

US MEDIA DARLINGS: ARAB AND MUSLIM WOMEN ACTIVISTS, EXCEPTIONALISM AND THE “RESCUE NARRATIVE”

Ahlam Muhtaseb

Abstract: Using critical textual analysis based on the postcolonial school of thought, this essay analyzed a ten-minute segment, called “Women of the Revolution,” on the ABC news program *This Week*, anchored at that time by Christiane Amanpour, for its portrayals of Arab and Muslim women. The analysis showed that Arab and Muslim women were portrayed positively only when they fit a “media-darling” trope of Western-educated Arab or Muslim women, or those who looked and acted similar to Western women, especially if they ascribed to a Western view of feminism. Those women also were seen as the exception to the “repressive” culture that characterizes the Arab and Muslim worlds, according to the Orientalist stereotype. The implications of this analysis indicate that, in spite of the visibility and progress of many Arab and Muslim women in their countries and indigenous cultures, they are still framed within old recycled molds in US mainstream media, even if these seem positive at face value.

Keywords: Arab/Muslim women, media darling, exceptionalism, rescue narrative, victimhood, Orientalism, postcolonialism

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This essay is inspired by a short conversation that I had with an administrative assistant I had known and worked with closely since 2003. The conversation took place during the peak of the January 25, 2011 Egyptian protests, during what became known as the “Arab Spring.” I asked her if she had been watching unfolding events in the Arab world, and she said, “Yes,” expressing strongly how shocked she was to see that there were so many “strong” women involved. This comment was surprising, because I assumed that she already had seen a strong Arab woman, with whom she had worked for approximately eight years at that time. That short conversation made me think about what an Arab Muslim woman, who wears the hijab, as I do, represented to the Americans whom she worked

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with. As a media studies scholar, I started thinking beyond what I embodied to what other scarfed, educated and strong Arab and Muslim women represented to people in Western societies, and I started to pay very close attention to media coverage of the role of Arab and Muslim women in the revolutions that were taking place in the Arab world, and, in particular, the visibility of female activists in those regions.

There has been a long line of research on representations of Arabs and Muslims, including Arab and Muslim women, in Western, especially US, media, from Said's (1978) original work on Orientalism to Shaheen's (1984, 1994, 2001) seminal studies on representations of Arab and Muslim women in Hollywood films and comic books, and many others (e.g., Bullock, 2015; Powell, 2011; Sadar, 2014; Said, 2004). Both descriptive and critical studies have found that Arab and Muslim women suffer from static, highly negative media images that are limited to only two or three media tropes that revolve around silence and oppression (Macdonald, 2006; Stabile and Kumar, 2005), sexualization (Bullock, 2015; Macdonald, 2006) and violent aid to terrorists (Magnet and Mason, 2014; Sadar, 2014). In all three negative tropes or stereotypes, Arab and Muslim women are agentless, even when they are producers of terror (Hirji, 2011). Moreover, Bullock (2015), employing textual analysis, found that audience members' perceptions of Muslim and Arab women were affected negatively by watching Orientalist television shows, such as *I Dream of Jeannie*. Bullock's conclusion comes as a surprise in 2015, since one hoped that the visibility of Arab women during the "Arab Spring" might have challenged such Orientalist depictions.

The purpose of this essay is to deconstruct US mainstream media's representations of Muslim and Arab women during the Egyptian revolution in 2011 to examine if there was a paradigm shift towards a more realistic impression of their role in the revolutions at that time. The essay starts with a historical overview of traditional Western media representations of Arab and Muslim women, focusing on the "rescue narrative" of Arab and Muslims women. I also provide a short survey of some major emerging representational issues during and after the Arab Spring, focusing on what I term Arab and Muslim "media darlings." A postcolonial textual analysis of a ten-minute roundtable television segment of the ABC news program *This Week*, when Christiane Amanpour was the main anchor, discussing with four female guests "women of the revolution" follows. I end the essay with a discussion of the implications of the analysis.

Media Darlings and Oriental Exceptionalism

Hoping for a new media trope of representing Arab and Muslim women seemed possible during the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions or uprisings, because the

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media's focus on the masses in the Arab streets included large numbers of Arab and Muslim women, not only in the Arab World but also in countries such as Turkey and Iran. However, Arab and Muslim women's activism was framed in a recycled trope of the Westernized Arab or Muslim woman: an image of exceptionalism of the "Oriental" culture.

