



Framing the Subaltern: Humanitarian Violence in Liz Mermin's documentary *The Beauty Academy of Kabul*

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Abstract

This paper examines how the encounter between the “First World American women” and “Third world Afghan women” is framed to inadvertently enact a form of representational violence in Liz Mermin’s documentary film, *The Beauty Academy of Kabul*. The paper shows that despite its ostensibly progressive stance of giving space to Afghan women’s voice, the film, serves to validate the new form the colonial self has taken in the globalized world - the humanitarian identity - and reaffirms the American imperial agenda. Employing Judith Butler’s insights in *Frames of War*, where she points out how the frame delimits the domain of representability and the confines of “reality” itself, the analysis explores how Mermin’s documentary frames the Afghan women as the first world audience is meant to recognize, grieve and intervene for..

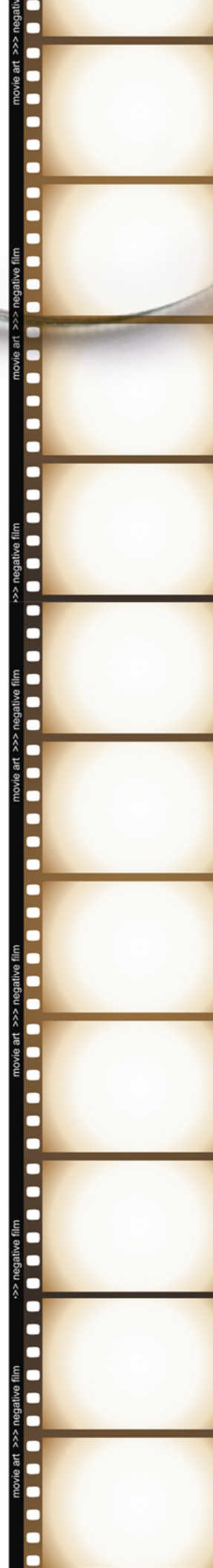
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Framing the Subaltern: Humanitarian Violence in Liz Mermin's documentary *The Beauty Academy of Kabul*

Deepthi Siriwardena

Introduction

Delivering her weekly address as the First Lady in November 2001, just few months after the 9/11 attacks, Laura Bush declares, “Because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes. They can listen to music and teach their daughters without fear of punishment...The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women”.¹ One of the most (in)famous declarations on America’s War Against Terror, Bush’s claims rationalizes the Afghan war as a goodwill endeavor of democratic America with a mission of preserving and protecting the rights and dignity of the unfortunate women in a nation that has robbed them not only of rights and dignity but of the most basic freedom. The Afghan War is therefore a moral responsibility of anyone who accepts the “common humanity” of everyone living in all continents. The voices or views of the Afghan women do not figure into Bush’s confident assertion of their imprisonment and need for liberation. Laura Bush’s observations demonstrate how in official state positions and even in media coverage, interest in the Third World subaltern is evoked in the form of humanitarian attention to rights and freedoms in order to justify military invasion and ongoing intervention.

While Laura Bush’s words represent the official state rationale for the war on terror, the London based *independent* filmmaker from New York, Liz Mermin’s documentary, *The Beauty Academy of Kabul*, released in 2004, closes the distance between the American and Afghan women as it actually ventures into this “misogynistic” land to meet and talk with the newly freed Afghan women. The film follows a group of American women who opens a school in Kabul for aspiring

hairdressers and beauticians in post-Taliban Afghanistan. This venture was administered by the nongovernmental organization (NGO), Beauty Without Borders, and was funded and supported by American and European fashion industry heavyweights such as Vogue's editor-in-chief Anna Wintour.² The volunteer faculty comprised of American beauticians, Afghan born and otherwise. As Nguyen finds, "the name Beauty without Borders also suggests that within a global human rights regime, beauty circulates as a universal good, a form of healing."³ The humanitarian impulse which, in Bush's words, justifies America's War Against Terror in Afghanistan, finds resonance in the act of opening a beauty academy in the newly "freed" land of Afghanistan because these American women are motivated by a desire to help the newly liberated Afghan women. How does Mermin's documentary present this encounter between the First World and the Third World women? To what extent does Mermin's cinematic representation endeavor to capture the agency of the subaltern? In other words, how far does Mermin's documentary trouble the hegemonic understanding of the "Third World woman" and challenge the official rationale for the War on Terror?

