

White Women War Reporters: Interrogating the 'Third Gender' Category

Written by Alex Edney-Browne

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ALEX EDNEY-BROWNE, OCT 9 2015

“In other words, the ‘third gender’ goes something like this: Big Bad Arabo-Muslim-or-Otherwise-Brown Men give White Women access to Information that Non-White Women don’t have.” (Alice, 2012, para. 2).

The ‘War on Terror’ years have seen an “unprecedented increase” of women in war correspondence (Harp, Loke, & Bachmann, 2011, p. 203). Given women’s historical marginalisation from war reporting, this appears to be a progressive development for women in journalism. In addition to a quantitative improvement, with greater numbers of women now reporting on conflict, many women war journalists state that they also experience a qualitative advantage in Muslim-majority countries.[1] These journalists explain their so-called advantage in terms of taking on a ‘Third Gender’ identification: a gendered and racial/ethnic category that allegedly, in the eyes of local men, distinguishes white women from white men (as ‘threatening’), and from local women (as ‘apolitical’). In short, Third Genderism explains the affordance of white women war reporters – as an unthreatening but politically savvy group – improved access to information. To date, this qualitative ‘Third Gender advantage’ has gone unchallenged within journalism and academia, and is often framed positively as a sign of women’s triumph in a traditionally men-dominated career. I contest that it is mistaken, for those of us who agree with intersectional feminist and anti-racist goals, to uncritically accept this category and frame its associated ‘advantage’ as a sign of women’s progress. It is necessary to interrogate the construction and reproduction of the Third Gender category, and ask: what kind of ‘feminism’, if any, is created and/or maintained by this discourse, and who is excluded within this narrative of ‘women’s progress’? Left unchallenged, the normalisation of the category reproduces patriarchal and colonial ideas. Using postcolonial feminist theory, I focus specifically on the racial/ethnic stereotypes underlying the Third Gender category. I contend that these are particularly powerful within the context of the on-going ‘War on Terror’, as the plight of Muslim women is often evoked to legitimise the US-led intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan. I conclude by proposing further study on the relationship between the emergence of Third Gender discourse, ‘postfeminism’ and neoliberal journalism.

What is ‘Third Gender’?

The Third Gender category has arisen in attempt to ‘make sense’ of two non-normative phenomena within journalism:[2] firstly, the quantitative increase of women war correspondents considering women’s historical marginalisation in conflict reporting and, secondly, that this increase has occurred during the War on Terror years – where the conflict zones women report from are believed to have radically different gender relations to those in the ‘West’. In this context, it is intriguing to consider how white, Western, non-Muslim women fare “in a society where women live behind veils and are denied the most basic of rights” (Dietrich, 2002, p. 13). Since 2001, a series of American and British newspaper and magazine articles on women in war reporting attempted to ‘explain’ these two phenomena. To understand how and why women are achieving in war correspondence despite historical and cultural challenges, these articles often interview women war reporters to glean first-hand insight into their success. The Third Gender category has arisen in response to interviewers’ questions, as women war reporters try to best articulate why they are successful in the face of expected adversity. Mary Fitzgerald (*The Irish Times*) describes her experience as follows: “As a Western woman and journalist, you are almost like a third sex [*sic*][3] in conservative societies where gender roles can be rigidly defined” (cited in Marlowe, 2012, p. 11). Kim Barker (*The Chicago*

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Tribune) reiterates this:

"I think that it's easier to be a woman at least in Pakistan and Afghanistan because you're not really seen as a local woman and you are not really seen as a foreign man. You are the in-between. You're the third sex. So you get access to absolutely everyone..." (cited in Lisosky, 2011, p. 167).

These are only two of a growing number of white women war journalists who either explicitly or implicitly identify with Third Genderism and its associated advantages.[4] Third Genderism therefore describes a gendered and racial/ethnic experience of privilege for white women working in Muslim-majority countries. Accordingly, it is an important topic of research for feminist theorists, particularly those who align with intersectional, anti-racist and/or postcolonial feminisms.