In her study of Western media's coverage of Arab first ladies, Ibroscheva (2013) concluded that

the portrayals of the First Ladies of the Arab Spring could be contextualized within the Oriental gaze, which situates the idea of an Arab and Muslim female political agency as only possible as explicitly Westernized, essentially re-circulating the colonial trope of the Muslim woman as "the Other." (872)

This conclusion is related to what I term as an Arab or Muslim "media darling". An image of the "media darling" usually is of either those Arab or Muslim women who were Western-educated/influenced or those who looked and acted similar to Western women, especially if they ascribed to a Western view of feminism that was not rooted necessarily in their indigenous cultures. For example, the most dominant voices/faces of women representing Arab and/or Muslim women in Western mainstream media have been women such as Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Irshad Manji and Mona Eltahawy, all of whom speak very strongly against Islam and Muslim/Arab societies and, from a Western perspective, call for "reforms" of either the religion or those societies.

Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a Somalian Dutch US woman who denounced Islam and became an atheist, has been featured in almost every media outlet, with a Google search of her name resulting in more than half a million hits. According to Ali's (n.d.) Harvard Kennedy School profile page:

Ayaan is a Senior Fellow with the Future of Diplomacy Project at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at The Harvard Kennedy School, a Fellow at the Hoover Institute at Stanford University, and a member of the Council on Foreign Relations. She was named one of TIME Magazine's "100 Most Influential People" of 2005, one of the *Glamour* Heroes of 2005 and *Reader's Digest's* European of the Year for 2005. She is the best selling author of *Infidel* (2007) and *Heretic: Why Islam Needs a Reformation Now* (2015). (para. 7)

Ali is a prominent media darling who usually is introduced by the media as representing Muslim women, although she no longer is Muslim. Her strong, essentialist, anti-Muslim views, which stem from a deeply internalized Orientalist perspective that celebrates Western culture and denounces the "Other" Muslim

culture, make her a media darling, not only in the United States but also in Europe. In an interview conducted with *Reason* magazine, Ali stated:

I accept that there are multitudes seeking God, seeking meaning, and so on, but if they reject atheism, I would rather they became modern-day Catholics or Jews than that they became Muslims. Because my Catholic and Jewish colleagues are *fine*. (Cited in van Bakel, 2007: 2)

Ali then said, “Western civilization is a celebration of life—everybody’s life, even your enemy’s life. So how can you be true to that morality and at the same time defend yourself against a very powerful enemy that seeks to destroy you?” (cited in van Bakel, 2007: 3). There are thousands of similar quotes from her.

Although Irshad Manji is not Islamophobic in her discourse compared to Ali, she still fits the mold of a Western-educated and Western-looking reformist Muslim activist. Although Manji still insists that she is Muslim, she is highly critical of Islam, especially with regard to gender issues, which makes her the ideal Western media darling. Similarly, journalist Mona Eltahawy is an Egyptian, Western-styled feminist who is highly critical of patriarchy in the Islamic world. For some time, she campaigned to enforce a niqab (face cover) ban around the world. Eltahawy (2012) got her moment of fame when she wrote a column titled “Why Do They Hate Us?” for *Foreign Policy*, in which she claimed that Muslim men hate women. The column received widespread critique, mainly from Muslim women who accused Eltahawy of performing as a “native informant” who played on stereotypical images of the Orient (for a list of major critiques, see the blog Muslim Reverie (2012). That column transformed her into an instant media darling, with her dubbed in 2011 by Jezebel—a leading feminist website—as “the woman explaining Egypt to the West” (Mazloun, 2017: para. 7), after which she appeared on many major news outlets.

These three media darlings have been dominant voices when issues of Muslim and Arab women are invoked by mainstream media. Unfortunately, the Arab Spring did not bring change to the Arab World in terms of democracy or in terms of Western mainstream media’s representations of Arab and Muslim women. El-Mahdi (2011) concluded that during the coverage of the Egyptian uprising, in particular, a quick look at CNN, *Time*, *Vanity Fair* and other

representations of the so-called leaders or icons of this revolution . . . [showed that] they are all middle (upper) class Egyptians under the age of thirty. Most of them have one or more connection to the West, either by virtue of education (*Time*’s cover feature of seven “youth,” included three students from the American University in Cairo), work (e.g. Wael Ghoneim, sales manager at

Google), or training. According to the BBC, Dr Gene Sharp - the author of “Non-Violent Revolution Rulebook” is “the man now credited with the strategy behind the toppling of the Egyptian government” through activists “trained in Sharp’s work.” (para. 2)