The documentary film - the genre that Mermin has chosen which is a popular genre for ethnographic cinematic representations - can be simply defined as, "a movie about real life".⁴ Elucidating her claim she observes that the documentary consist of, "portraits of real life, using real life as their raw material, constructed by artists and technicians who make myriad decisions about what story to tell to whom, and for what purpose."⁵ Robert Flaherty defines the genre as the, "artistic representation of actuality."⁶ Two central ideas emerge from these definitions of the documentary film. First, is the idea that the documentary film's claims to representing facticity/actuality or the "Real". Second, is the idea of its simultaneous fictitiousness - as conveyed through Aufderheide's notion of it being a *construct* of an artist and Flaherty's idea of it being an *artistic* or a *created* representation of reality - which paradoxically troubles its claims to facticity

and actuality. Indeed, despite its claims of differing from other films through its investment with representing actuality, the inevitable process of the selection of topic, editing, mixing and sound which goes into the production of the film, makes it not a representation of the ever elusive “Real” but merely a version of the “real”; or, an *effect* of the “real”. Because the documentary film, with its claims to facticity, presents its version of the “real” as *the Real*, its critical appreciation requires the interpretation and evaluation of the effects created through its formal techniques of selection, editing and mixing to understand what ideologies subtends its version of the “real.” Thus, how does Mermin manipulate the conventions of the documentary film in her presentation of the Afghan women? Through her manipulations of cinematic conventions, what version of the “real” does she create in regard to the Afghan women?

Indeed, the documentary film has been a popular genre with directors interested in critiquing America’s so-called “War Against Terror”. In fact, in their critical study of post 9/11 documentaries, Joe Parker and Rebekah Sinclair observe that:

Post 9/11 documentaries that appear to oppose the World War Without End rely on liberal beliefs on rights and freedoms in order to formulate explicit and implicit political criticisms of the war. In this way the documentaries are agreeing with the claims of those they are said to oppose: such nation states as the United States and Britain who have justified the intervention by the same humanitarian terms. This agreement is seen when documentaries show the violation of constitutional or international law and human rights in Afghanistan as in *Taxi to the Dark Side* (2010) or in the US, as in Sree Nallamothe’s *Patriot Acts* (2004).⁷

Moreover, in addition to the documentary’s (in)advertent collusion with the state agenda, Parker and Sinclair also observe that these films often engage in a problematic rendition of the subaltern. For example, in *Taxi to the Dark Side* for example, “the subject matter is limited almost exclusively

to the agency of educated men.”⁸ However, more problematically, the film fails to recognize the subtle resistance of the subaltern. For instance, they point out the instance in the film when a woman interrogator makes a passing remark about the taxi driver’s wife visiting him in prison. Parker and Sinclair observe that this is the only “representation of a rural, possibly unlettered farming woman in the film.”⁹ They argue that this “ghostly contradictory appearance of the Afghan woman” in the film is significant because, on one hand, it “brings into clarity the gendered tilt not only of the prison population at Bagram air base and in the documentary” but on the other hand it is indicative of how, “unlike the male driver the women in the same village are likely cases of those outside the circuits of capitalism who rarely benefit in any concrete way from national wars of liberation or so called modern development.”¹⁰ They thus point out that the complete absence of these women from the film is, “one index of how such rural Afghan and Iraqi women are effaced from the stories that documentarians tell us about the WWWE.”¹¹

If *Taxi to the Dark Side* is, “relentlessly masculinized”¹², Mermin’s *The Beauty Academy of Kabul* is just as relentlessly feminized. Instead of pushing women into the margins or of speaking for them from a distant and safe vantage point, Mermin’s documentary focuses fully on the Afghan women in their own local milieu. To what effect and with what cost is the centering of the women achieved? Does this centering challenge or reaffirm imperial agendas? Even a casual watching of the film is suffice to realize that women form the center of Mermin’s film while the men are deliberately pushed into the background. Indeed, male voices are hardly heard in the film and on the few occasions when their voices are heard (i.e: Hanifa’s salon) it is only to reaffirm the US state agenda by condemning the Soviet and the Taliban as the destroyers of Afghan life. Throughout much of the film, the men hover in the margins of the film, seen primarily in the establishing shots which set the locale. They are thus shown merely as part of the background while the camera focuses fully on women.

