**Barbie and Afghanistan**

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The Barbie movie was a delight to watch at the movie theatre. Vicariously reliving the Barbie world, brought back pleasant memories of my childhood days. That Barbie was special, is proven by the fact that I have carefully preserved my Barbie world to this day. I was not alone in this sentiment, as proven by the USD 1 billion the film has grossed worldwide in just three weeks of its release. Barbie is a global phenomenon because the plastic concoction represents the female agency. Barbie was not restricted to traditional adult female role play with kitchen items tea parties or dress-up games. Barbie instead went on to pursue her dreams. An astronaut Barbie was launched in 1965, even before man landed on the moon – pun not intended. Recent Barbie careers have been in the STEM field. Barbie has had over 200 careers and through that, it subliminally taught young girls that they could be anything they wanted to be.

It is a less-known fact that Barbie’s original design was based on the Bild Lilli, a West German line of fashion dolls launched by Greiner & Hausser Gmbh on August 12, 1955. Bild Lilli was based on the comic-strip character Lilli, of the tabloid newspaper Bild. Most importantly Bild Lilli was a gag gift escort doll. Barbie’s famed inventor Ruth Marianna Handler bought the doll during her vacation in Germany and then decided to launch her American version.

Bild Lilly, a sexualized doll lasted only nine years in production, but Barbie, the doll with female agency has been charming girls the world over since 1959 – and minting money. Barbie is perhaps the most iconic and controversy-free symbol of American feminism. The phenomenal trajectory of this plastic toy best demonstrates how reducing women to one-dimensional sexual roles is counter-intuitive. When women are given agency and the freedom to pursue their dreams, then everyone benefits tremendously.

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Afghanistan under the Taliban is the antithesis of the Barbie world. The Taliban across both sides of the border have reduced women to a one-dimensional role, much like the German Bild Lilly. In the irony of ironies, the Taliban eagerly use Western technology but reject a Western education. They are claiming independence while being dependent on the West for every little thing. This is a huge blind post for Afghans.

It is a less known fact that in July 1973 President Carter signed the first directive for secret aid for the opponents of the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul. Zbignew Brzezenski, the national security adviser of the POTUS Carter, said that back then he wrote to the US President every day that this would induce a Soviet Military intervention. This prediction turned out to be true and we know the official version of Charlie Wilson convincing the US to aid Afghan Mujahideen. However, the unofficial true version stated above sheds light on the greater equation that unfolded.

I have previously written about Dr Cheryly Bernard of the RAND Corporation, who is an Afghan Affairs expert in her own right but is also married to Zalmay Khalilzad, an Afghan-American neo-con holding US political power in the region. Dr Bernard stated: “In Afghanistan, we (the US) made a deliberate choice. At first, everyone thought, there is no way to beat the Soviets. So what we have to do is to throw the worst crazies against them that we can find, and there was a lot of collateral damage. We knew who these people were, and what their organizations were like, and we didnt care. Then we allowed them to get rid of, just kill all the moderate leaders. The reason we don’t have moderate leaders in Afghanistan today is because we let the nuts kill them all. They killed the leftists, the moderates, the middle-of-the-roaders. They were just eliminated during the 80’s and afterwards.”

I stated in detail Cheryl Bernard’s research on the unique Afghan refugee phenomenon in Europe, in my July 20, 2023 column, how the conduct of Muslims has led to Quran burnings in Europe. This spate of Quran burnings is not a sacrilegious act, but a political statement by atheist Europe.

Dr Bernard’s research has revealed how in addition to abusing the welfare system, Afghan men sexually assault females of all ages in broad daylight in public spaces. She termed them “social terrorists.” According to her research, the Afghan refugees in Europe hold a deep and abiding contempt for the western civilization and they wish to suck all resources from their host European countries and treat European women as spoils of war.

Mufti Mehsud of the TTP titled his book Inqilab-e-Mehsud, South Waziristan: Firangi Raj se Amreeki Samraj Tak, revealing the same anti-imperial motivation underlying his militant movement. However, a darker motivation lies underneath. During his talk at the Karachi International Literature Festival 2023, Shahbaz Taseer – who famously remained in Taliban captivity for five years – mentioned in passing the sexual fantasy of the Taliban commander who wanted to capture Italian women after conquering the Vatican. The TTP lacked knowledge of geography, so they did not know that the Vatican happened to be a separate sovereign state inside Rome.

The Afghan Taliban resent the US and the Western world at large, for the Great Game. In their minds, they are the bulwark against any direct imperial intervention or proxy rule by the West. The TTP states the same narrative. However, the TTP’s stated goal is only a fig leaf, as their true motivations are darker. Mufti Mehsud makes full use of Western technology as I stated in my January 19, 2023 column on the TTP. He is a power-hungry narcissistic sociopath, exploiting his followers’ religious sentiments. The TTP has declared democracy, constitutionalism, and Western education as anti-Islamic practices. This is how it has garnered followers to wage war on the Pakistani state, its citizens, its military and its police.

Since Mufti Mehsud’s and the Afghan TTP’s true weapon is their narrative, Pakistan can defeat them only by defeating their narrative. Afghan misogyny can only be subverted by stating and popularizing the life of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) who respected and empowered women. The Pashtoonwali brand of Islam which makes women invisible and mute, can only be defeated by popularizing the sayings of Mother Ayesha who is the narrator of the bulk of Sahih Bukhari – being the source of 2213 hadith of the 6,000 contained therein. Mother Umme Salamah was a mufti along with Mother Aysha binte Abu Bakr. Mother Hafsa binte Umar bin Khattab was the custodian of the compilation of the Quran standardized by Rashidun Caliph Usman bin Affan. The story did not end with the companions of the holy Prophet, as Muslim women of the next few centuries possessed agency and they used it for public good. The world’s first degree-granting university, The University of Al Qarawiyyin, in Morocco, was founded in 895 AD by a Fatimid princess named Fatima al-Fihri. This university became the model for the University of Cambridge, which was founded a century later.

The list of prominent women including those in Islamic fiqh and Islamic jurisprudence during the golden age of Islam (630- 1258) is extremely long. The globally popular 1001 Nights or Arabian Nights is perhaps the best yardstick to measure the agency Muslim women possessed in the 900s as the stories depict the lives of women then. The world of Islam invented the current sciences of mathematics; chemistry; medicine; physics; surgery; navigation; urban and town planning; astronomy; and many others from 799-1258 in Iraq, Spain and Egypt. Chemistry was originally Al-Kimiya and Algebra was Al-Jabr wa MuqablaThis happened during the European dark ages and these sciences are certainly not Western. These originate from the Islamic world of the past.

However, this epoch of history is lost to the world and certainly to the tribals of Afghanistan and Pakistan. These facts need to be brought to light to defeat the TTP narrative. Pakistan has threatened Afghanistan with military action against the TTP hideouts inside Afghan territory. We cannot hope to win with the war strategy the mightiest military in the world failed at. Defeating the TTP narrative is the only way to neutralize political Islam in Pakistan.

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