US media coverage of the Egyptian revolution verified El-Mahdi’s (2011) observations. For example, activist and blogger Asmaa Mahfouz, 26 years old at the time, became a sensation in the Arab World for her famous vlog on January 18, 2011 (see her other famous vlogs at Mahfouz, 2011), calling on Egyptians to congregate in Tahrir Square, which became the symbol of the Egyptian revolution. Of course, in issuing that call, she put her life in great jeopardy and real danger because of the Egyptian political and security atmosphere at that time. However, because Mahfouz, with her traditional Islamic hijab did not fit the “media darling” mold, she never has been featured by US media. Even when progressive media personality Jon Stewart interviewed one of the young faces of the revolution, he chose Gihan Ibrahim (twice), a female Egyptian activist who was almost the same age as Mahfouz, but who fit the mold of the liberal, Western-looking, Western-educated media darling. Moreover, whereas Mahfouz, who graduated from Cairo University, speaks poor English with a heavy Egyptian accent (see her interview with Democracy Now, 2011), Ibrahim, a graduate of the American University of Cairo and Orange Coast College in California, speaks fluent English, and she even coauthored an English-language comic book about the revolution. Ibrahim became another media darling, interviewed by *Time* magazine, Frontline, Al-Jazeera English, BBC, *The Daily Show* and other media outlets. Additionally, a documentary, *Gigi’s Revolution*, which aired on the US Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) network, revolved around her role in the revolution (Gilmore, 2011). She even was on the cover of the February 2011 *Time* magazine as one of the young faces of the revolution. I do not mean to minimize Ibrahim’s role in the revolution or to accuse her of any wrongdoing; I merely offer a critical look at who does and does not get featured by US mainstream media, to understand the dynamics and political economy of media production.

The media trope of Arab and Muslim “media darlings” provides an image of Arab and/or Muslim women outside of the Orientalist mold, but not without giving credit to Western or US “civilizations” for their exceptionalism. For example, the three media darlings discussed above (Ali, Manji, and Eltahawy) are natives of North America or were naturalized and educated there; hence, presumably, they were “empowered” by Western democracy to speak against a violent “Other” that needs reform.

This line of thinking can be linked easily to the ideology of “American exceptionalism”: the belief that the United States is a unique country in history, culture and, most important, values. Lipset (1996: 17) referred to such exceptionalism as “the ways in which the United States varies from the rest of the world.” Although

Lipset emphasized that this exceptionalism does not mean, necessarily, that the United States is “better” than other places, many scholars have suggested that the term usually means “better” or “superior,” and that it is used to provoke patriotism, especially when employed by politicians and media practitioners. For example, Gilmore (2015) discussed the impact of American nationalism and exceptionalism, especially when expressed overtly, on the formation of a US national identity among US Americans, which is based on an ethnocentric bias. As Gilmore argued, “This work shows that the notion of America as unique, superior, and even God-favored has been pervasive in the construction and maintenance of American identity throughout the country’s history” (302). Thus, it is not surprising that US mainstream media look for links between positive images of Arab/Muslim women and the US “exceptional” culture or “civilization.”

When Arab and/or Muslim women who do not fit the media darling mold, such as Malala Yousafzai, are presented by mainstream US media, usually, they are portrayed through the frame of what Stabile and Kumar (2005) and other scholars called the “rescue” or “protection narrative,” in which the burden of saving and rescuing “poor” Muslim and Arab women from the savagery of the barbaric brown Muslim man falls on the shoulders of Western societies. Stabile and Kumar’s (2005) rhetorical analysis of the sudden interest of US mainstream media in the suffering and oppression of Afghani women immediately after 9/11 described the two narrative traditions of such media discourse as “that of the protection scenario and that of Orientalism. Both traditions draw much of their rhetorical force from discourses of imperialism” (770).

In the case of Malala, the rescue narrative was the perfect justification for US imperial/colonial conquests in Afghanistan and Iraq. After the US tragic failure in both of those countries, Malala’s story came as the perfect rescue narrative that neoliberals used to legitimize illegitimate wars; those wars include not only previous Afghanistan and Iraq wars but also the so-called “war on terror,” especially with regard to using invisible drones to kill people. Hence, Malala, who seems to be proud of her culture and religion, became an “international *cause célèbre*” (Mufti, 2014: para. 2), celebrated by neoliberals as a success story, especially with their focus on her fashion. There also is the actual rescue narrative of this child who was injured critically by the Taliban and saved in a British hospital. According to Stabile and Kumar (2005: 771), “Yet until Afghan women proved rhetorically useful, their tragic circumstances merited little coverage in the mainstream media.” This unique story of Malala can be linked to both American exceptionalism through the rescue narrative and to US neoliberal policies (discussed further in the analysis section below).