In contrast to the men, the women are primarily shown in medium shots and close ups shot in eye-level, low angle and over the shoulder angles - shot sizes and angles that are have the effect of attributing a dominant position to the subject, highlighting the nuances of her emotions and reactions. Moreover, the film fully accommodates the voices of these women as it allows them to speak for themselves and narrate their own stories in their own language without attempting to suppress their voices by providing a voice over in English. In thus allowing the women to speak without having a third person narrative voice tying up the threads of the story, Mermin dispenses with the “sonorous voice-of-God narration” typically found in documentaries. The Afghan women thus appear to represent themselves. Moreover, as the women speak in their own language, the audience is forced to understand what the women are saying by reading the subtitles. In making this choice of subtitles over voice over, Mermin prioritizes the voice of the Afghan women over pandering to the convenience of her primarily First World audience. This foregrounding of the Afghan women and their voices is most apparent in the four insert shots where four Kabul women narrate their stories about their life, salon work, and survival in their own language. Interspersed throughout the film and interrupting the linear narrative of the women’s training at the beauty academy, these insert shots are introduced to the film as a dramatic means of highlighting the voice, the spirit, and resilience of the women of Kabul. They comprise almost entirely of close ups, medium-close ups and medium shots that are taken from eye level and low angle positions serving to foreground the women and their narratives.

Through the representation of women Mermin strives to debunk many of the stereotypes associated with Afghan women. For instance, none of the women who narrate their stories and study in the beauty academy are veiled. In addition, Mermin inserts several scenes which are explicitly targeted to undercut the stereotype of Afghan women as silent, meek and submissive by presenting them

as inquisitive, questioning and even challenging of authority. The first and one of the most poignant of these scenes occur when an Afghan woman, on the very opening day of the beauty academy stands up before the crowd and questions the American women's motives for coming to Afghanistan and opening a beauty academy. Moreover, they are shown as challenging authority when a group of Afghan women refuses to heed to the American teacher Debbie's insistence on the necessity of using make-up every day. Boldly talking back to the loud and aggressive Debbie, they declare, "we don't use makeup every day because it is harmful to our skin." The Afghan women come across as inquisitive, assertive, and articulate. Their representation and voice debunk the long-held stereotypes that have grown trite with the passing of time, creating the impression that the film is indeed offering the hitherto unseen and unknown "real" life of the Afghan women. Yet, the extent to which these women's speech can carry subversive/resistant potential is a point that this paper tackles in its latter part.

Apart from the aforementioned insert shots that directly focuses on a particular woman and her story, Mermin attempts to bring the hitherto effaced Kabul women into the forefront throughout the film. In fact, throughout the documentary, the women are seen speaking directly to the camera, talking with one another, laughing, smiling, and working. In striking contrast, the men, often with skeptical or disapproving faces, are presented as skulking in the background. It must be noted, however, that women's merriment and freedom are primarily confined to the space inside the beauty academy. Possibilities of their life outside are only glimpsed as in the instance when the American women visit one of their former successful students at her home. Shot in close ups, medium shots in eye level and low angle shots, primary focus is given to her and her voice in this scene as she airs her views and talks glibly with her American teachers. However, since she talks in the presence of the American teachers, even here, she appears to be under the influence of the beauty academy although not literally in its environs. The life that is completely outside the space

and influence of the beauty academy can only be inferred from the establishing shots which provide glimpses of burqa clad women who pass hurriedly by in the busy streets where men casually loiter.

Advertently or inadvertently, the film thus establishes a contrast between the world inside and outside the beauty academy. - the world inside is free and happy while the outside world appears discomfiting. Mermin's representation of the Afghan women as happy and merrily engaged in their work with their American counterparts in the milieu of the beauty academy, has the effect of portraying the beauty academy as an oasis of feminist solidarity, freedom, and happiness. This effect is further heightened when contrasted with the aforementioned establishing shots that sets the cinematic backdrop where unnamed burqa clad women walk by and groups of men - often armed - hover on the fringes of the beauty academy gates as well as on the sidewalks, and street corners of the city, their silent but watchful observation creating the disconcerting air of a suppressed but not fully vanquished threat to the women's freedom. If the silently observing men pose an implicit threat to the women's liberation, - indeed, the film does not indicate whether their silent curiosity is benign or malevolent but leaves it as disconcertingly open ended - the idea that continued American humanitarian interventions - the creation of nurturing oases such as the beauty academy where women can gain education and confidence - are necessary, becomes an oblique suggestion of the film.

