

**GENDER AND EMPIRE: An Anti-Imperialist Perspective for Women's
Liberation: Looking at the U.S. Invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan**

by Karel Sloane-Boekbinder

GENDER AND EMPIRE

A native of Bagdad, they still made her appear white and blue-eyed.

At six years old, I didn't know better. I didn't know that what flickered on the T.V. screen was a mirage, that, being from Bagdad, she would have been brown, or at least, "the color of brass." I didn't know the cradle of civilization was part of her culture, or that the Middle East was her heritage. I didn't know in her own country she had long been liberated—able to have an independent income, able to be educated, able to earn as much as a man. I didn't know that the dream referenced in the show's title was how she was cast, that the real dream was the one dreamed up by a media executive from my country; her appearance, her culture—that these mirages made from a media executive's dreams were catapulting her to the status of icon, or, that the sitcom that featured her had already seen its final season and then been immediately placed in syndication, syndicated two years when I started watching.

This iconic blue-eyed mirage was Jeannie and she lived, still lives in fact, in T.V. land. My mind, along with many others, was occupied. This occupation was the first invasion. For me, the occupation came before I could fully tell the difference between fancy and truth, rhetoric and reality, before I knew about programming or pop-culture, before I was fully literate enough to read images, to discern between propaganda and personal history. In her harem pants, she emerged from her Jim Beam bottle to dance into U.S. living rooms and into our dreams. These dreams were the lens through which we viewed Mesopotamia: The series began by Jeannie responding, "Thou may ask anything of thy slave, master," an embrace of the "master" by the slave, and Jeannie's ever-present desire to sneak into her master's bedroom. Iraq was misrepresented and subjugated in U.S. pop-culture, the Iraqis subservient before a single U.S. soldier had ever set foot on Bagdad soil.

Subjugation was further evidenced by the man media executives dreamed up to play Jeannie's master: a U.S. Air force man. Jeannie's master, Air Force Major Nelson, initially was assigned in the sitcom to a Missile Test Annex. The mirage Major Nelson looked toward was of a docile Mesopotamian supplicant in service to him the "master." The dreams Jeannie dreamed were to be with "the wisest master in the whole world." Contained in contours of drapery and carpet, Mesopotamian Jeannie was content to be kept by her Missile Test Annex stationed U.S. military master like a collected specimen. Even though Major Nelson was supposed to be an astronaut, the makers of the series made sure he was almost never out of military uniform. The same went for his best friend Roger Healy and all of their superior officers. Major Nelson was Jeannie's liberator, and, Jeannie was liberated from her Mesopotamian history with the singular distinction of having a burning, ever-present desire to do Major Nelson's bidding. Major Nelson's bidding included conjuring Jeannie regularly to clean up the table after a meal and ensure the rest of his house stayed immaculate. Additionally, Major Nelson's best friend Roger Healy occasionally made use of Jeannie's magic; once he even has Jeannie conjure gambling winnings while he chants "Money, money, money." One episode,

called “The Americanization of Jeannie,” has the newly liberated Mesopotamian supplicant read about “The Emancipation of Modern Women.” As she reads, she is told by her master, “You don’t need to worry about things like that.” Major Nelson then goes on to criticize Jeannie’s speech, clothing and mannerisms, prompting a confused Jeannie to ask, ” So...except for the manner in which I speak, dress and act...I am perfect?”

In another episode, Major Nelson exclaims, “If there’s anything I cannot stand, it’s a smart alec genie.” Over the course of the series, the writers have Jeannie exchange her pink harem outfit in favor of American clothing and eventually marry her U.S. Air force master. Even after they marry, Major Nelson prefers Jeannie call him master, rather than by his first name. The sitcom’s only premise was that Jeannie chase after Major Nelson and that Major Nelson avoid her advances. Once the U.S. Air force man made a commitment to occupy the genie from Bagdad, the series was over.

Our culture occupied her history and commandeered her appearance, commanding Jeannie give up her brownness, the fertility of her ancestry, her religion and her ethnic identity. Jeannie was a pose-able figure, complete with blond pony tail and a pink silk outfit. The story kept our imaginations preoccupied and prepared the way: Mesopotamia in a bottle as wish maker and a U.S. military in need of Mesopotamian resources to bail it out. Jeannie was subjugated and we were programmed take the mirage of her personal narrative as an account of Mesopotamia reality. At six, training in imperialism was beginning; I was being primed to participate in the subjugation of Bagdad. I didn’t know any better, but the network television executives did.

Imperialism takes many forms, one of them, cultural misrepresentation. Western culture has a long history of misrepresentation, particularly misrepresenting the identity of any culture that does not have its roots in European origins. This form of imperialism places mimesis over authenticity, the ability to persuade over the telling of truths. Misgivings about media and its persuasive power to misrepresent are not new; they extend back to the criticisms crafted by Plato and Aristotle about their own culture’s tendency to misrepresent truths through theater.