In the case of the “Arab Spring,” US mainstream media showed similar patterns of coverage of Arab and/or Muslim women. Macdonald (2006), who used the term “victim narrative,” described the dichotomous pattern after 9/11:

If the newly audible voices are mainly those of diasporic or Western Muslims, and the shrouded, silenced images those of women in Afghanistan, Iran, or Saudi Arabia, the Orientalist polarity between “liberating” Western Islam and “repressive” Eastern Islam is accentuated. (15)

This dichotomy became very stark during protests in Egypt, because mainstream media no longer could ignore the salient activism of Arab and Muslim women in the streets, forcing the media to provide “acceptable” models of those women.

Unfortunately, many, but not all, of these acceptable women suffer from what I term “deep internalized Orientalism,” even though they do not live necessarily in the West. According to El-Mahdi (2011), “As Edward Said explained years ago, Orientalism is not only confined to ‘Western’ depictions of the Middle East—and particularly Arabs and Muslims—but it is also internalized and propagated by ‘local’ elites” (para. 1). In the Arab and Islamic World, there are many Western-molded women who believe strongly in the universality of the feminist experience, and that Western feminist ideologies and theories (a) are superior to any alternative feminist views that might spring from their Eastern cultures or religions, and (b) serve as solutions for the ills in their countries. These women, thus, tend to borrow what inherently are “colonial” forms of feminism. Although many Arab and Muslim scholars (e.g., Abdulhadi, Alsultany, and Naber, 2011; Abu-Lughod and El-Mahdi, 2011; Darraj, 2003; Deeb, 2006; El Guindi, 2005) have deconstructed colonial feminist discourses and written against the universality of feminism, US mainstream media operate from that very starting point and offer positive images of Arab/Muslim women from an exceptionalist framework.

Although I use the term “media darlings” to refer to Arab and Muslim women who, usually, attract the Western media’s attention, some of these media darlings do not necessarily adopt Western feminist ideologies. However, sometimes, because of their looks and how they talk, especially if they speak fluent English and/or French, they are assumed by Western media to be on the “good” side of feminism.

The following section will focus on one particular example or case study of a US media program that exhibits this focus on Arab and/or Muslim media darlings to illustrate such media framing of Arab/Muslim “exceptional women.”

Critical Textual Analysis

The empirical focus of this essay is a ten-minute roundtable television segment from the ABC news show *This Week*, which aired on March 6, 2011. I engage in a postcolonial critical textual analysis of this segment, to explain the positioning of race and gender at this roundtable discussion. The postcolonial school of thought stems from Said’s (1978) seminal work on *Orientalism*, which he defined

as “a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction between ‘the Orient’ [East] and (most of the time) ‘the Occident’ [West]” (2). Of course, his theoretical framework was based on the (de)colonization of knowledge about the “Other,” as Said (2003) claimed:

Orientalism is very much tied to the tumultuous dynamics of contemporary history. I emphasize in it accordingly that neither the term Orient nor the concept of the West has any ontological stability; each is made up of human effort, partly affirmation, partly identification of the Other. (870)

Hence, in spite of the changing historical contexts, the framework of Orientalism still is valid and highly applicable to the relationship between the Orient and Occident, or the colonizer and the colonized (Said, 1989).

Douglas (2011) emphasized the importance of textual analysis in that line of scholarship, stating that “the products of media culture require multidimensional close textual readings to analyze their various forms of discourses, ideological positions, narrative strategies, image construction, and effects” (11). Hence, the analysis conducted in this essay utilizes this multidimensionality by focusing not only on the text, starting with an explanation of the television show and a full transcription word for word of the segment analyzed, but also the visual elements in the segment such as the subheadings, editorial cuts, camera angle, etc.

This Week is a weekly public affairs program of ABC News that airs Sunday mornings and analyzes news of the previous week. In March 2010, Christiane Amanpour was hired as the anchor of the show (ABC News, 2010), and served in that capacity for less than two years, leaving in 2012, after the program fell from the second to the third highest rated program in its time slot (Stelter, 2011). Amanpour, who is Iranian American, was born to a Muslim Iranian father and a Christian British mother in England, where she was educated in a Catholic boarding school from the age of 11 (Biography.com, n.d.). Amanpour, an Emmy-winning reporter who started her career in 1983 (Amanpour, 2006), usually takes mainstream media stances on political issues, including Islam, which tend to go hand-in-hand with mainstream media’s political agendas—not surprising in the case of the Islamic revolution, because that revolution led to the exile of her family from Iran (Biography.com, n.d.).