It must be noted that the seemingly apolitical humanitarian projects have a long and troubling colonial history, dating back to the missionary endeavors that attempted to bring "light of civilization to the dark corners of the earth". Highlighting the imperial agendas subtending humanitarian endeavors, Jennifer Hyndman finds that, "humanitarian work functions at times as a colonialism of compassion."¹³ As scholars have noted, humanitarianism is founded on a premise

of morality (Wilson & Brown 2009; Fassin, 2012). However, this very moral premise is problematic as it leads to the creation of complicated relations. In other words, due to the hierarchical relationship between the giver and receiver of assistance, humanitarianism bolsters the us/them binary and thus inevitably lapses into mirroring colonial relations, downplaying the political agency of their beneficiaries. As Wilson and Brown note, "because beneficiaries of humanitarian aid are more likely to appear as passive recipients, critics have asserted that humanitarianism may, in its quest to be seen as "apolitical", draw attention away from the political reasons for victimization, disempower individuals, and strip them of agency."¹⁴

Mermin's representation of the Third World Afghan women in *The Beauty Academy of Kabul* recalls a similar historical moment in the nineteenth century which Gayatri Spivak evokes in her essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", when the British in India felt that they must protect and liberate the Indian women from the tradition of sati or the immolation of the upper caste widows. In both cases, a dominant world power legitimizes its intervention into the affairs of a Third World country by arguing that outsiders must protect the Third world women from the barbarities of their own countrymen. In "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Spivak coins the phrase, "white men saving brown women from brown men"¹⁵ to describe the British abolition of sati in 19th century India. In fact, as Miriam Cooke notes, the saving of women or the rescue paradigm became the "*ius ad bellum* driving the civilizing mission in South Asia"¹⁶. Set against this background, it appears that *The Beauty Academy of Kabul* too operates on a similar imperial rescue paradigm; in this case, *white women* saving brown women from brown men.

Providing further insight into how this imperial logic subtending humanitarian projects operates, Cooke observes that, "imperial logic genders and separates subject people so that men are the Other and the women are civilizable"¹⁷. In centering women at the expense of relegating the men into the margins, in an effort at apparently turning the tables of representation, *The Beauty*

Academy of Kabul conforms to this imperial logic. That this is not an unfortunate mistake of trying to flip the narrative, but the film actually supports this imperial logic of framing the women as civilizable and the men as the intractable other, I believe, is evident in the film's sustained investment in presenting the men's attitudes as deeply ambiguous, veering more towards suspicion rather than support of the women's endeavors - an attitude that the Afghan women confirm at the very opening of the film with one woman remarking, "Our men have backward mentalities. I didn't tell him I was coming here." Although other women in the background are heard murmuring in hushed tones, "Don't say that...Don't say that", the film places explicit emphasis on the woman's condemnation about the Afghan men's backwardness. The contradictory voices receive no further pursuit; they occur as background noise and merely fade into the background.

However, the idea of men's backwardness embedded in its opening, resonates throughout the documentary with numerous women on numerous occasions confirming this view. For instance, one woman in the salon confides to her Afghan-American teacher that she has to deal with an "aggressive" husband upon returning home; Palwasha declares that if she ventures out in the evening, the boys will beat her and an Afghan woman (Sima) answering her American colleague's (Sheila's) exasperated question of why the women appear to be so fearful of their husbands, explains, "if a woman does not obey her husband, she'll be thought a whore". Moreover, when speaking about themselves, several women say that they are not allowed to go out but are only allowed to open salons in a small room in their house. Although this may be the case for some women, is it the plight of all? In fact, Fauzia's salon that is depicted in the very first insert shot, appears to be located in a shop on the sidewalk outside the home. The audience gets to know that she has a husband, but never get to hear how she came to work in a salon that appears to be located outside the house. On another occasion, Hanifa declares that "My husband is strict. I have to work

at home”. The unspoken element of this remark implies that there may be husbands who are *not* strict, but this is a thread that the documentary does not pick up and pursue.

