

### **Beyond liberation: using Rebecca West to complicate images of Muslim womanhood**

Early on in *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, Rebecca West describes a veiled woman drinking coffee. She sketches out the scene in careful detail, and pays special attention to a moment when the wind presses against the woman's clothing<sup>1</sup>. Throughout the book, West varies in her attitude towards the Muslim women she encounters. At times, she fixates on their attire, or romanticises imagined relations between Muslim men and women. During her time in Sarajevo, she writes of a "tranquil sensuality of Moslem origin"<sup>2</sup>. In other moments, she speaks for the Muslim women she is introduced to, despite having had little interaction with them. She says of her friend Hassanovitch's wife, "she was for me as pathetic as the women of Korcula, who believed that they had earned their happiness because they had passed certain tests of womanhood"<sup>3</sup>. But despite the variations in West's approach, her writing is mostly defined by her commitment to contextualising and complicating the experiences of the historical actors she meets with, or hears about. In our current political climate, defined by simplistic narratives about Muslim women, we would do well to cultivate West's emphasis on distinction and lived experience, and apply it to today's discussions. Using *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* as a template for moving beyond superficial analysis, we can evaluate the ways in which tropes of Muslim womanhood serve to prop up various political projects.

In his book *Orientalism*, Said uses the example of Flaubert's courtesan as an Oriental figure whose cultural impact was undeniable despite being fundamentally misrepresented. When Flaubert slept with the Egyptian courtesan Kuchuk Hanem and began in his writings, to associate the Orient with sexual promise and untiring sensuality, he did so by silencing Kuchuk herself. According to Said, "she (Kuchuk) never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence or history. He spoke for and represented her. He was foreign, comparatively wealthy, male, and these were historical facts of domination that allowed him not only to possess Kuchuk Hanem physically but to speak for her and to tell his readers in what ways she was typically Oriental"<sup>4</sup>. Said is known for his assertion that a whole host of Western thinkers and authors, from Austen to Forster, knowingly and unknowingly bolstered beliefs in Western superiority and the Otherness of non-Europeans. In *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, West is not immune to such influences. In her description of a banker friend's female relatives, she says of them that "they reminded the banker and my husband that it must have been very pleasant to keep a covey of darlings in brocades behind latticed windows, who would laugh and scuttle away...and sing and touch the strings of the gusla and mock the male and be overawed by him, and mock again, in an unending, uncriticized process of delight"<sup>5</sup>. It may appear that though West was famous for her incisive political analysis and multi-dimensional readings of her subjects, she too views 'Oriental' women as fundamentally existing for the delight of Western men (not unlike Flaubert), in all their malleable sensuality. Yet, a closer reading could suggest that while West is distanced from these women by her European gaze, she is equally critical of white men's reaction to them. It is the *men* who are Othering the women in their minds, and one feels that she is almost mocking their Orientalist desires which centre on female submission and exotic beauty.

<sup>1</sup> West, Rebecca. *Black lamb and grey falcon: a journey through Yugoslavia*. Open Road Media, 2010, p422

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p424

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p462

<sup>4</sup> Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. Penguin Books, 1979, p6

<sup>5</sup> West, Rebecca. *Black lamb and grey falcon: a journey through Yugoslavia*. Open Road Media, 2010, p455

West and her perspective become particularly relevant for us because one-dimensional views on ‘Oriental’ women, and particularly Muslim women, persist to this day. In their seminal paper dissecting mainstream feminist sympathy with Afghan women, Mahmood and Hirschkind look at the trope of the ‘Oppressed Muslim Woman’, used to justify the invasion of Afghanistan by President Bush and his contemporaries. Their emphasis is on the way “the burqa-clad body of the Afghan woman became the visible sign of an invisible enemy that threatens not only ‘us’, citizens of the West, but our entire civilisation”<sup>6</sup>. Much has been written about the shallow and non-factual thinking and writing that defined this political moment. For example, the Feminist Majority Foundation is a non-profit that led calls to save Afghan women from their suffering under the Taliban. Although there is no denying that women experienced a great deal of brutality and hardship under the rule of the Taliban, they had long suffered from many of the ills that the Feminist Majority attributed to the Taliban. For instance, in addition to being one of the poorest nations in the World, Afghanistan had, for a number of years, one of the highest infant and maternal mortality rates. Mahmood and Hirschkind contend that such conditions were only exacerbated by twenty years of war that the US had supported in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union<sup>7</sup>.