The Third Gender category is constructed upon many different gendered and ethnic/racial characteristics. I cannot cover all of these in the scope of this essay. The common thread, however, is that gender "double standards" and racial/ethnic assumptions can be exploited by white women reporters in order to improve their access to information (Dietrich, 2002, p. 13). This is posited as a "unique advantage" over men journalists in *all* conflict zones (who are allegedly considered more threatening and suspicious by potential sources), but also over local women *specifically* in Muslim-majority countries (Barnett, 2012, para. 8). According to *The Independent's* Lindsay Hillsum (2011), local men perceive white women as "honorary men" – with a political aptitude that local women either could not or should not possess (para. 27). Similarly, *The Guardian's* Phoebe Greenwood writes: "Muslim men [...] actually talk to us about the war, their strategy and their weapons – which they wouldn't do with the women of their country" (cited in Barnett, 2012, para. 9). In addition to their political aptitude, white women reporters are considered to be non-threatening: a perception that also works to their advantage. Evgenia Peretz (2002) writes that women war reporters can "slip past checkpoints unhassled or even unnoticed" in conservative Muslim-majority countries, as "there is the residual belief that women are ultimately harmless" (para. 4). Women's perceived harmlessness is described as especially advantageous in military or political contexts where men journalists are more readily conflated with 'the enemy'. Women reporters are able to exploit this, sometimes even deliberately feigning 'innocence' in order to get restricted access to a story. Lastly, Third Gender advantage also has a (hetero-)sexualised component. White women journalists are purportedly able to use their physical attractiveness/sexual agency in order 'sweet-talk' politically or militarily powerful men into sharing otherwise exclusive information.[5]

(White) Women's Triumph?

To date, descriptions of Third Genderism and its purported advantage have gone largely unchallenged within academia and journalism. In *Women in Journalism*, Suzanne Franks considers Third Gender advantage as evidence that women have "capitalised upon their differences in order to bring a wider dimension to their reporting" (2013, p. 30). Franks makes no attempt to deconstruct these "differences" to determine whether they reinforce patriarchal or colonial ideas. Journalistic articles will sometimes frame Third Genderism as one half of a debate amongst women journalists about their safety: one side (the Third Genderites) adopt the postfeminist line that men are no longer privileged in war reporting and that the 'gender question' need not be raised, while the other side contends that they continue to experience sexism and misogyny in their respective careers. This balanced approach is certainly better than presenting isolated accounts of Third Gender, as it leaves open the possibility for debate about gender discrimination in war journalism. Melki and Mallat (2014), for example, acknowledge that women's gendered 'advantage' rests on "traditional patriarchal values", including "a view of women as less threatening than men" (p. 10). However, while some scholars have flagged Third Gender's problematic gendered dimensions, there is little academic or journalistic work identifying and critiquing its racial/ethnic assumptions. This is a telling omission given Third Gender descriptions overtly stereotype Muslim women as oppressed and Muslim men as oppressors.

These uncritical responses to women's testimonies of career success are understandable in light of the historical marginalisation of women in war correspondence. Throughout the 20th century, and continuing today, women who made it into journalism careers[6] often faced the additional obstacle of gender-based story allocation. News stories were (and to a large extent, still are) allocated along a gendered divide of 'soft news' ('feminine'), on the one hand, and 'hard news' ('masculine') on the other. Soft news stories centre on "human interest, unusual events, trends,

