic regime and to straighten the political and legal frameworks of women's rights issues to women's protection from violence, women's empowerment, and gender equality.

The above argument leads to the third point: the IC aid actors' strategies for women's rights issues, especially the UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, significantly impacted the development of women's rights empowerment in Afghanistan. As for this point, the Afghan government had tackled women's rights empowerment with the aid of IC in post-9/11 peacebuilding. Based on the UNSCR 1325's 'four pillars': protection of women from sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), women's participation in politics and peace processes, prevention of violence and human rights, and relief and recovery, the Afghanistan government implemented Afghanistan's National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325, also known as the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA) on June 30, 2015, in order to promote women's empowerment, gender equality, transitional process and state building (Ministry of Foreign Affairs [MFA], 2015).

In the NAPWA, the Afghan government promoted the following issues: (1) women's participation in all levels of decision-making regarding civil service, peace, and security issues; (2) women's participation in elections both of national and provincial; (3) women's access to the active justice system; (4) health and psychosocial assistance for SGBV victims; (5) protection of women from all types of discrimination and violence; (6) financial assistance for activities associated

with women in an emergency; (7) implementation of internally displaced person policy related to UNSCR 1325; (8) the implementation of punishment for violence against women; (9) including men and boys in efforts to support victims of war; (10) increasing job opportunity and access to education for women and girls (MFA, 2015). Moreover, in 2004, Afghan women's rights were enshrined and guaranteed by the new Constitution, such as women's equality issues (Article 22), equal educational opportunity (Articles 43 and 44), and the right to work (Article 48) (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan [IRA], 2014). What is important here is that consistent with the IC aid actors' belief in the importance of implementing UNSCR 1325 on women's rights issues, the Afghan government considered UNSCR 1325 a worldwide benchmark for women's rights issues.

IV. Overview of misconceptions regarding Islam and women's rights in Western discourses

In this article, the term 'misconceptions' refers to beliefs or ideas within Western discourse that do not align with accurate or factual information regarding Islam and women's rights. Specifically, this article analyzes the misconceptions of Islam and women's rights held by the IC aid actors, with particular emphasis on the U.S. and its allies, in the context of the war on terror and post-9/11 peacebuilding efforts.

Firstly, the IC aid actors, especially the U.S. and its allies, have a misconception that 'Islam oppresses women' through post-9/11 peacebuilding efforts (Abu-Lughod, 2013; USDD, 2006a; USDD, 2006b). To be specific, the IC aid actors, especially the U.S., had a bias that 'Islam oppressed women' and labeled Islam as misogynistic in the context of the war on terror and post-9/11 peacebuilding in Afghanistan (Patoari, 2019; Syed, 2008). This misconception portrays Islam as a monolithic and inherently oppressive religion towards women, disregarding the diversity of interpretations and practices within Muslim communities (Ahmed, 2012; Barlas, 2002).

What has to be noted is that Islam is a global religion with diverse interpretations and practices across different regions and cultures (An-Naim,

2008; Moghissi, 2006). For example, Muslim-majority countries exhibit varied interpretations and applications of Islamic law (*Sharia*), leading to diverse legal protections for women (An-Naim, 2008). These countries also possess distinct cultural traditions and societal norms affecting women's experiences and rights (Barlas, 2002; Moghissi, 2006; Ahmed, 2012). Therefore, it is crucial to consider the complex interplay of factors like race, class, and ethnicity in understanding Muslim women's diverse experiences and rights.

Moreover, as mentioned, this paper acknowledges the diversity within Islam; this paper specifically examines the *Qur'an* to address the misconception that 'Islam oppresses women' because the *Qur'an* is the foundational scripture of the Islamic faith. In this respect, the *Qur'an* emphasizes peace and equality for all, including both men and women. For example, the following verses in the *Qur'an* emphasize that both men and women are equally valued in the eyes of Allah:

"O ye folk! fear your Lord, who created you from one soul, and created therefrom its mate, and diffused from them twain many men and women." (*Qur'an*, chap. 4: 2, as cited in Palmer, 1900)