Similarly, a 2010 TIME magazine cover that portrayed a woman named Bibi Ayesha with a severed face was widely received as implying that women would be tortured in this manner were the US to pull out of Afghanistan. This was despite the fact that the photo was taken while American forces were still in Afghanistan<sup>8</sup>. These reductive political statements served time and time again to conjure up an idea of the inherently patriarchal and repressive Muslim world, in which women could never be free, and men were forever beasts. The only way to save these women was foreign intervention, led by the United States<sup>9</sup>. Crucially, these analyses and images ignored the fact that a few decades prior, the CIA had channeled funds to the most extreme authoritarian elements of the Afghan resistance to the Soviets<sup>10</sup>. Thus, the tropes of Muslim womanhood became embedded in a military campaign that relied on ahistorical and imprecise knowledge-spread for its popularity.

In her writing, West offers us an alternative approach to such political thinking, one that does not depend so heavily on constructed binaries of Western freedom and Eastern oppression. She treats her subjects with humanity. Though she rarely refrains from making a moral judgment about their actions, their internal complexity is not under question, and nor does she posit herself as a potential saviour. Writing about Astra, the belly-dancer she befriends, she speaks of the trials and tribulations of her line of work (as told to her by Astra), but does not cast her as oppressed or unfree. Rather, West portrays her as a woman who has faced great difficulty, but has valid aspirations, such as a desire to give her young son a better life<sup>11</sup>. When West criticises the work that Astra does, it is only by giving voice to what Astra has told her - that her job is not usually so bad when she is in Greece or Bulgaria, or in the North of Yugoslavia, but she particularly dislikes her encounters with Turks in South Serbia. Astra’s profession is not exoticised, and West’s poison is reserved only for the Turkish men who patronise the dancer. In this sense, West’s

<sup>6</sup> Hirschkind, Charles, and Mahmood, Saba. ‘Feminism, the Taliban, the politics of counter-insurgency’, *Anthropological Quarterly*, Vol.75 (2), Spring 2002, p341

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p355

<sup>8</sup> Abu-Lughod, Lila. *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Harvard University Press, 2013, p28

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p30

<sup>10</sup> Hirschkind, Charles, and Mahmood, Saba. ‘Feminism, the Taliban, the politics of counter-insurgency’, *Anthropological Quarterly*, Vol.75 (2), Spring 2002, p343

<sup>11</sup> West, Rebecca. *Black lamb and grey falcon: a journey through Yugoslavia*. Open Road Media, 2010, p440

perspective is in sharp contrast to Flaubert's encounter with the Egyptian courtesan, and to the narratives of the Bush era. In *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, Astra the belly-dancer is not brimming with limitless sexuality, but nor is she veiled and voiceless. Instead, she is a middle-aged woman, at the "homely and vanishing point of voluptuousness"<sup>12</sup>, who has had to navigate difficult socio-economic circumstances to make her way in the world.

Beyond allowing for the complex nature of her actors, West also situates them in their political and historical contexts. Muslim women were rarely treated with such courtesy by most politicians and commentators in the buildup to the war in Afghanistan. However, thinkers and ethnographers who *do* practice in this manner are often able to identify the external forces that have impacted these women, besides their relationships with Muslim men. Lila Abu-Lughod writes poignantly in her book *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* about her Muslim aunt, who has lived a difficult and fractured life. After her aunt sings about her struggles, she explains them to her niece. Abu-Lughod writes "The song about herself as a wounded bird... was about more than her personal plight. She explained to me 'I am like Palestine. My wounds are deep. We Palestinians are all wounded and strangers in this world'"<sup>13</sup>. Thus, her aunt's plight is inseparable from that of her Palestinian homeland, and her life-story cannot be viewed without taking her estrangement from it into consideration. Abu-Lughod goes on to say of her, and the other women she has interviewed in the book – "we see that the most basic conditions of these women's lives are set by political forces that are local in effect but national and even international in origin"<sup>14</sup>.