To make this a comprehensive analysis of the *This Week* program, I surveyed all coverage of Arab revolutions happening during Amanpour’s tenure as the anchor, searching for segments that focused on the role of women in the revolution. The episode analyzed, titled “Women of the Revolution,” was the only episode devoted to the role of Arab and/or Muslim women in those revolutions, with Amanpour inviting four guests to speak on women’s issues in relation to revolutions occurring

during the peak of the Arab Spring. The women were (as introduced by Amanpour in the segment): “Tina Brown, editor in chief of the *Daily Beast* and *News Week* who was hosting a Women of the World summit that week”; some of the women involved in the summit also were guests: “Dr. Nawal El Saadawi, a long-time activist for women’s rights in Egypt; Zainab Salbi, the Iraqi founder of Women for Women International; and Sussan Tahmasebi, who has been at the forefront of the struggle for women’s rights in Iran” (ABC News, 2011c).

Except for El Saadawi, none of these women actually were involved in revolutions occurring in the Arab World at that time. These women were selected because they represented “media darlings” to Amanpour, who, herself, is a Western media darling. El Saadawi is one of the most famous Arab feminists in the world, but the other three women all were US citizens, fluent in English, Westerners (i.e., Brown) or educated in the West (i.e., Salbi and Tahmasebi), and looked Western in style; for instance, none wore a scarf or hijab, or even clothes representing regions of the revolutions.

This group of women also did not include one of the most prominent activists in the Egyptian revolution, which just had culminated at that time with the removal of President Muhammad Hosni El Sayed Mubarak: Egyptian blogger Asmaa Mahfouz. This oversight would not be the only time that “street” women of the revolution were absent. When Amanpour decided to shed light on the role of social media in coordinating protestors around the Arab and Islamic Worlds, interviewees in a February 20, 2011 segment of *This Week*, titled “#revolution,” similarly, were middle-class, Western-educated young men and women, including Google’s marketing executive Wael Ghoneim. Her main female participant in that segment was Nadine Waheb, an Egyptian American blogger from New York who had never left the United States to participate in the revolution on the ground, according to Amanpour, but was given a great share of the credit for directing it from the United States.

In the segment analyzed, Amanpour started the conversation with an optimistic note about change and the role of women in nation building. She introduced her guests, starting with Tina Brown, although a focus on Nawal El Saadawi might have been expected, as she was the only interviewee from one of the revolution regions. She then asked the “ladies” if they thought that women’s gains were solidified and set in stone, looking at Salbi, who responded immediately enthusiastically and warned everyone that, historically, women’s rights in those regions had been “hijacked” once revolutions were over.

Amanpour then took a sharp turn in the conversation into the “rescue narrative,” when she asked Tina Brown about what Hillary Clinton, US Secretary of State and on the cover of *Newsweek* at the time, could do to “help these women in these revolutions.” This question was absurd given that Clinton took an anti-revolution stance at the beginning of the protests in Egypt, stating on January 25, 2011 that “Mubarak is an important US partner in the Middle East” (Siddique, Owen, and Gabbatt, n.d.).

On January 30, 2011, during an interview with Christiane Amanpour for ABC News, although Clinton tried to backtrack, she still defended the Egyptian regime as a long-term ally of the United States and Israel. Moreover, in 2009, Clinton told journalists that she considered Mubarak “family” (Redmond, 2011). Even more absurd was the way in which Brown responded, invoking a classical neoliberal hijacking of the role of actual “women of the revolution”:

What’s interesting right now is that Hillary Clinton, in fact, has actually met her moment in a sense, because her long-held conviction has always been women are the leading indicator. . . . If you empower women, you are going to make huge changes in the democracy movement and the GDP [gross domestic product] of the countries concerned. She has been bounding that trumpet for a long time, so this is unique. You see her really in action . . . what she is doing. We followed her, for instance, during her trip to Yemen few weeks before the Arab revolution and she was conducting a robust town hall where people were encouraged to talk. . . . They were being encouraged to ask about women’s rights, and, after that meeting, she met with [a] few of the women who clustered around her and asked her . . . , “Can you help us educate women here?”

