



The Racial Limits of Western Feminism: Empire, Capitalism, and Selective Solidarity in the Case of Palestine and Iran

Arthemis Snijders

This piece examines the racialized boundaries of Western feminism through an analysis of the intersections between imperialism and capitalism, with particular attention to the Orientalist construction of Muslims—especially Muslim women. It argues that these representational frameworks produce Muslim women as subjects outside the category of feminist equality. Drawing on two case studies, the genocide in Gaza and the illegal war in Iran, I demonstrate how such events are differentially interpreted and politically framed within dominant feminist discourse. In doing so, I highlight how Western feminism is implicated in broader structures of power that sustain racialized hierarchies and colonial logics.

Imperial, colonial, Zionist, white, and Western feminisms, though distinct in their historical and geopolitical articulations, share a common structural root: They are often built upon the dehumanisation of the “Other.” Historically, Black women and those racialised as non-white were excluded from dominant feminist movements, which largely centred the experiences and rights of white women. In many cases, these women were not even regarded as fully human within the epistemological frameworks that underpinned early feminist thought (Davis 1983; hooks 1981). In *Women, Race and Class*, Davis describes in detail how the National American Women’s Suffrage Association (NAWSA) was riddled with racism. At the NAWSA convention in 1901, Susan B. Anthony’s welcoming message reflected the ideology, which had become a combination of racism, sexism, white supremacy, and eugenics. “While women, she argued, had been corrupted in the past by ‘man’s appetites and passions,’ it was time for them to fulfil their purpose of becoming saviours of ‘the Race.’ It would be through women’s intelligent emancipation that (the race) shall be purified.” (Davis 1983, p 72).

When racialised women have been incorporated into feminist discourse, this inclusion has frequently been instrumentalised to justify imperial projects. A paradigmatic example is the framing of Western intervention in Afghanistan as a mission to “save brown women from brown men” (Abu-Lughod 2002; Spivak 1988). Such narratives obscure the agency of local women while legitimising military and political domination. We see this exact scenario play out today in Iran, where the genuine grassroots movement of “women, life, freedom” got coopted by Western imperialist actors, who used it to push for regime change and ultimately as legitimacy for the current illegal war (BOEH! n.d).

In contemporary Western contexts, although many white women have achieved significant economic and legal rights, these gains are embedded within a racialised and gendered global capitalist order. This system continues to rely on the labour of racialised women, particularly in care work, domestic labour, and other forms of reproductive labour, thereby enabling the “independence” of more privileged women (Glenn 1992; Federici 2020). For Glenn, this is proof that “forging a political agenda that addresses the universal needs of women is highly problematic, not just because women’s priorities differ but because gains for



some groups may require a corresponding loss of advantage and privilege for others.” (Glenn 1992, 37).

In light of the genocide in Gaza and the current illegal war in Iran, the limitations of Western feminism have become increasingly visible, particularly for those in the Global North. This raises critical questions: To whom does Western feminism apply? Who is recognised as fully human and thus worthy of solidarity and protection? And to what extent does contemporary Western feminism function as a form of ideological “window dressing,” assuaging liberal sensibilities without challenging global inequalities?

Western feminist solidarity often appears contingent upon identification with victims who resemble Western norms, such as Ukrainian women, or those who conform to liberal expectations of behaviour. For example, symbolic acts such as removing the hijab are often valorised. At the same time, the voices of women who choose to wear it, whether in Western societies, Palestine, or Iran, are marginalised or ignored (Mahmood 2005). Meanwhile, Palestinian women still face acute forms of gendered violence: rising miscarriage rates, childbirth without anaesthesia, lack of menstrual products, and exposure to lethal military force. The Palestinian Feminist Collective has described these conditions as constituting a form of “reproductive genocide” (Palestinian Feminist Collective 2024).

The current illegal war in Iran is another clear illustration of how imperial feminism was instrumentalised to justify US and Israeli Zionist intervention. After the killing of Mahsa Jina Amini, European politicians were cutting their hair in solidarity with Iranian women, on television and even in the European parliament (Reuters 2022). Yet, when these same women are subjected to US/Zionist bombs that kill them, abject silence follows. The US “double-tap” missile strike, which killed almost 170 schoolgirls in Minab, Iran, is the most prominent and recent example of this (United Nations 2026).

This raises further questions: Is the marginalisation of Palestinian women due to their racialisation as Muslim subjects, or because the perpetrator of violence is aligned with a predominantly white, settler colonial framework? Western feminist discourse has long been preoccupied with saving “brown women from brown men” (Spivak 1988, 296), yet Palestinian women are not calling for rescue from their own communities, but rather from occupation and structural violence. So, rather, saving brown women from “white men”. Why is this claim not widely recognised as a legitimate feminist demand? The relative silence of Western feminists suggests a troubling answer. The response to both questions lies in the ways Muslim women’s agency has been erased, as well as in the West’s longstanding construction of itself as the superior “saviour.”