In the *Qur'an*, Islam treats men and women as being the equal essence created from one soul, so Islam emphasizes the equality of both men and women regarding their rights, dignity, and virtues, and it abolishes inequality, inhumanity, and discrimination against women (Orakzai, 2014; Patoari, 2019; Syed, 2008; Wadud, 1999). The *Qur'an* recognizes gender differences and assigns distinct roles and responsibilities to each gender, not for discrimination but in acknowledgment of their unique attributes, emphasizing that men's role is to protect rather than oppress women (Wadud, 1999). Thus, the misconception that 'Islam oppresses women' overlooks the diversity within Muslim communities, Muslim women's diverse narratives, and the *Qur'an*'s advocacy for equality and shared responsibilities.

The second misconception regarding Islam and women's rights in Western discourse is that 'Muslim women are passive victims,' requiring liberation. This

misconception assumes that Muslim women are universally oppressed and do not have abilities to make effective choices for desired outcomes. As mentioned, based on the above idea of Muslim women, the IC aid actors have promoted respect for women's rights and empowerment in post-9/11 peacebuilding. However, the following arguments demonstrate that the above perspective for Muslim women underestimates the diversity of Muslim women's experiences and their agency in shaping their lives and advocating for their rights. For example, the idea that women are victims and should be protected tends to simplify the complex socio-cultural dynamics within Muslim-majority societies and neglects the agency and resilience of Muslim women in advocating for their rights (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Moghadam, 1997; Moghissi, 2006).

In this regard, Islamic feminist perspectives challenge the notion of Muslim women as passive victims and emphasize their agency, resilience, and contributions to society, while Western liberal feminists often advocate for a universal application of gender equality without substantial contextual adjustments, potentially overlooking cultural and societal nuances (Barlas, 2002; Tong, 2009; Pratt, 2013). Islamic feminists emphasize the principles of justice, equality, and dignity within Islamic texts like the *Qur'an* and *Hadith*, advocating for a contextually nuanced approach to gender equality and women's rights (Ahmed, 2012; Barlas, 2002). They challenge patriarchal interpretations and practices within their communities, emphasizing the diverse and active Muslim women's roles (Badran, 2009). Mahmood (2005) further illuminates the nuanced ways in which Muslim women actively engage with and negotiate their identities, rights, and expressions within their cultural and religious frameworks. Hence, Islamic feminists acknowledge that Afghan women are not merely passive victims but active agents whose lives, choices, and identities are shaped not just by external influences but also by their faith, cultural norms, and individual aspirations (Ahmed, 1992; Mahmood, 2005). Therefore, the narrative of 'Muslim women as passive victims' is a misconception because it narrowly focuses on 'saving' Afghan women and fails to engage with their diverse efforts in various fields, including education, politics, and social activism.

V. From Misconceptions to Multifaceted Understandings: Analyzing Women's Rights in the post-9/11 Afghan Context

Having analyzed misconceptions in Western discourses that 'Islam oppresses women' and 'Muslim women are passive victims' requiring liberation, this section explores to what extent these misconceptions, grounded in Orientalist and Western liberal feminist perspectives, have influenced the war on terror and post-9/11 peacebuilding efforts in Afghanistan.

Firstly, the IC aid actors, primarily the U.S. and its allies, exploited these misconceptions to legitimize the post-9/11 Afghanistan invasion. Specifically, the Bush administration prominently utilized the rhetoric of 'Islam oppresses women' and 'Muslim women as passive victims' to rally public support and ratify the war on terror (USDD, 2002; USDD, 2006b; USDS, 2001). This exploitation reinforced the moral imperative behind the war on terror, presenting it as a noble cause against Afghanistan's perceived oppression. Hence, the IC aid actors promoted the war on terror as a moral prerogative, and this perspective also encouraged to justify the IC aid actors' post-9/11 military invasion against Afghanistan. The narrative was augmented by the belief that radical Islamic terrorism stemmed from an absence of democracy, the prevalence of authoritarianism, and the lack of freedom in the Islamic world (USDD, 2002; USDD, 2006b; USDS, 2001).