There were two troubling issues represented in Brown’s statement. The first issue is that Brown invoked the “White woman’s burden” (Cloud, 2004; Farooqi, 2011; Syed and Ali, 2011), with Clinton being asked by women in Yemen to educate women there, which is a deceptive claim when taking into consideration anti-imperialist sentiments in the Arab World, in general, and in Yemen, in particular. The second issue is that Brown tried to give Clinton credit indirectly for the role of Arab women in the revolutions, and, maybe, in inspiring revolutions, by saying that those revolutions followed Clinton’s trip to Yemen a few weeks before the Arab revolution, and by saying that Clinton held a “robust” town hall meeting in Yemen “where people were encouraged to talk.”

The last part of Brown’s quote represents the White women’s burden, including Brown herself, a recycled colonial burden that goes back hundreds of years, but presented, here in a modern neoliberal frame. According to Ahluwalia (2006), as

Ronald Inden (1986: 408) points out, the knowledge acquired by the Orientalist appropriates “the power to represent the Oriental, to translate and explain his (and her) thoughts and acts not only to Europeans and Americans but also to the Orientals themselves.” (541)

Hence, Brown not only explained to the US audience ills of Arab and Islamic societies but she also educated, as her idol Clinton had done, Arab and Muslim

women about what was wrong with their societies. She added later, “Civil society and also doing away with the barbaric custom, for instance, of . . . child brides.”

Brown’s statement was a modern form of imperial conquest through “education” or “acculturation,” also known as “soft power” in neoliberal terminology (regarding soft power and nongovernmental funding in the Arab World, see Abu-Lughod and El-Mahdi, 2011). This conquest was done in hopes of creating more media darlings who could be hosted on television programs by media personnel such as Amanpour, an Iranian British media darling, and who would be viewed as the pride of US success.

In the next part of the television segment, Amanpour, at last, addressed El Saadawi, who is known in the Arab World as a very Western-oriented feminist (Darraj, 2003), especially in terms of her anti-Islamic, and, particularly, anti-veil, views. Arguably, El Saadawi embodies the media darling mold more than any other Arab or Muslim woman. Amanpour probed El Saadawi about the fear of Egyptian women losing their footing, especially in writing the Constitution. El Saadawi took a very radical shift in the conversation, which was a rare historical moment for her, that, obviously, shocked Amanpour, whose facial expression, when the camera zoomed in on her, seemed to indicate that she was not amused by El-Saadawi’s response:

I look to women’s rights as global and local, and we cannot be liberated in Egypt as a country that is not liberated. Our problem is colonialism. I am here in New York . . . in Washington, and I want to speak to you Americans and the government; it’s the problem of colonialism.

Amanpour replied swiftly: “What do you mean by that?” to which El Sadawi explained:

I mean that . . . if we are independent, if we are producing our food, then we will be OK. Now, 50% of the people in Egypt are under \$2 a-day because of American neocolonialism. You see, so women cannot be liberated.

This anti-colonial and anti-imperial tone taken by El Sadawi, who insisted that the liberation of women in her country must come as part of a larger national liberation project, elicited a swift response from Amanpour, who interrupted her and shifted the conversation to Salbi, who earlier had delivered the response for which Amanpour was looking. The almost resentful astonishment in Amanpour’s tone and facial expressions could be attributed to two factors: El Saadawi’s (a) strong defiance against US hegemony on a US television show that addressed a US audience, and/or (b) strong diversion from what many neoliberal feminists,

such as Amanpour, believe to be the universality of the female experience and feminism, with no link to the political economy of imperial hegemony.

El Saadawi continued in defiance, stating, “In a country not liberated, you see [looking at other panelists instead of at Amanpour], I have to link that. It cannot be . . . women’s issues . . . are global issues, local issues, politics, economics—so, everything.” She ended by shifting her eyes back to Amanpour. Hence, the brown woman had turned the tables, educating the other women, including White ones, on how to interpret and deconstruct women’s issues in her country. She took control over her narrative by linking it to issues of global hegemony. Thus, during this media moment, the Oriental subject taught the Orientalist master.

At that point, Amanpour retreated somewhat in the face of such defiance, shifting her attention, again, to Salbi, and saying, “Nawal is talking about the real big picture here.” At that moment (3:49), the camera zoomed in, again, on Amanpour, who looked very serious, putting her fingers under her nose, as Salbi happily took back the wheel. Immediately, there was an editorial cut, as if Amanpour was not supposed to be showing this deep disappointment. Salbi was on target and delivered the typical speech about putting women rights at the forefront of a country’s rights, because if that did not occur, women actually might lose them in the process. She also painted the stereotypical image of how awful things are for women in the “Middle East.”