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personalities or lifestyle,” and are traditionally allocated to women journalists (North, 2014, p. 2). Soft news is also believed to lack political value and, because of its universality and ‘timelessness’, rarely requires urgent publication. In contrast, hard news “focuses on politics, public interest matters and [...] demands immediate publication” (North, 2014, p. 5). War, as a matter of (inter)national politics requiring urgent publication, is therefore categorised as “hard news” and gendered masculine. Because of this, “men’s perspectives have long dominated war coverage” (Harp et al., 2011, p. 202). Moreover, deep-seated in the allocation of war reporting, specifically, is the traditional association between war, violence and masculinity. As Patricia Owens (2010) argues, “a biological link between male sexuality and aggression” is often assumed (p. 315). In contrast, women during wartime are biologically essentialised as “bearers of children” (Yural-Davis, 1993, p. 628). They come to signify a collective category of the weak (encapsulated by the phrase ‘women and children’) who require men’s protection. These reasons conspire to create a situation where “men dominate the public sphere regarding war” and war journalism remains “a very macho territory” (Harp et al., 2011, p. 204). With this in mind, one can see why personal testimonies of Third Gender advantage are either unchallenged or framed positively as a sign of women’s progress. While understandable, however, this is no less problematic. In addition to propagating postfeminist ideas by minimising the challenges women continue to face in journalism,[7] Third Gender discourse also perpetuates colonising discourses that stereotype and de-politicise Muslim women.

It is likely that Third Genderism has also garnered discursive immunity because challenging it requires undermining the legitimacy of women reporters’ personal testimonies. This is no easy task: who, if not women war correspondents themselves, has greater right to generate discourse on their careers? The problem with this approach, however well intentioned, is that it neglects the political power of the language they use. As Judith Butler (1999) points out, “there is no political position purified of power”, particularly when the women in question, as journalists, play a significant role in shaping public opinion (p. xxvi). It is not that the correspondents in these interviews are ‘wrong’ in how they characterise their experiences, but that the language they use *is* – like all language – shaped by hegemonic ideas and assumptions. As Jill Steans puts it (2008), “acts of ‘boundary drawing’ and ‘identity fixing’ in discourse [...] are no less political than concrete struggles to secure political space” (p. 160). The journalists’ descriptions of Third Gender advantage fail to identify problems with patriarchal ideas and, as I discuss shortly, discursively and socially reproduce colonialist stereotypes about Muslim women. Moreover, while it is one thing to avoid confronting another’s personal testimony, many of the news articles take the next step of framing these descriptions as confirmation of women’s advancement. With titles like “The Girls at the Front” and “On the Frontline with Female War Reporters”, these articles paint a rosy picture of women individually overcoming power structures (Peretz, 2002; Cramer, 2012). Rather than posited as grounds for further discussion, Third Genderism assumes a ‘postfeminist’ evidentiary status of “gender equality finally filtering down” (Greenwood cited in Barnett, 2012, para. 5). It is possible, then, that leaving Third Genderism unchallenged is also politically expedient as it supports two hegemonic structures: the first colonial and the second both postfeminist and neoliberal.

Postcolonial Feminism and the War on Terror

“... feminism is local, and has many colours, and isn’t always called ‘feminism’ because ‘feminism’ is owned and run by White women who bring White men in fighter planes.” (Shabana Mir, 2009, para. 16).

Postcolonial feminism is a movement and set of ideas challenging the “enduring myth of the feminist benevolence of colonialism” (Desai and Nair, 2005, p. 311). Bringing together postcolonial theory (which often neglects gender) and feminist theory (which, in its Eurocentrism, often neglects race and ethnicity), postcolonial feminists argue that gender is integral to regimes of colonial power. They contend that liberal feminism is (and historically has been) instrumental to colonial rescue narratives where local women require saving “from the brutality of their men” through intervention or occupation by liberal states (Desai and Nair, 2005, p. 311). In this narrative, ‘enemy men’ are portrayed as barbaric and oppressive towards local women, who are constructed as “a homogenous ‘powerless’ group” (Mohanty, 2003, p. 54). Thus a (white) feminist liberation narrative justifies and legitimises military intervention, giving credence to the “myth of colonialism as immediately or in the long run beneficial to its subject populations” (Desai and Nair, 2005, p. 311). Accordingly, postcolonial feminism seeks to expose the ways in which liberal feminism functions to create and sustain the conditions of colonisation. It deconstructs how shared assumptions within liberal feminism make Euro-American war “palatable, if not advisable, to people across the

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political spectrum" (Mahmood, 2008, p. 82). To this end, colonisation is considered an on-going *process* (both within and outside of immediate intervention) that is both social and discursive. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003), pointing to the power of discourse, argues that colonialism is also the "appropriation and codification of 'scholarship' and 'knowledge' about women in the third world by particular analytic categories" (p. 49). Third Genderism, as the discursive construction and reproduction of a racialised/ethnicised analytic category, therefore has colonial power and requires deconstructing in these terms.

