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To What Extent Can Body Politics be used to Define Afghan Women's Sexuality as Locations of Power and Control under Taliban's Rule? A Contemporary Foucauldian Interpretation of Femininity in Body Politics

By Chiara Rambaldi

Abstract- Central Asia. Iran to the west, and Pakistan to the east. We are in Afghanistan, and more specifically, in a Taliban-controlled country. The character of national politics and social connections in Taliban Afghanistan has been shaped by harsh gender policies and patriarchal restrictions. The Taliban's leadership has exacerbated the country's weak social structure and lack of a centralised, modern state, resulting in a severe case of underdevelopment (Goodson, 2001). Statistics are instructive: socio-economic issues such as unemployment and poverty account for 20% of national concerns, while education account for 12%, and finally, a lack of essential amenities for 8% (Bizhan, 2013). In this difficult situation, it is logical to wonder: who are the most vulnerable members of this fractured society? The focus turns to women. Indeed, women are the demographic segment paying the largest price for Afghan shortcomings in terms of Taliban decision-making. Taliban's severe regulations on women, who are denied of countless social opportunities under the Taliban patriarchal culture, disguise Afghan underdevelopment, resulting in detrimental inequalities inside the country (Moghadam 2002).

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I. Introduction

An examination of the restrictive situation women face in the Taliban-Afghan environment is required to establish the progress principle for a just, inclusive society free of misogyny and inequities. As a result, this essay will try to do so and will be divided into four main sections, each of which is mutually exclusive. The first part describes Taliban advent and ascend into Afghanistan, to better contextualise the following discussion of the analysed case study. Secondly, a discussion of Foucauldian bio-political conceptions and supporting contributions to his theory will follow, which help understand how bio-power and bio-politics are utilised to control women's bodies for Taliban to dominate Afghanistan. As Foucauldian ideas will be the driving force behind this essay's analysis, the third section will be an exploration of some Taliban policies used to exert authority over women's bodies. The latter will be investigated in terms of education, clothing, and health-care interventions. While Foucauldian principles are crucial to the examination of Afghan women's body subjugation, the final essay component will be a theoretical criticism of the Foucauldian power and resistance paradigm. Eventually, this study connects Foucault's theory with the Taliban's control over women's sexuality; an overall study pointing to the Taliban's creation of "docile bodies", which are key components of Taliban knowledge construction, public system domination, and authoritarian ascendancy.

Afghanistan and its people have been under Taliban authority since the autumn of 1994, when Taliban leader Omar created a fundamentalist and extreme religious student militia in reaction to widespread social unrest across the nation (Johnson, et al., 2007). In the twenty-first century, Taliban control and its governing power in Afghanistan have come and gone, enacting restrictive measures based on a rigid interpretation of Islam (Rashid, 2000). Because of their gender and class relations' patriarchal view, The Taliban's rise to power has been facilitated by the country's fragile state, which is ranked 15th out of 16 on the Fragile States Index, which is a valuable tool for identifying the most vulnerable states on the edge of collapse (Anon, 2021). Along with the lack of action of the international, and arguably feminist, community, Taliban have progressively increased their power over the whole country, taking advantage of the Afghan political instability and fragmented ethnic-based society, which resisted Western development strategies (Gallagher, 2005).

While the consequences of this harsh condition include LGBTQ people, persons with disabilities, orphans, and other vulnerable citizens, women remain the most vulnerable and widely oppressed part of society, as this paper will show. Patriarchy-based social order confines them, granting only men rights, dignity, and unlimited access to public space. To impose power and control over women, the Taliban employ a variety of measures, including imposing cultural norms through self-surveillance and self-discipline, particularly in areas affecting the body, such as hygiene, healthcare, and sexuality (Mottier, 2012). While the Taliban have exploited sexuality and (women's) bodies for biopolitical benefit, Foucauldian notions best define the disciplinary authority used directly on the bodies to maintain and perpetuate Taliban power structures. Therefore, the following Foucauldian theorisation of Afghan women's marginalisation may contribute to a better under-

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standing of the development challenges Afghan women and the international community face.