Amanpour, somewhat relieved, turned to Tahmasebi and changed the topic to Iran, reminding the roundtable of what happened to women there after the revolution, condensing Iranian women’s issues into hijab-only enforcement, which resonated with Macdonald’s (2006) conclusion that, in spite of the increase in Western media’s attention to Muslim women, their coverage was limited to a continuing obsession with veiling and unveiling. However, Tahmasebi surprised her by providing another anti-Orientalist response and reclaiming the agency of Iranian and other Muslim women:

We are surprised to see women out in these revolutions on the streets, but the reality for someone like myself who has lived in Iran and worked in Iran, it is not surprising at all. To see it in Iran . . . to see it in Egypt, because women are present, and wherever you are in these countries, there are women who are advocating for women’s rights, and I think one way to do this is that women’s movements, themselves, should be very vigilant in defending their rights. We need to have regional opportunities to make women’s rights an indigenous issue and a global solidarity.

Tahmasebi thus rejected the rescue narrative and insisted on the indigenesness of the solution, a call for change from within, and, simultaneously, accepted global solidarity over dominance. Stabile and Kumar’s (2005) rhetorical analysis of

media coverage of Afghani women before and after 9/11 found a similar overuse by US media of the “oppression” image, ignoring the bravery of Afghani women activists, especially those of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA).

Amanpour resorted to calling on Brown, who seemed to be on the same page as herself. However, Amanpour changed abruptly the topic to extremism and terrorism, and, out of the blue, she asked Brown if the revolution were a blow to Al-Qaeda. There was a mirror shift in the conversation that was reflected on the screen caption: Instead of “Female Freedom Fighters,” it now read “Al Qaeda and Women.” Hence, again, the segment resorted to the recycled image of violent brown Muslim men, ignoring the solidarity between men and women in Tahrir Square, and in other protests in the Arab and Muslim Worlds.

Brown jumped at this opportunity and acknowledged El Saadawi not as a capable strong feminist with agency and defiance but as the exceptional victim who needs rescue and help:

Women like Nawal here have been working with this for you know 30–40 years doing brave acts and speaking out when ... I mean was jailed for speaking out about her feminist ideas in this repressive society, so it’s about vigilance, it really is, and for America to do everything it can to support and educate without being clumsy about it, without going and creating blowback about it, because . . . what can happen is that, suddenly, it is presented that the women’s rights are issues of foreign influence, and once that happens, you know, that nationalistic Islamist fervor takes place and the whole issue could be submerged. So, it is really really important for us to help them in every way we can.

Brown, thus, used Orientalist discourse that was based on her belief that those Arab and Muslim women needed to be rescued. She did not call for direct military occupation, such as in Afghanistan and Iraq; instead, she promoted using soft power, invoking, one more time, the neoliberal feminist idea of the White woman’s burden. The duality in her speech, however, was apparent; although she called for interference, she also predicted that “these people,” the “Others,” would resist such interference and she, herself, seemed to resist that resistance. She wanted “those people” to submit to the will of the United States and the West, because Brown, similar to her role model Clinton, could not seem to accept that there might be a chance that “those women” might want something else from the revolution. This framing also was in line with the American exceptionalism ideology that promotes that idea that the United States should play a custodial role over other nations.

The neoliberal tone established in this television program continued when Amanpour asked El Saadawi about the Muslim Brotherhood, with the caption on

the screen still reading “Al Qaeda and Women.” This was part of the never-ending attempt to view all Islamic thought as despotic, repressive and nomadic. Amanpour, with her long journalistic experience of the region, knew exactly the difference between Al Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood, but at that time, it seemed that the Muslim Brotherhood might have had a strong chance of ruling Egypt, which was regarded by neoliberals as problematic because of the potential national anti-imperialist project that the Muslim Brotherhood might bring to the table.

When El Saadawi fought back and started to talk about the bigger global issues, again, there was an editorial cut at minute 7:07. It is, of course, impossible to know what had been cut out but, regardless, Amanpour practiced “selective reporting.” Resorting to the easiest tactic of attacking a political project in the region, women were referred to, again, within victimhood and rescue narratives, when Amanpour asked El Saadawi, “Do you think the Muslim Brotherhood is an enemy of women in Egypt?” Again, in a second blow, El Saadawi defied what was expected of her as a media darling when she answered:

No, no, I am not afraid of . . . They ask me, “Are you afraid of Muslim brothers?” [in defiance] No. I am afraid of local dictators, you know, the ones who will come after Mubarak and global dictators.

The caption was changed back to “Female Freedom Fighters,” and Amanpour looked curtly away from El Saadawi, interrupted her, and started to address Zainab, but Nawal fought back for her earned spot on the program, saying:

I didn’t finish my point [*with Amanpour, obviously, annoyed by her*], because we are always concentrating on local dictators who oppress women. We are oppressed by both external powers. I am afraid of external powers. That point is related to my liberation.