With this in mind, one must consider the relationship between Third Gender discourse and the War on Terror. Moreover, why it might be the case that the publication of these news articles clusters around two time periods: 2001–2003 (the initial interventions of Afghanistan and Iraq) and 2011–2012 (the start of the 'War against ISIS'). As Janine Rich (2014) argues, feminism's concern for women's rights has been integral to garnering public support during the War on Terror. After 9/11, "the ideological rallying cry of 'saving' the women of the Middle East" became "a powerful tool in justifying U.S military intervention" (Rich, 2014, para. 1). In the initial intervention years, Afghan and Iraqi women were constructed in the West's social imaginary as "object victims of Islamic fundamentalism" (Mahmood, 2008, p. 83). As Krista Hunt (2008) states, the Bush administration sought public approval for the interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan by "embedding discourse about women's rights and liberation" (p. 56). Hence then-Secretary of State Colin Powell's 2002 address to an International Women's Day reception, in which he described the United States as "a champion of [...] the wellbeing of women worldwide" (cited in Hunt, 2008, p. 56). This colonialism did not simply involve men in government co-opting feminism, however, as many U.S-based feminists also took it upon themselves to rally for US-led intervention. The Feminist Majority Foundation, for instance, saw "the war on terror [as] an important opportunity to liberate Afghan women and promote freedom and democracy in Afghanistan" (Hunt, 2008, p. 59). While it is certainly true that women face sexism and misogyny in Iraq and Afghanistan (as they do in the 'enlightened West'), the problem rests in the generalising and de-politicising language used to describe Iraqi and Afghan women. In this (white) feminist discourse, there was (and is) "no discussion of the specific practices" of *different* Muslim women, from *different* families, with *different* religions; instead, "all Arab and Muslim women are seen to constitute a homogenous oppressed group" (Mohanty, 2003, p. 58). By de-politicising all Afghan and Iraqi women in this way, liberal feminist discourse erases the myriad of feminisms (including Islamic feminism) and feminist activist organisations already operating within these countries – all of which publicly oppose Euro-American military intervention.[8] Tellingly, 2011-2012 saw a resurgent interest in white women war correspondents and their descriptions of Third Gender advantage. With the start of the War against ISIS, "Western fascination with the 'oppressed Muslim woman' has once again flared up in media and policy debates" (Rich, 2014, para. 1). The political power of Third Gender discourse is thus even more potent considering its dissemination corresponds with periods of increased US-led military intervention.

Women war reporters' descriptions of Third Genderism discursively support the construction of women living in Afghanistan and Iraq as an oppressed and apolitical group, and thereby legitimise the United States' colonial rescue narrative. By segregating Muslim women's experiences from white women's experiences, the Third Gender category constructs "the average third-world woman" in opposition to the idealised image of "the western women" ("as educated, modern, having control over their bodies and sexualities, and the 'freedom' to make their own decisions") (Mohanty, 2003, p. 53). This image is further reinforced by Third Gender's (hetero)-sexualised characteristic ('flirting for access') whereby the chauvinistic inclination to sexualise powerful women ought to be harnessed for career advantage rather than challenged. Not only does Third Gender's construction of a racial/ethnic distinction depoliticise Muslim women, it also propagates the postfeminist idea that Western women have now achieved full gender equality. In this environment, the 'gender question' no longer needs to be raised as feminist goals are (allegedly) accomplished. As Phoebe Greenwood puts it: "We are now on a total equal footing to the men when it comes to reporting on conflict zones" (cited in Barnett, 2012, para. 6). Empirical studies show that, to the contrary, war reporting "is still an extremely male-dominated territory with the increase in numbers insufficient to make a real change" (Harp et al., 2011, p. 206; Global Media Monitoring Project, 2010, p. 2). Underlying the Third Gender category is therefore a postfeminist narrative that women can overcome structural inequalities (if they even exist!) through individual motivation and hard work.