In *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* Judith Butler examines how modern warfare represents certain lives as more or less worthy of grieving and underscores that grievability emerges through a process of “framing”. Building her analysis, Butler claims that a life is apprehended as a life through the norms that qualifies it as a life. Thus, subjects are constituted through norms, and shifts in norms affects which subjects are recognized as worthy and which are not. The norms that are “determined by the question of when and where a life is grievable”¹⁸ therefore furnish the “frames” through which life is apprehended or recognized. The frames contain, convey, and determine what is seen. Thus, it is these frames that implicitly guide interpretation:

The frame functions not only as boundary to the image, but as structuring the image itself. If the image in turn structures how we register reality, then it is bound up in the interpretive scene in which we operate. The question for war photography [visual media] thus concerns not only what it shows but also how it shows what it shows. The “how” not only organizes the image but works to organize our perception and thinking as well.¹⁹

However, despite the power of norms to determine the recognition of life, Butler asserts that, “it would be a mistake to understand the operation of norms as deterministic” because, “normative schemes are interrupted by one another, they emerge and fade depending on the broader operations of power.”²⁰ Depending on one’s critical outlook that enables one to grasp the operations of power, frames can therefore be called into question. Butler points out that, “to call the frame into question is to show that the frame never quite contained the scene it was meant to limn, that something was already outside, which made the very sense of the inside possible,

recognizable...something exceeds the frame that troubles our sense of reality.”²¹ In relating these operations of frames to the responsibilities of visual culture, Butler asserts:

To learn to see the frame that blinds us to what we see is no easy matter. And if there is a critical role for visual culture during times of war it is precisely *to thematize the forcible frame*, the one that conducts the dehumanizing norm, that restricts what is perceivable, and indeed, what can be. Although restriction is necessary for focus, and there is no seeing without selection, this restriction we have been asked to live with imposes constraints on what can be heard, read, seen felt and known and so works to undermine both a sensate understanding of war, and the conditions for a sensate opposition to war.²² (emphasis added)

Butler’s observations, while asserting the power of norms/frames in determining life itself, simultaneously demonstrates how the visual culture could function as an agent of the war-mongering status quo *or* be its critic by either contesting or affirming the norms through which lives are apprehended and recognized in the manner it frames its subject matter. The medium of film, through its camera work, scene selection, editing and composition, engages in a dynamic and overt framing of its subject matter. Considering the significance of Butler’s observations to understanding the dynamics of visual culture in times of war, it becomes pertinent to examine Mermin’s renditions in *The Beauty of Academy of Kabul* in light of Butler’s insights.

From its very opening sequence, the film engages in a very careful framing of the Afghan women’s lives that is calculated to elicit a sympathetic response from Mermin’s First World audience. At the very beginning of the film, she employs a montage of 1970s Afghanistan with explicit focus on women. This montage, created with fast-paced editing, shows women in Kabul attending fashion shows, sitting together in the same room with men, dancing and smoking while dressed in the western fashions of the day. The fast-paced editing and the ambient music that accompanies

this montage contains a sense of dynamism and vitality, creating an impression of a life lived in comfort and ease. Occurring just after the opening scene where the woman insists that Afghan men have backward mentalities, this montage is obviously meant as a means of highlighting the contrast between the lives of the Afghan women then and now. The contrast that is made is obvious - it is one of modernity and pre-modernity: *then*, the Afghan women lived modern lives like western women; *now*, they have gone back in time to an era of pre-modernity as the Afghan men, influenced by the Taliban ideals, espouse “backward mentalities”. The response elicited through this sequence is sympathy through relation and loss. In other words, the film demonstrates the plight of the present-day Afghan women - a plight of such dire abjection where women are so discriminated that they are compelled to hide the use of cosmetics from men. This is a state of being so abnormal to many American women, compelling them to view the Afghan women as the alien other. However, the montage that occurs right after this opening scene, *relates* the Afghan women to western women and western modernity that existed in Afghanistan at some not-too-distant point in the past. The Afghan women, the film suggests, are not very different from the western women, and if they were such in the recent past, then they can be, even desire to be, like western women again. The effect thus elicited on the part of the first world audience is a sense of sympathy for the “loss” [of modernity] their Afghan “sisters” have undergone. It is this sense of profound loss of an erstwhile era’s freedom and modernity that frames the lives of these Afghan women as grievable. In so doing, the film creates them as subjects/lives worthy of recognition, investigation and intervention.

As this Butlerian analysis suggests, the lives of the Kabul women are rendered valuable and worthy by first being presented as “normal” and “modern” according to western schemas of normalcy and modernity. This idea of the erstwhile modernity of the Afghan women serves to establish a sense of an implicit sisterhood between them and the American women. The film relies

heavily on this sense of sisterhood as its driving force - it operates on the logic of the privileged first world sister lending a helping hand to her poor, battered, third world sister to find her lost modernity. This idea is explicitly brought forth in the moment when the American teacher, Sima, embracing the Afghan students declares, “I feel like you are my sisters. We are like family”.

