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## The Capitalist-Rescue Narrative, Afghanistan, and the War on Terror

Following the 9/11 attacks, North American writers have turned their attention to representing the experiences of Afghan women. Books such as Deborah Rodriguez's *Kabul Beauty School* and Gayle Tzemach Lemmon's *The Dressmaker of Khair Khana* recount the challenges facing Afghan girls and women in the face of gender-specific, state-sponsored sanctions under the Taliban, their heroism in surviving the Taliban era, and their attempts to piece together their lives after the US invasion. With respect to the implicit suggestion that the US liberated Afghan girls and women from Taliban oppression, both texts function as what Gillian Whitlock calls "soft weapons" of conflict, namely, as cultural artifacts that provide the ideological justification for military intervention. While they credit the US for creating a "more secure" environment for females, Rodriguez and Lemmon stress that capitalist enterprise itself is the real agent of "rescue" for Afghan women. In this project, I will analyze the ways in which *Kabul Beauty Academy* and *The Dressmaker of Khair Khana* paradoxically valorize the home as both simultaneously the site of patriarchal oppression and a launching pad for capitalist participation in the global economy, and, thus, as the space for female empowerment.

A crucial aspect of capitalist modernity in this conflict zone, as the memoirs reveal, is the imbrication of military operations and development-reconstruction efforts. In an effort designed "to win hearts and minds," foreign soldiers have added many of the traditional services of aid organizations to their responsibilities, and non-governmental organizations [NGOs] increasingly rely on foreign troops to provide a secure environment for their work. NGOs, in both narratives, provide the conditions of possibility for the maturation of Afghan women into capitalist modernity. In *Kabul Beauty Academy*, foreign aid workers constitute the largest clientele for cosmetic and grooming services, helping to facilitate through their patronage the incorporation of Afghan women as wage labor into the NGO sector. Kamila Sidiqi, the protagonist of *The Dressmaker of Khair Khana*, gives up her tailoring business following the US invasion in order to accept a job with an US NGO.

As should be clear from this abstract, my approach to these texts is not simply aesthetic and formalist, but very much motivated by the impulse to analyze them for their ideological content as representations of actually-existing material realities. For this reason, I will contextualize my readings within the debates about development and NGOs in conflict zones, and the specificities of the political economy of the US occupation of Afghanistan.

Purnima Bose is an Associate Professor of English and International Studies at Indiana University. She is the author of *Organizing Empire: Individualism, Collective Agency, and India*, and co-editor, along with Laura E. Lyons, of *Cultural Critique and the Global Corporation*. In addition, she has published essays on feminism, activism, and globalization in journals such as *American Quarterly*, *The Global South*, and *The Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies*, among others. Currently working on a book-length manuscript on the US intervention in Afghanistan, her essays on this topic appear in *Genders* and *Against the Current*.