"Bio-politics" is probably Michael Foucault's major contribution to the literature on power rooted in sexuality. The concept of "bio-politics" has influenced development studies and other fields in the idea that contemporary State authority governs biological life (Agamben, 1998). Foucault expresses the concept of sovereign power embedded in sexuality in his work "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" where power is understood as functioning at two poles: human population and human body (Foucault, M., 1984). Accordingly, he analyses traditional forms of power established in "domination practises" offering the concepts of "bio-politics of the population" and "bio-power" (McNay, 1991). The former is concerned with population control by scientific interventions in reproduction, mortality, and illness; the latter with individual body control and domination (Foucault, 2004). To clarify, Foucault claims political order is maintained by the production of "docile bodies"; thus, passive, subjugated, and productive individuals whose sexuality is the focus of micro and macro level power dispersal in social interactions, practices, and structures adopted by the sovereign. Thus, "biopower" acts on our bodies, regulating them through self-discipline, eventually subjugating ourselves. On a more concrete level, schools, hospitals, prisons, and family's nexus are under the State's control of disciplining, surveillance, and punishment creating docile bodies integrated in the systems of social controls (Foucault 1981).

Foucault's insights on sexuality, power, and knowledge enhance Development studies and related subjects, inspiring new perspectives on political agency, power regimes, and gender expression. Specifically, Foucauldian ideas have expanded the latter feminist works on women's subjugation. His thesis that power relations are essential to the social sphere and work largely via the human body allows feminists to debate the origins of gender inequality, which are said to be founded on anatomical distinctions caused by social hierarchies (Deveaux, 1994). This draws attention to the destructive consequences of cultural standards of attractiveness, which, according to Braidotti (1989), obstruct women feelings about their bodies, appearance, and social norms. On the one hand, the body is crucial to a feminist explanation of women's oppression since the construction of gender inequality is built and legitimised on biological sexuality becoming power sites. On the other, feminists pointed out Foucauldian limitations, claiming he overlooks the "gender myopia" traditionally characterised in sociological theories. For instance, Bartky (1988) claims Foucault considers the body as a genderless entity, thus failing to explain why men and women connect to contemporary institutions differently.

Bartky's argument of "gender blindness" may be found in Foucault's work Discipline and Punish (1977), where female bodies are examined without difference from masculine norms (2015). Undoubtedly, the entire contribution of Foucault to power and sexuality illustrates the existing political system, in which societies divide political authority both vertically and horizontally via the emergence of enforcing minute practises based on the sexes of the bodies they control. Foucauldian principles are not only applicable to a wide range of fields, but they are also relevant to the case study presented in this paper. Indeed, the following discussion will focus on the Taliban's use of power dynamics in the administration of sexuality, which disproportionately affects women. Foucauldian bio-politics eventually tries to explain Taliban's policies and practises for managing women's bodies, with the ultimate objective of attaining societal control through micro-level dominance policies (Foucault, and Sheridan, 1977).

II. Education

The absence of education for girls is a significant venue for Taliban bio-politics. Women are excluded from receiving education, from the most basic to the most advanced (Hartley-Blecic, 2001). Despite the Taliban's declaration that they will open certain educational facilities for females, many schools have been shuttered under their control, encouraging the creation of the docile individuals Taliban can control (Ruttig, 2011). Indeed, women's lack of schooling becomes a mean of imposing bio-politics via managing Afghan women's social subordination. Women subjection to Taliban rules requires them to align their bodies to Taliban socio-political systems of power; in Foucauldian words, a scenario explicative of how women's bodies are bio-politically subordinated to Taliban authority by being portrayed as subpar and in need of external control (Foucault, and Rabinow, 1984).