As a Mesopotamian, Jeannie was a citizen of one of the earth’s first cultures. Every episode, though, true to the imperialist mirage, she would dance from her bottle in a puff of pink smoke to bestow a kiss on her military master. A 2,000 year-old enchantress, she was portrayed as a docile supplicant, not one of the mighty creators of the first alphabet, the first code of law, the first printing press or the first post office.

Further typical of fairy tales, Jeannie emerged into T.V. land absent of a belly button, indicating she hadn’t come from a mother. It is a prerequisite in any fairy tale, the powerful woman must trade a mermaid tail, a tongue, magic power, immortality, trade her exotica for domesticity; exchange everything in order to be with the man she loves. Mortal Major Nelson was befuddled by her magic. A young girl of six, I rooted for the mortal, her magic in his service; I routed for the love connection devoid of context. I did not know her true liberation would have meant NOT setting her free from her bottle but liberating her personal appearance and her history from media executives, brown skin

becoming preferable to white, long dark hair becoming preferable to blonde pony tail , back story becoming free of imperialist concoctions that had contorted her cultural context.

The story followed fairy tale formula all the way: as the series progressed, enter Jeannie's brunette sister. As a matter of course, the brunette Mesopotamian sister was "the bad one." Bad or not, Jeannie's sister also preferred Major Nelson as a master, preferred him over her current master, a Mesopotamian sheik. It became a battle of the genies, brunette vs. blonde. In one of the sitcom's final episodes, Major Nelson locks the Mesopotamian brunette in a closet saying, "That's where disobedient wives go." Enter also the brunette and the blonde's uncles Azmire and Vasmir. Neither uncle wore traditional Mesopotamian dress. Instead, garbed in western dress, Uncle Azmire wore an ascot and a bowler. He also spoke with a British accent, as did uncle Vasmir. Uncle Vasmir looked like a character out of Dickens, complete with cap and scruffy clothing. As an adult I wonder, maybe the uncles' accents and appearance were some sort of skewed residual, another holdover of imperialism, a subliminal tip of the hat to the British occupation all of Iraq had endured until 1958.

I did not know I had been indoctrinated. Then, decades later, in the mid 1990's, I attended an overseas conference lead by an NGO of women. There at the conference, in the woods of Finland, I met women from Beirut, from Palestine, from Bagdad. In their brown hands, they had carried contraband to this conference. The contraband was video tape, and their stories, stories of loss, and stories of defiance. These women showed us footage of the bombings from inside the buildings being bombed. They showed us footage of funerals. They recounted the lost—they had lost brothers, fathers, husbands, children. They were Muslim. They were Jewish. They were Arab. They were Israeli. They had stood in front of oncoming tanks. They had stood together, arms linked in long chains of solidarity. Some of them had defied husbands or fathers to come to this conference. From their Mesopotamian mouths, I was taught about The Women in Black, Israeli women on the West Bank who regularly gather with their Muslim sisters to protest anti-Arab Israeli policy. From them, I learned about back story, about the misrepresentation of Mesopotamia, I learned how to fully appreciate media's power to be persuasive; from them I learned about RAWA, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan. These women did not need liberation, they needed to be heard.

In the woods of Finland, I turned to face my own imperialism. I learned about 'liberator' from their tongues. I saw the occupation in the images they showed me on T.V. monitors, images they had made with their hand-held video cameras. Meeting members of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan and other women like them was the beginning of my own liberation.

Since that time at the conference, that time of the first Gulf War, I have learned how to dismantle that iconic blue-eyed mirage and the life she still lives in T.V. land. I have learned how to face my own occupation, how to fully tell the difference between fancy and truth, rhetoric and reality, learn about programming and pop-culture, become literate enough to read images, and learn how to discern between propaganda and personal

history. I have learned how to dismantle the American Dream, the lens through which we view Mesopotamia, and any other region of the world we occupy.

Today, I dream of a Bagdad minus Major Nelson. In the now, with the wave of a veil, T.V land Bagdad has gone from the homeland of Jeannie to the penultimate threat to democracy. I wonder what Jeannie would do now, her husband's country invading her homeland, decimating it with the wave of a war declaration. Today, I dream outside the mirage. I dream of a Bagdad rebuilt by revolutionary women, women inspired by their sisters, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan. These courageous women, these Afghani and Iraqi women, are not a mirage; I dream media executives from my country will begin to depict them accurately, in all their beauty. I dream the desires of the majority of these women, the ability to have an independent income, education, and income earning power equal to a man, will not be a mirage but a reality, on their terms. In Iraq, these desires were a reality before both wars. As there is alternative media, and, it is possible to overcome programming, I dream my sisters in this country will come to see for themselves that we did not intervene, we scrambled—gambled on a scam— for occupation. Today, I dream, and I write and I remember the women I met over a decade ago, women who opened the door to my own liberation.