Consequently, the condition of Afghan women was appropriated as emblematic of broader issues, prompting IC aid actors to embark on a mission to 'liberate' them. Afghan women's condition was embedded within a liberal peacebuilding template, characterized by the promotion of democracy, human rights, and a market economy, serving as a linchpin for the IC aid actors to justify the war on terror and post-9/11 peacebuilding under the banner of women's freedom (Kandiyoti, 2005; Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003). The IC aid actors, operating within the war on terror framework, couched their intervention in the narrative of protecting and liberating oppressed Muslim women. This logic integrated Afghan women's rights into the broader justification for military and diplomatic actions in Afghanistan.

In this regard, Western liberal feminists argue that the U.S. and its allies

exploited gender mainstreaming and NAPWA to advance post-9/11 peacebuilding and their self-interests, such as the war on terror, using the empowerment of Afghan women as a front to bolster counter-terrorism in post-9/11 efforts (Otto, 2006; Pratt, 2013). Based on secular and rights-based approaches, Western liberal feminists focus on achieving gender equality by challenging and altering existing political, social, and economic systems (Tong, 2009; Weldon, 2006).

In contrast, Islamic feminists contend for a more nuanced and multifaceted understanding of Islam, highlighting interpretations that acknowledge and uphold women's rights and agency (Ahmed, 1992; Mir-Hosseini, 1999). Islamic feminists argue for women's rights within the framework of Islam, asserting that the religion, when correctly understood and interpreted, advocates for gender equality and justice (Barlas, 2002). This argument starkly contrasts the Western liberal feminist perspective that often perceives Islam through a monolithic lens, neglecting Muslim societies' heterogeneous interpretations and practices (Hirschkind & Mahmood, 2002).

Secondly, these misconceptions underscored a binary perspective in post-9/11 peacebuilding, casting the IC aid actors as 'liberators' and Muslim societies as 'oppressors.' The IC aid actors' approach to 'saving' Afghan women was based on this dichotomy, leading to stereotypes that rendered Afghan women as mere victims, sidelined in peacebuilding initiatives. As seen in the NAPWA, a top-down strategy based on Western-centric approaches was adopted that focused on promoting gender mainstreaming, introducing concepts of women's rights and gender equality, rather than a bottom-up policy that focused on the status and needs of Afghan women. This approach witnessed the promotion of a top-down strategy, emphasizing Western-centric gender mainstreaming at the expense of grassroots policies tailored to Afghan women's unique experiences and needs.

What has to be noticed is that these misconceptions are rooted in Orientalist narratives and aspects of Western liberal feminism. Said (1978) delineated the complex strategies and practices employed by colonial powers to define and 'construct' the 'Orient.' Influenced by ideas in Foucault (1977) about the inseparable ties between power and knowledge, Said (1978) contended that

'Orientalism' is a discourse where the West deliberately crafts depictions of the Orient to consolidate its control and superiority. According to Said (1978), these portrayals are not 'real' reflections of Oriental societies but are 'constructed narratives,' deliberately framed to subjugate and render the Orient as the 'other' under Western dominance.

In this regard, the Orientalist narratives sometimes essentialize Muslim societies and cultures, promoting a binary framework of 'liberation' versus 'oppression' and reinforcing a hierarchical dynamic between Western powers and Muslim societies (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Moghadam, 1997; Said, 1978). Western liberal feminism often adopts a universalized approach, assuming the universality of women's experiences and overlooking the cultural, social, and political contexts that shape these experiences differently across various regions and societies (Alexander & Mohanty, 1997; Marhia, 2013; Spivak, 1988). In this context, Islamic feminists challenge the above binary narratives and acknowledge that Afghan women are not merely passive victims but active agents whose lives, choices, and identities are shaped not just by external influences but also by their faith, cultural norms, and agency (Mahmood, 2005). Thus, the binary perspectives converge to create a simplified, homogenized representation of Muslim women, obscuring the rich diversity and complexity of their experiences and aspirations across varied cultural and socio-political landscapes (Mohanty, 1988).