The lack of education has also had significant influence on women's employment, which is exacerbated when widows are involved. Since widowed women are the sole source of income for their families and since many women lack the fundamental knowledge to obtain employment, they have no other option than begging on the streets and sell their personal things to buy food for themselves and their children (Bordo, 2020). Again, the lack of schooling and career opportunities available to women make them vulnerable and subjugated to male superiority, as Taliban's mandate for female illiteracy creates social conduits for male dominance, subjugating and enslaving the inferior via their ignorance (Mottier 2012). Women are denaturalised by their sexuality, becoming docile bodies, perceived as passive, submissive, dependent, and inferior to the rest of society. In other words, Taliban's intervention in women's life and their

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biopolitical subordination lead to unrestricted State control over their micro-level dimension of life. The latter impedes women's personal growth, which may be developed by education, resulting, in Foucauldian terms, symbols and sources of Taliban power.

III. Clothing

Other Taliban policies include requiring women to wear a burqa. Indeed, control over women's clothing code is an essential aspect of Taliban politics, and women's bodies are the site of their authority. Hijabisation (the adoption of the hijab, which is the Arabic name for burqa) is a product of Taliban state coercion, since their government restricts women's ability to express themselves via clothes by mandating them to wear Muslim clothing (Pylypa, 1998). Mandatory clothing code is a climax of a condition of women deprivation, as local reports declared. The latter states that women are not allowed to wear white veils, socks, or shoes, and that if they do, they will be punished (Hafez, 2008). Arguably, clothing constraints become a symbol of the micro-level of physical discipline explained by Foucauldian theories. Taliban rule is exercised through Afghan women's bodies, which serve as sites of Taliban power-device and power-object through regulations of micro-level engagement in women's daily lives, such as the choice of dress code (or lack thereof). Consequently, dress rules are the result of social policies that establish gendered citizenship based on laws defining the body; eventually, the woman body itself becomes the definition of citizenship for women in Afghanistan (Mottier, 2012).

Furthermore, Taliban restrictions over women's clothing mandate public and police oversight, which allow any male to demand compliance (Ramirez 2015). This means that any men may function as a power controller over a woman's body, reinforcing women's subordination and fragility in society. Women who are caught without wearing a burqa are reported to the Taliban's Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Suppression of Vice and beaten on the street (Zakhilwal, and Thomas, 2008).

However, a more problematic scenario arises when women cannot afford a burqa. Women without one are obliged to stay at home or fear being severely beaten by the Taliban. Similarly, handicapped women who require prostheses are confined to their houses since the burqa will not fit over this equipment to entirely conceal their bodies. Arguably, the Taliban regime's power dynamics is sovereign in determining what constitutes normative reality of feminine bodies. Wearing a burqa has given Afghan society the ability to define the "normal" and identify the "deviant" woman. Beyond biopolitics, Taliban body control affects physical intersectionality by controlling gender interactions with female disability, class, and other axes of difference, demonstrating that female bodies are at the crossroads of various identity markers and powers utilised by the Taliban (Foucault, 1975).

IV. Healthcare

Women are unable to receive open access to essential needs such as medical treatment under Taliban control. Internationally, the Physicians for Human Rights initially raised the issue in 1997, claiming the Taliban had stopped providing medical care to women (Amowitz, et al., 2002). Local reports also suggested that the only medical facility given to women was one in the capital, which was a 35-bed-makeshift construction, with no running water, nor power, nor surgical equipment (Browser, 2006). Therefore, many women are unable to receive medical care because of Taliban's prohibitions. If a woman is lucky enough to persuade a male doctor to cure her, he is not permitted to assess her or talk to her personally since all communication is conducted through her male companion (Pylypa, 1998). Again, micro-level control through bodily healthcare dominance exemplifies Taliban's surveillance and supervision of women, demonstrating power as unavoidable, fragmented, and impacting all parts of women's life, from their flesh to their brains.

After Taliban's control over the "anatomo-politics of the human body" (Mottier, 2012, p.143), most Afghan women health have deteriorated alarmingly due to limited access to clinical treatment, and in some cases, no access at all (Ahmed, 1992). There have been allegations of young women dying because of being denied admission to male-only facilities or being unable to seek professional help because they lacked a burqa or a male guardian (Doumato, 2000). Under Taliban control, women's bodies are rendered invisible to their natural needs, and they are just built bodies meant to fulfil their eugenics tasks for the welfare of the sovereign. While women's uniqueness is overshadowed by their eugenic biopolitics of life, eventually Afghan women's treatment is characterised by their social docility. This turns them into flexible body products and feasible sources of power.