What remains of Western feminism if it is reduced to performative gestures, corporate “girlboss” rhetoric, or symbolic acts of resistance, while failing to address systemic violence? Media representations that celebrate gender equality within the Israeli military (New York Times 2024), often through hypersexualised imagery, stand in stark contrast to portrayals of Muslim women in Gaza as inherently oppressed. These narratives reinforce Islamophobic tropes that have proliferated, particularly since 9/11 and the so-called ‘war on Terror’, “a war seeks to force a choice between a “tolerant” West (that scapegoats and surveils brown bodies) and an intolerant Islamic world, with its monolithic oppression of women and queers.” (Tavia Nyong’o 2017, xiv). From this framing emerge three gendered stereotypes: the “dangerous” Muslim man, the “imperilled” Muslim woman, and the “civilised” European (Sherene H. Razack 2008, 2).

Such representations strip Muslim women of agency, dehumanise Palestinian men, erase queer and trans Palestinians, and obscure the presence of Palestinian Christians.



Historically and contemporarily, Palestinian women have played central roles in resistance movements, whether through armed struggle, such as figures like Leila Khaled, or through professional and activist labour as doctors, journalists, and organisers under conditions of الاحتلال (occupation). Their contributions challenge reductive narratives that deny their political agency.

Ultimately, the construction of the “Other” is foundational to the operation of imperial and colonial feminisms. In *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said explains how the West historically produced the “Orient” (the Middle East, North Africa, and Asia) as its cultural opposite: irrational, backward, emotional, and uncivilised, in contrast to a rational, modern, and superior “Occident”, with the hegemony of a superior European identity becoming so entrenched that overriding these ideas became impossible (Said 1978, 3). This was not an objective description, but a discourse; a system of knowledge that justified and reinforced colonial domination and later imperialism. “Othering” is therefore not just about difference, but about power: The West defines the “Other” in ways that legitimise control, imperialist intervention, and hierarchy. In other words, the construction of the Orient as ‘inferior’ was necessary not only to allow for colonialism and imperialist intervention, but also for Europeans to construct their own ‘superior’ identity as diametrically opposed.

The erasure of Palestinian plurality, humanity, and political subjectivity is not incidental but constitutive of these frameworks. In this sense, the material reality of “Israel” can be understood as intertwined with broader histories of settler colonialism and racial hierarchy (Veracini 2010; Wolfe 2006). These systems are sustained through interconnected capitalist industries of Islamophobia, surveillance, carcerality, and the so-called “War on Terror.” The silence of many Western feminists, therefore, should not be surprising. Yet it remains deeply disillusioning, as it exposes the gap between the professed ideals of universal human rights and the selective application of feminist solidarity.

Works Cited

- Abu-Lughod, Lila. 2002. “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others.” *American Anthropologist* 104 (3): 783–90. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.2002.104.3.783>.
- BOEH!. “Jin, Jiyan, Azadi: Baas Over Eigen Hoofd! Need We Say More?” Accessed April 12, 2026. <https://boeh.be/jin-jiyan-azadi-baas-over-eigen-hoofd-need-we-say-more/>.
- Davis, Angela. 1983. *Women, Race, & Class*. New York: Vintage.
- Federici, Silvia. 2020. *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*. Oakland, CA: PM Press.
- Glenn, Evelyn Nakano. 1992. “From Servitude to Service Work: Historical Continuities in the Racial Division of Paid Reproductive Labor.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 18 (1): 1–43. <https://doi.org/10.1086/494777>.
- hooks, bell. 2015. *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge.
- Kershner, Isabel. 2024. “Israeli Women Fight on the Front Line in Gaza, a First.” *The New York Times*, January 19, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/19/world/middleeast/israel-gaza-women-soldiers.html>.



- Mahmood, Saba. 2005. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Rev. ed. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Nyong'o, Tavia. 2017. "Foreword." In *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, by Jasbir K. Puar, xi–xvi. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Palestinian Feminist Collective. 2024. "Statement on Reproductive Genocide in Gaza." <https://palestinianfeministcollective.org/the-pfc-condemns-reproductive-genocide-in-gaza/>.
- Puar, Jasbir. 2017. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822371755>.
- Razack, Sherene. 2008. *Casting Out: The Eviction of Muslims from Western Law and Politics*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Reuters. 2022. "Swedish MEP Cuts Hair During Speech in Solidarity with Iranian Women." October 5, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/swedish-mep-cuts-hair-during-speech-solidarity-with-iranian-women-2022-10-05/>.
- Said, Edward. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1988. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, 271–313. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- United Nations. 2026. "Deadly Bombing of Iran Primary School 'a Grave Violation of Humanitarian Law': UNESCO." *UN News*, March 1, 2026. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2026/03/1167063>.
- Veracini, Lorenzo. 2010. *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-639-26-5>.
- Wolfe, Patrick. 2006. "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native." *Journal of Genocide Research* 8 (4): 387–409. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623520601056240>.

ARTHEMIS SNIJDERS is a PhD candidate at the University of Ghent in Belgium. Her research focuses on gendered islamophobia and the racialisation of Muslims in Belgium. More specifically, she looks at the various manifestations of Islamophobia, everyday and structural, and how these intersect with whiteness, secularism and racial capitalism, as well as the responses and resistance strategies that Muslims use to negotiate (gendered) Islamophobia.