Despite the heartwarming effects that depictions of sisterhood elicit, feminist scholars have insisted that it needs to be critically appraised. In *Feminism Without Borders* Chandra Talpade Mohanty problematizes the type of sisterhood - the kind of connection based on the notion of a fundamental shared commonality [in terms of gender, oppression, aspirations, interests] - that texts such as *The Beauty Academy of Kabul* rely on. She asserts that such a stance does not sufficiently account for the differences/particulars of different women’s contexts. Although sisterhood conveys a sense of affection, in Mohanty’s view, it is problematic because it does not necessarily herald, “praxis-oriented, active political struggle”²³ that intelligently acknowledge and respect diversity and difference in building alliances. She points out that uncritical cross-cultural analysis/representations through western feminist methodologies that are not sufficiently reflective of the power dynamics of a world dominated by the West, have led to troubling conceptions of “Third World difference”. For instance:

... a homogeneous notion of the oppression of women as a group is assumed, which, in turn, produces the image of an “average Third World woman”. This average Third World woman lead an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being “Third World” (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-based, domestic, family-oriented, victimized etc.). This, I suggest, is in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of Western women as educated, as modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities and the freedom to make their own decisions.²⁴

Mohanty's insight becomes apparent in the unfolding of Mermin's documentary. Indeed, the film presents the Afghan women precisely in the image of "the average Third World woman" that Mohanty identifies and the American women as its desirable opposite. All the Afghan women who appear in the film are family-oriented and appear to be victimized by strict husbands/patriarchs who curtail the freedom of their movements. The American women, in contrast, are represented as free and independent. The film captures how they go about organizing the opening of the beauty academy, calling various agents in different countries as they attempt to negotiate the arrival of the supplies in Kabul. Such scenes highlight their entrepreneurship, their mobility, their access to transnational networks of capital and establish them as the epitomes of modern, independent, capable women.

The framing of cross-cultural interactions amongst women is a representational terrain that is highly vexed. As an alternative to sisterhood that most cross-cultural representations opt into, Mohanty proposes the idea of a "reflective solidarity" which is, "crafted by an interaction involving three persons: "I ask you to stand by me over and against a third. This involves thematizing the third voice to reconstruct solidarity as an inclusive idea rather than an us vs them notion."²⁵ Reflective solidarity thus entails the creation of a sense of solidarity through critical thinking and dialogue that is cognizant of the differences/particulars in different women's contexts. It is this critical reflection and dialogue that is absent in the interaction between the Afghan and American women in Mermin's film. Although the Afghan women speak and the American women listen to them and praise their spirit and resilience, their speech merely reconfirms the First World's extant biases regarding the abject plight of the homogeneous Third World women. The Afghan women's speech triggers no resonance on the part of the American women, eliciting a critical reflection about women's condition under American patriarchy that could provide an understanding the diverse nuances of patriarchal oppression and provide a sound basis for building

informed and intelligent alliances. In fact, Mermin herself acknowledges that she knew little about Afghanistan and that the American hairdressers did not read anything about Afghanistan before their arrival in Kabul.²⁶ This demonstrates that critical dialogue was never thought of as subtending the alliance they sought to bring about through the beauty academy; nor was it a particular concern of the filmmaker. The academy was not envisioned as a space for cross-cultural dialogue and exchange but as a venture that facilitated the traditional, imperial flow of modernity from West to the East. Since Mermin does not include any instance of women attempting the kind of solidarity-building reflection that Mohanty writes about, Mermin upholds and perpetuates the imperialist vision of the academy. The documentary thus does not trouble the imperial divide.