Postfeminism and Neoliberal Journalism

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I would like to conclude by proposing future research on the emergence of Third Gender discourse in relation to postfeminism and the neoliberalisation of journalism. I was initially surprised that women war reporters working in Iraq and Afghanistan – with greater access than most to home-grown feminist activists working within these countries – would propagate such a crude representation of Muslim women. The journalists who then uncritically accept their Third Gender descriptions, in fact take the added step of framing them positively, are equally complicit in this misrepresentation. One might hope that journalists (as experts in the acquisition and communication of knowledge) would be able to provide a more nuanced account of Muslim women's lives than Western politicians, who are motivated to construct a colonial rescue narrative. I suggest that research situating Third Gender discourse within the context of postfeminism and neoliberal journalism would improve our understanding of Third Gender's creation and its lack of critical response. Mohanty argues that the discursive production of the Third World Woman "might well tie into the larger economic and ideological praxis of 'disinterested' inquiry" (p. 69). Given this, an examination of the roles that economic (read: neoliberal) and ideological (read: postfeminist) discourses play in the reproduction of patriarchal ideas and colonising narratives – like Third Gender advantage – is required. This is also a question of who and what journalism is for in the 21st century. The disinterested, indeed *lazy*, stereotyping of Muslim women's lives in Third Gender discourse suggests that journalism is no longer motivated out of social responsibility towards its subjects; rather, the career advancement of individual women journalists takes precedence. In this social and political environment, Third Gender advantage is grounds for celebration, as the women whose lives truly matter are white, Western, career-driven individuals.

Correction: the original version of this article incorrectly used the term 'Arab' to describe the people of Iraq and Afghanistan, when Arab is not one of the many ethnicities of Afghan people. The author wishes to apologise for this insensitive mistake and for the harm caused by this erasure.

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Endnotes

[1] 'Women reporters' and 'men reporters' may sound jarring; however, I will not be using 'female' and 'male' in this essay as such language excludes trans people. The only exception to this will be when quoting others.

[2] 'Third Gender' has its roots in anthropology and sociology – developed in an effort to describe gender identities within other cultures that do not conform to a Euro-American gender binary.

[3] Journalists often use 'third sex' and 'third gender' interchangeably. However, as they are describing perceptions/experiences of one's character and not one's anatomy, it is likely that those referring to 'sex' actually mean to say 'gender'.

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[4] For women war journalists who identify as Third Gender or with its characteristics, see: Greenwood cited in Barnett, 2012; Rowland, O'Kane, and Giovanni cited in Peretz, 2002; Fawcett, Vidon, Sullivan, Tremonti, and Susman cited in Dietrich, 2002; Doucet cited in Cramer, 2012; Fitzgerald, Hilsum, Guerin, Ward, and O'Kane cited in Marlowe, 2012; Doucet cited in Storm, 2012; Barker and Nivat cited in Lisosky, 2011.

[5] See Jacky Rowland's anecdote in Peretz (2002, para. 9) and Maya Vidon's in Dietrich (2002, p. 13).

[6] This is an achievement in itself considering women's traditional relegation to the 'private sphere' (an allegedly apolitical domestic space in which women were/are expected to look after the home and children).

[7] As the Global Media Monitoring Project's (2010) North American Regional Report puts it: "While popular discourse may support the myth that 'we've come a long way', credible empirical evidence shows [...] persistent historical constraints on, and nascent challenges to, gender equality" (p. 2).

[8] These home-grown feminist organisations within Afghanistan and Iraq include (but are not limited to): the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), Humanitarian Assistance for the Women and Children of Afghanistan (HAWCA), Woman Living Under Muslim Law (WLUML), Organisation of Women's Freedom in Iraq (OWFI) and the Iraqi Women's League (IWL).

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