These above points lead to the third point: the binary narrative of 'Western vs. Islamic' and 'oppressed vs. liberated' not only oversimplifies Afghan women's multifaceted identities and experiences but also perpetuates stereotypes, reinforcing Western superiority narratives and undermining Muslim women's agency and resilience. In this regard, recent studies emphasize the necessity of more nuanced perspectives that move beyond such binary viewpoints (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Narayan, 1997). For example, Narayan (1997) criticizes monolithic representations of non-Western women, asserting that these simplified depictions undermine the complex social, cultural, and political contexts that shape individual identities and experiences. Similarly, Abu-Lughod (2013) challenges the Western savior narrative, advocating for recognizing Muslim women's agency and

multifaceted experiences shaped by factors like class, ethnicity, and geography. Therefore, the convergence of Orientalist and Western liberal feminist views can lead to a stereotyped portrayal of Muslim women, overlooking the depth of their lived experiences and societal roles.

In this respect, the idea of 'intersectionality' emerges to explore the compounded effects of multiple intersecting identities (Crenshaw, 1989). Whereas the above-nuanced perspectives by Narayan (1997) and Abu-Lughod (2013) focus on the diversity and complexity of experiences, intersectionality, rooted in Crenshaw (1989), delves into how various identities and social categorizations interconnect to influence individuals' specific experiences of privilege or oppression. In other words, while both approaches seek to transcend binary narratives, intersectionality provides a concrete analytical framework to explore the compounded effects of multiple intersecting identities. It is not just about acknowledging diversity but dissecting how elements like gender, ethnicity, class, and religion intertwine and mutually construct one another to shape individual and collective experiences in specific socio-political contexts.

Intersectionality as a framework to amalgamate the strength of both Western liberal feminism and Islamic feminism, offering a more comprehensive understanding of women's experiences, particularly in places with complex socio-political landscapes like Afghanistan (Crenshaw, 1989; Nussbaum, 2000). For example, Pashtun and Hazara women in Afghanistan face distinct challenges due to the complex combination of gender, ethnicity, socio-economic dynamics, and religious beliefs. While Western liberal feminism may emphasize gender rights and Islamic feminism focuses on rights within religious contexts, intersectionality captures how gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and religion collectively shape their experiences. Therefore, the above-nuanced perspectives and the idea of intersectionality collectively challenge binary narratives, offering a more sophisticated lens that recognizes the intricate interplay of factors shaping various experiences of Afghan women in their specific socio-political and cultural contexts.

VI. Conclusion

This paper critically examined the influence of Western misconceptions about Islam and women's rights on the war on terror and post-9/11 peacebuilding efforts in Afghanistan. It illuminated how binary perspectives, notably misconceptions that 'Islam oppresses women' and 'Muslim women are passive victims' requiring liberation, rooted in Orientalist and Western liberal feminist lenses, played a pivotal role in framing the war on terror and subsequent peacebuilding efforts in Afghanistan. Such binary perspectives not only served as justifications for the post-9/11 intervention in Afghanistan but also oversimplified the multi-dimensional realities of Muslim societies, casting the West as the 'savior' and Muslim societies as inherently oppressive. In this regard, Western liberal feminists often fall into the trap of universalizing women's experiences, overlooking cultural intricacies. In contrast, Islamic feminists offer a more nuanced lens, emphasizing the diversity of women's experiences rooted in Islamic teaching.

This paper asserts that the above binary narratives of Western discourses on Islam and women's rights often fail to encapsulate Afghan women's multifaceted experiences and aspirations. It is important to move beyond binary narratives, not to deny the harsh realities faced by Afghan women but to present a more nuanced, empirical representation of their lives. In this regard, this paper asserts that the concept of 'intersectionality' illuminates the multifaceted identities of Afghan women, offering a more comprehensive understanding of their diverse experiences, especially in the complex socio-political landscapes of Afghanistan. Moreover, intersectionality has the potential to act as a bridge between the above different feminist ideologies, emphasizing that the pursuit of women's rights is not a singular or linear path but a multifaceted journey reflecting the diverse experiences of the women it seeks to empower.

In conclusion, despite the clear challenges Afghan women face, particularly under regimes like the Taliban, it is vital to move beyond binary narratives. This study advocates for a multi-dimensional understanding of Afghan women's identities and experiences. The intersectional approach highlights the importance of nuanced perspectives, challenging stereotypes, and revealing the intricate

realities of women's lives in Afghanistan.

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