Although Foucauldian concepts illuminate Afghan women bodily exploitation as sites of Taliban power in the context of a patriarchal society where cultural and religious norms set gender roles, Foucault's concepts also present limitations to this case study analysis which will be here discussed. The idea that "where there is power, there is opposition" is arguably the most significant limiting factor for Afghan women (Foucault, 1980b). Power, according to Foucault, is mostly generative, not oppressive. This might suggest that Afghan womens willingness to follow Taliban stringent norms drives them to willingly preserve their subjugation through self-discipline. However, I contend

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that when discussing the reality of Afghan women in such a repressive and male-dominated context, this idea of power supported by resistance is misleading. Contrarily, when the illusion of women resistance fades under the life threats of Taliban authority, Foucault's power-resistance paradigm reinforces the sense of Taliban empowerment. I argue that Foucault's power-resistance model prevents us from comprehending structural injustice in the context of Afghan women living under Taliban authority.

Under Taliban corridors of power, women are subjected to many types of control and subordination, such as strict behavioural canons and gender segregation, meaning that dominance is common and frequently unavoidable in this context. This viewpoint is supported by the large number of women who committed suicide to avoid being raped or mass hanged while fighting Taliban's control over their identities (Malik, and Jan, 2021). Questionably, when it comes to expatriated Afghan women activists who oppose the Taliban rule and are backed by a more liberal geo-political framework, the Foucauldian power and resistance paradigm may be a better match. Consequently, although being idealised within Afghanistan, resistance to the Taliban's gender policy is identified predominantly outside the nation (McLeod, 2011). The Afghan Women's Council based in Pakistan, and the Women's Association for Peace and Human Rights in Afghanistan based in the United States are just a few examples.

However, to show the discussed case study as a totality of meanings (Odysseos, 2009), it is critical to engage with Foucault's ideas on power, resistance, and sexuality interpretively via a hermeneutic filter. As a result, while Foucault's idea of power bears flaws, it remains an important contribution to our understanding of Taliban authority, Afghanistan's patriarchal social structure, and the lack of a developed and centralized state. As a result, the role of women's bodies as status and power indicators in the political system is illuminated.

Finally, this essay aimed to provide light on the condition of Afghan women under Taliban authority. Through an investigation of Taliban's employment of sexist policies that convert women into instrumental "bodies", sovereignty and societal control is exercised. From an introductory overview of the Taliban's ascension to power and their related governance programme, Foucauldian biopolitics is discussed in terms of his theoretical support to this essay. The latter provides a theoretical prism through which to comprehend how the Taliban's overarching socio-political control is entrenched in the symbolic and material management over women's bodies (Fluri, 2012). Based on the notion that power shapes meaning conditions that circulate "through the entire social body" (Shepherd, 2008, p.23), this paper studied the micro-level practical meanings of Taliban bio-political policies in terms of women's education, clothing, and medical treatment.

Eventually, it became obvious that the socio-political architecture of Afghanistan under Taliban control is as much a product of gender as of biopolitical activities. Exploring their place in life's politics helps us to think alongside and beyond Foucault, whose critique of power and resistance was addressed in the latest essay section. Arguably, understanding practises as means of the role biopolitics plays in the rational management of women's sexuality is fundamental to address gender apartheid as part of a larger developmental picture to avoid further suffering that could eventually lead to gender genocide. While the examined case study attempts to go beyond a practical exercise, I believe Foucault's theory of bio-power and control urgently calls for the global community to reflect on present body power producing methods. Individuals who have been silenced may only be given a voice by delving at the social discipline of human bodies, as the Afghan case demonstrates. Thus, a developmentalist project may be useful to end the replication of patriarchal power relationships and male privilege, as well as the persistence of gender inequity.

Disclosure statement

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