Amanpour tried to interrupt her, again, saying, “But that is kind of what I was talking about external idea of oppression and also extremism, fundamentalism, and indeed terrorism.” However, that was not what El Saadawi was talking about; she was providing an oppositional narrative to women’s liberation that was rooted in anti-colonial and anti-imperial dominance over her country and culture.

The last two minutes of the program are silent on that point, and both Salbi and Tahmasebi provided some analysis of engaging women in the nation building of their countries. However, El Saadawi failed to enact her role as an Arab media darling and, consequently, was a big disappointment to Amanpour.

Lastly, in media production, every second of a program matters; the decision-making process of every aspect of a media product is conscious and intentional.

It can be guessed easily who was given less media space and air time, based on their views and whether they fulfilled their media darling role. Because El Saadawi was defiant in the face of neocolonialism, she was given only 87 seconds of airtime and was the only one interrupted, not once but several times. Her interview also was the only one that was edited. In comparison, the speaker with the least time, but close to El Saadawi, was Tahmasebi, who was given only 79 seconds. In contrast, the perfect media darling, with her Western clean-cut looks, Western feminist ideology and Western education, was Salbi, who received 130 seconds of airtime, which almost was double that of both El Saadawi and Tahmasebi. Tina Brown, the embodiment of the hegemonic, White, Western, neoliberal feminist, got 114 seconds of airtime.

Amanpour had done several roundtable discussions about the revolutions during the months of February and March 2011, but they were not devoted necessarily to the role of women in the revolutions. In all other episodes, she hosted several Arab women to talk about various issues, such as social media and the role of the youth, and all of these women were within the Arab and Muslim media darling trope. For example, Mona Eltahawy, who became a superstar media sensation after writing several pieces attacking Islam, Muslim men and the niqab (a cloth that covers the face as part of the hijab), was one of Amanpour's guests on February 13, 2011. Amanpour also hosted Egyptian journalists Nadia Abou el-Magd and Lamia Radi on February 6, 2011, both of whom looked very Western and spoke fluent English, expressing views that were within the parameters expected of them on US mainstream media outlets.

Conclusion

This essay has given several examples of mainstream media darlings, providing an anticolonial oppositional narrative through those who resist when given the chance. Unfortunately, the US mainstream media not only recycle unchanging Orientalist images of Arab and Muslim women but also promote colonial and imperial interventions in the Arab and Islamic World. For Amanpour, it would not be the first time she promoted such interventions. For example, in her response to the killing of Osama Bin Laden, Amanpour said, "The job is not finished there. You'll talk to the commanders. We'll talk to them. It's the Taliban there who are waging war against the United States, and that job is not finished" (Naureckas, 2011: 8).

This essay focused on Amanpour as a case study that represents US mainstream media's coverage of Muslim and Arab women, because of her long journalistic experience working for several major television giant companies, including CNN International, CBS and ABC. It is unfortunate that her stance on these issues lacks sophistication and depth, resulting in the same old stereotypical assumptions about

women's issues in the Arab and Muslim Worlds. Another example of her neoliberal coverage is documented by Stabile and Kumar (2005):

These realities have not prevented journalists from glorifying the US invasion of Afghanistan. "What a difference regime change makes," enthused CNN's Christiane Amanpour (explicitly endorsing the invasion of Iraq) on a segment of *60 Minutes* broadcast over a year after the bombing of Afghanistan commenced. Entitled "The Women of Afghanistan," the segment proposed to look at "how women have fared" one year later (CBS, 2002). Not surprisingly, the program dealt mainly with girls' education and women's liberation from the burqa. There was no mention of outbreaks of diseases like polio and measles, of chronic hunger or dreadful poverty. (776)

More analysis is needed of other media icons and their coverage of issues related to Arab and Muslim women, to see the extent to which the concept of "media darlings" is generalizable. For instance, media personalities who are considered to be feminists, such as Barbara Walters and Diane Sawyer, have covered Arab and Muslim women in multiple programs and segments. There also needs to be a comparative look at the salience of real "street" female activists on social media, comparing their actions with their coverage by US mainstream media.

More than nine years have passed since the igniting events of the Egyptian revolution that helped make visible Arab and Muslim women activists, but Western mainstream media, especially in the United States, are still (re)producing and recycling same media darlings. Will the day arrive when indigenous Arab/Muslim women get their fair representation in US mainstream media?

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