There is a startling parallel to this approach in West's treatment of the youths of the Black Hand. Of them, she writes "What these youths did was abominable, precisely as abominable as the tyranny they destroyed. Yet it need not be denied that they might have grown to be good men, and perhaps great men, if the Austrian Empire had not crashed down on them in its collapse"<sup>15</sup>. Earlier on in the book, she notes that Princip declared "he had committed his crime as a peasant who resented the poverty the Austrians had brought on his kind"<sup>16</sup>. In her analysis, West asserts that historical winds from across borders can cause lives to change and twist, and that no one individual can be regarded in a political vacuum. Just as the actions of the Black Hand gang can only be understood as part of what the Serbian people experienced, so the experiences of Muslim women around the world should be understood and unpacked in their specific contexts. As Mahmood and Hirschkind point out, "Whereas the veil was forced on urban women in Afghanistan by the Taliban under the threat of physical violence, in France its adoption has, in many instances, come in the context of young women going against their parents' more assimilated life-style"<sup>17</sup>. There is no homogenous, ahistorical Muslim woman, and there is no one attitude towards the veil.

West's insights relied on her semi-ethnographic approach, and her interest in hearing the histories of those minimised in mainstream narratives. In *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* she writes of rural women participating in a fertility ritual, "I suspect that women such as these are not truly slaves, but have found a

<sup>12</sup> West, Rebecca. *Black lamb and grey falcon: a journey through Yugoslavia*. Open Road Media, 2010, p441

<sup>13</sup> Abu-Lughod, L. *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Harvard University Press, 2013, p23

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p24

<sup>15</sup> West, Rebecca. *Black lamb and grey falcon: a journey through Yugoslavia*. Open Road Media, 2010, p542

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p537

<sup>17</sup> Hirschkind, Charles, and Mahmood, Saba. 'Feminism, the Taliban, the politics of counter-insurgency', *Anthropological Quarterly*, Vol.75 (2), Spring 2002, p350

fraudulent method of persuading men to give them support and leave them their spiritual freedom”<sup>18</sup>. In her text, women are granted agency, cast as resourceful and even conniving. The complexity of their lives is not shied away from; rather, it is embraced. Many commentators today diverge from this attitude in the way they speak about Muslim women, seemingly uncaring of the weight of their words. In September 2019, after now-Prime Minister Boris Johnson wrote an article in which he compared burka-clad women to letterboxes, Islamophobic incidents shot up. Over 40 percent of these incidents directly referenced either Boris Johnson and/or his words<sup>19</sup>. Johnson’s remarks were rooted in an historical obsession with the bodies and choices of Muslim women, but were remarkable for their simplicity. It is this reductive approach to Muslim womanhood that recent books such as *It’s Not About the Burqa* and photography collectives such as the *Muslim Sisterhood* seek to challenge. The self-professed aims of such initiatives is to highlight the variations in the lives of Muslim women, and to move away from public perceptions of an oppressed monolith<sup>20</sup>. But they are in a minority, and instead, the same stereotypes crop up repeatedly in media narratives, and serve to justify invasions and rescue missions. West’s approach to political thinking is unfashionable, bound up as it is in real research and reams of historical knowledge. It is, however, a sorely needed alternative to the clichés that define mainstream political enquiry regarding Muslim women today.

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<sup>18</sup> West, Rebecca. *Black lamb and grey falcon: a journey through Yugoslavia*. Open Road Media, 2010, p469

<sup>19</sup> Dearden, Lizzie. ‘Islamophobic incidents rose 375% after Boris Johnson compared Muslim women to ‘letterboxes’, figures show’. *The Independent*, Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/boris-johnson-muslim-women-letterboxes-burqa-islamphobia-rise-a9088476.html>

<sup>20</sup> Thompson, Storm. ‘Meet the Muslim Sisterhood’, *gal-dem*, Available at: <https://gal-dem.com/meet-muslim-sisterhood-the-collective-exploring-muslim-womanhood-in-london/> and Maher, Sanam. ‘Thinly Veiled’, *TLS*, Available at: <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/thinly-veiled>