Mermin's framing of the Afghan women as "the average Third World women"²⁷ and victims of a lost/stolen modernity, serve to confirm the identities of these disenfranchised women into frames of humanitarian intelligibility that substantiates US imperial ventures as a mission for global democracy. Thus, the documentary, "circumscribe difference within a particular domain of representability, one to which all forms of subjectivity must sooner or later be referred to for their validation and legibility."²⁸ In other words, the first world audience can recognize the lives of the Afghan women only because they are "depicted through an ontology of a generalized, global human subject constituted through an assumed narrative of suffering and coercion."²⁹

As Butler explicates, the frame is active and interpretive, resulting in "a viewer who assumes him/herself to be in immediate visual relation to reality."³⁰ The frame delimits the domain of representability and the confines of "reality" itself. However, she notes that "the frame never quite contained the [entirety of the] scene it was meant to limn."³¹ In other words, the representation has its constitutive outside which makes, "the very sense of the inside possible, recognizable."³² This constitutive outside of the frame forms the domain of the subalterns - the unrepresentable and

the unrecognizable - because they do not fall within the confines of the representability/ “the Real”. Mermin’s documentary frames the group of docile, capitalist, Kabul based women as the “Afghan women”/ “the women of Kabul” - the lives/the subjects the First World audience is meant to recognize, grieve, and intervene for. This process, helped by the genre’s claims to factuality, constitute for this audience, the “reality” of Afghanistan itself. In this framing, the women’s expulsion from capitalist production is a tragedy that must be grieved for. Their sole wish is the restoration into the circuits of capitalist production which according to this logic is the hallmark of modernity and liberation. As aforementioned, the “voice-of-God narration” where the director attempts explicitly to represent her subjects may be absent in this film, but one must not forget the presence of the Godlike director behind the camera, implicitly framing the conditions of possibility for the subjects’ speech and self-representation. Thus, although the women speak and the film ostensibly strives to accommodate their voice, the humanitarian frame determines the voices of the women. In other words, the framing delimits what the women can say and consequently, arbitrates what voices are heard/considered “real”. It must be noted that the film’s humanitarian framing does not provide the space for rejecting the imperial ethico-politics of the US and occludes the possibility for the women to articulate the violence done to them in terms other than by those offered by the generalized liberal ontology of the US imperial power. This serves to validate the new form the colonial self has taken in the globalized world - the humanitarian identity - and reaffirms the American imperial agenda of the American nation state as an exceptional and benevolent empire.

It must be remembered that outside this frame lie those who are excluded from the circuits of global capital such as rural Afghan women who are usually erased from orthodox national and world histories as well as narratives of progress and modernity. In this “outside” is also included Afghan feminist activists such as RAWA (Revolutionary Association of the Women of

Afghanistan) who have been fighting for Afghan women's rights and liberties from 1970s to the present despite much persecution, lack of resources and appreciation.³³ Indeed, as Cooke notes, "these women's resilience and activism are little acknowledged both home and abroad."³⁴ In fact, even though Mermin's film speaks appreciatively about the Afghan women's *resilience* in the face of war on several occasions (i.e: Terry claiming that she came to Afghanistan because she was "so inspired" by the Afghan women's "resilience"), the film makes no mention of the Afghan women's *activism*. Indeed, while the idea of resilience that is tied up with endurance - a quality traditionally associated with women - falls within the frame, the idea of an *Afghan activism* falls outside this humanitarian frame of intelligibility determined by the imperial status quo. In her study of Muslim women's activism, Cooke debunks the myth of Muslim as passive victims in a patriarchal society structured by a misogynistic religion by tracing the Muslim women's activism as warriors and fighters who fought for their salvation (i.e: *the soeurs mujahidates*) from pre-Crusade times. However, in Mermin's opening montage which captures the dynamic, liberated lives of the Afghan women during the pre-Soviet and pre-Taliban era, this form of activism - a form which does not fall within western frames of feminist intelligibility of conceptualizing Muslim women - is notably absent. Mermin's documentary, therefore, does not trouble the frames of intelligibility determined by the status quo because it does not attempt to encapsulate the domain of subalterns that lies outside the frame.

Despite having problematized the depiction of Muslim women in Mermin's documentary in this paper, I do not claim that attempts at subaltern representation are to be eschewed because it is riddled with many problems. Nor do I belittle the efforts and good intentions of the American women who started the beauty academy, nor make the claim that humanitarian work is unnecessary. Such work *is* necessary, but at the same time, the necessity of such work does not

occlude the fact that attempts at representing the “Third World” - a geopolitical space that has suffered much exploitation at the hands of the so-called “First World” - is a task of immense responsibility that requires much critical reflection, especially about how certain forms of violence can remain unnamable and invisible because they are justified by the same liberal assumptions which validated the First World’s colonial ventures. The validation and perpetuation of monolithic homogeneity of categories like “Afghan women”/”Muslim women” is one form of violence that result from “documentary filmmakers who often work within homogenizing, universalizing beliefs in human rights, freedom and democratic governance”³⁵ because such attempts inevitably erase the agency and resistance of the subaltern which can only be “rendered visible only with careful attention to local configurations of difference within historically specific arenas of struggle.”³⁶ Gayatri Spivak and other subaltern studies scholars have turned to the notion of “singularity” in order to address the question of subaltern representation. In Butlerian terms of framing, this requires the understanding that, “prior to the events and actions represented within the frame, there is an active if unmarked delimitation of the field itself, and so of a set of contents and perspectives that are never shown, that it becomes impermissible to show.”³⁷ As Parker and Sinclair note “singularity” is, “the notion of the unrepeatable, irreducible, historically specific, contingent Other whose existence is marked out of knowledge and language - a social being whose constituted in ways that make her “unintelligible” to us.”³⁸ To her credit, Mermin attempts this somewhat when she troubles the stereotypes of Muslim women’s veiling, silence and passivity. Yet this critique needs to deepen to capture and demonstrate the “non-thematized background of what is represented and thus one of its absent organizing features” leading to expose “the forcible dramaturgy of the state.”³⁹ It thus requires “thematizing the forcible frame, the one that conducts the dehumanizing norm.”⁴⁰ In other words, critical stance requires an attempt at *framing the frame itself* - in this case, the stakes of framing the “Afghan women” as resilient others who are willing

to benefit from their “First World” sisters to realize their dreams of entering into the circuits of global capital. Thus, it is the ethical responsibility of documentary filmmakers such as Mermin and other artists who attempt to represent the “Third World” to refrain from employing monolithic categories in their delineations and adapt their generic conventions in creative and critical ways that refuses to appropriate the other into the status quo frames of intelligibility.

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ENDNOTES:

¹ Laura Bush, "The Weekly Address Delivered by the First Lady," November 17, 2001. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-weekly-address-delivered-the-first-lady>

² Mimi Thi Nguyen. "The Biopower of Beauty: Humanitarian Imperialisms and Global Feminisms in an Age of Terror" *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 36, no. 2 (2011), 360

³ *Ibid.*, 368.

⁴ Patricia Aufderheide, *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction*. (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 2.

- ⁵ Ibid.,2.
- ⁶ Ibid.,3.
- ⁷ Joe Parker & Rebekah Sinclair. "An Ethico-Politics of Subaltern Representations in Post-9/11 Documentary Film," in *Screens of Terror: Representations of War and Terrorism in Film and Television Since 9/11*, Ed. Philip Hammond (Suffolk: Arima Publishing, 2011), 213.
- ⁸ Ibid., 214
- ⁹ Ibid., 217.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Ibid., 216
- ¹³ Jennifer Hyndman. *Managing Displacement: Refugees and the Politics of Humanitarianism*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), xvi.
- ¹⁴ Richard Ashby Wilson & Richard D.Brown. *Humanitarianism & Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 8
- ¹⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: U of Illinois Press, 1988), 271-313.
- ¹⁶ Miriam Cooke. "Islamic Feminism Before and After September 11th," *Duke Journal of Gender Law & Policy*, (2002), 227.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Judith Butler. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London; New York: Verso., 2009), 74.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.,71.
- ²⁰ Ibid.,4.
- ²¹ Ibid., 9
- ²² Ibid., 100
- ²³ Chandra Talpade Mohanty. *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2003), 7
- ²⁴ Ibid.,22.
- ²⁵ Ibid.,7.
- ²⁶ Mai Abdul Rahman. "'The Beauty Academy of Kabul' documentary screened in DC." *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, 25, no.5 (July 2006) <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A147558980/AONE?u=gain40375&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=3e86caf1>
- ²⁷ Ibid., 22.
- ²⁸ Joe Parker and Rebekah Sinclair, "An Ethico-Politics of Subaltern Representation", 221.
- ²⁹ Ibid.
- ³⁰ Butler, *Frames of War*, 73.
- ³¹ Ibid., 9

³² Ibid.

³³ Miriam Cooke, "Islamic Feminism", 228-9

³⁴ Ibid., 234.

³⁵ Parker & Sinclair, 215.

³⁶ Ibid., 215

³⁷ Butler, *Frames of War*, 73.

³⁸ Parker & Sinclair, 215.

³⁹ Butler, 74.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 100.