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Representation of Female Terrorists in the Western Media and Academia

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SWETA MADHURI KANNAN, AUG 31 2011

'(A) binary thinking about victimization and offending, angels and demons, has influenced scholarship, public policy, and activism regarding women, crime and victimization'[2]

One of the most striking continuities in the history of human societies is the tendency to educe women to their biological and societal roles. Endowed with the arguably greater responsibilities of pregnancy, women have often been made out to be 'life givers', 'nurturers' and 'homemakers' – and little but. This tendency is particularly noticeable in the discourses surrounding female offenders. Female violence has been labelled as aberrant and is often portrayed as caused by mental ill health or delusion. Similarly essentializing and derogative reasons are used to explain the 'phenomenon' of female terrorists. Made out to be a rare and dangerous addition to violent Islamist organizations, female terrorists are often portrayed as representing a 'new' trend in terrorism – even though they have existed throughout the ages.

Furthermore, numerous instances can be identified in which female violence is consciously constructed as presenting a conflict between 'unnatural, violent behaviour' and 'female behaviour'. Women utilizing violent methods are thus construed as rejecting inherently 'female' values such as being peaceful, passive and non-violent. Indeed, 'feminine' behaviour is often made out to be a logical behavioural consequence of women's ability to 'give birth'. Implicit in this argument is the assumption that a woman's biological 'difference' directly affects her behaviour in ways that cannot be understood by the logic or rationality of the 'male psyche'. Interestingly, this portrayal of female terrorists as deviant, misguided or mentally deficient has been particular to Western descriptions of such women – even though similar norms and definitions of 'womanhood' can be found worldwide.

This essay argues that the West's distinctly misogynistic characterization of female terrorists is rooted largely in Europe's socio-cultural, patriarchal heritage. It argues that these patterns of male dominance have persisted and continue to shape contemporary media and academic perceptions of violent women. The main argument that this essay puts forward, is that contemporary culture is pervaded by a sense of 'hetero-normativity' – a form of gender mainstreaming – which leads to the portrayal of female terrorists in a highly gendered light[3]. According to these rigid notions of 'gender', violent women are either portrayed as adhering to socially constructed gender stereotypes, or as rejecting these.

Section One specifically looks at the nature and the characteristic of the media and academic discourses surrounding the issue of 'female terrorists'. Drawing on numerous examples, this section highlights the ways in which female terrorists are depicted and discusses the implications of such portrayals for women and society more broadly.

Section Two analyzes contemporary power-knowledge relations and examines the role of the media and academia in constructing hegemonic discourses. Placing these in the context of narratives of violent women, this section discusses the implications of such portrayals for women and society more broadly.

Section One: Angels and Demons: Depictions of Female Terrorists

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‘Violent female terrorists seem(ed) to be radically undermining the body politic of the nation through grossly exceeding their female socialization’[4]

Prior to engaging with the subject matter, it is important to define the highly contested term terrorism. Terrorism, to this author, is the strategic utilization of violence, which seeks to address a larger audience beyond the direct victims. Although terroristic methods are used both in symmetrical as well as in asymmetrical warfare, it is a term that has come to denote the illegitimate use of violence against legitimate institutions of authority. By referring to female terrorists, then, this essay alludes to women engaged in violent non-state (political) activities; the inclusion of ‘state terrorists’ would go beyond the objectives of this essay. This section explores the main discourses and narratives that Western media and academic communities have created to address the ‘phenomenon’ of female terrorists. Due to spatial constraints, narratives and discourses created and perpetuated by media and academic discourses will be discussed together. Although they refer to different forms of ‘knowledge-creation’, the ways in which they refer to ‘female terrorists’ is very similar and overlaps at times. Needless to say, the creation and perpetration of these discourses determine the way that female terrorism is portrayed and understood in Western and non-Western societies more broadly.

Two Main Categories of Distinction: Rational / Irrational and Conform/ Non-Conform

One can discern two broad categories of stereotypes that are used by the media to portray and explain the mindset of female terrorists. According to the media, these two categories consist of ‘rational’ and ‘irrational’ female actors. These terms, though objective on the surface, are indicative of the assumptions and interpretations that are (sub-) consciously brought into the discussion. Language itself – whether spoken or written – is never neutral, therefore the meaning that is conveyed through language can be seen as inherently subjective and prejudiced. ‘Rationality’ then, ‘based on or in accordance with logic or reason’[5], is a term that denotes the rise of reason and a reliance on logic as the new dogma of the Western hemisphere. In contrast, ‘irrationality’ refers to subjects and objects that cannot be explained through logic or rationality – and which, in consequence, are seen as somewhat less worth. This dichotomy of rationality/ irrationality has become fundamental to the definition and self-perception of the post-Enlightenment world. Western media outlets, such as Time Magazine or the British Broadcasting Corporation’s (BBC) News have latently applied this framework to explain the phenomenon of female terrorists that does not seem to fit into established gender norms and behavioural patterns.

Interestingly, not all female terrorists are regarded as ‘irrational’. Articles and films dealing with terrorism in general paint an ambiguous picture of terrorism as the refuge of the desperate, and the lost. ‘Desperate Women’ could therefore be the heading under which certain female terrorists are viewed as and analyzed as ‘rational’. Often, an ideational link is established between this female rationality and a sense of conformity with established gender norms. It is interesting to note that such perceived conformity tends to evoke images of female terrorists, who are portrayed as less of a threat than women who are understood to be ‘irrational’. Personal experiences, emotions and relationships are highlighted as determinative of their decision to join (politically) violent organizations. There are, for instances numerous examples of women portrayed as being motivated to utilize terrorist methods because of a personal trauma, such as the death of a close (often male) relative. As a result, these women are often reduced to their social capacity as mothers, daughters, sisters or lovers[6].

A very good example of this narrative can be found in the media portrayals of Wafa Idris, Palestine’s first suicide bomber[7]. Although some articles acknowledge Idris’ political agency, most describe her as ‘(...) a 27-year old auburn-haired divorcee whose job was to save lives’[8] (emphasis by this author). In this one quote, Oswald emphasizes three different aspects of Idris’ femininity: he firstly refers to the colour of her hair, thus highlighting a strikingly female physical characteristic, then mentions the status of her personal relationship (‘divorcee’) and then refers to her vocation to ‘save’ lives, not to take them. Oswald’s argument that Idris – as a female medic – acted counter-intuitively when detonating the explosives attached to her body resonates with a larger movement that asserts that women are inherently inclined to nurture and sustain life, not take it.

This narrative, brought to the fore most prominently by representatives of Maternalist thought, has been successful in positing women as ‘ideal peacemakers’[9]. In certain cases, this has lead to a positive inclusion of female actors as

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'peace negotiators', like in the Liberian peace process; however, it has also led to the fortification of the notion that women who *do* engage in (political) violent activities act against their innermost instincts. Albeit being an argument supported by men and women, such arguments ultimately serve to undermine and delegitimize violent female agency. Furthermore, it serves to essentialize women, assuming that their behaviour was principally determined by their sex. This analysis disallows a perception of women as 'individuals' with political and socio-economic grievances. Media and academic portrayals of the 'rational' female terrorist tend to misinterpret their decision to join violent organisation as acts born out of emotional distress.

The second broad category that is frequently drawn on to explain female terrorism is defined by portrayals of women as 'non-conform' to conventional, Western European gender norms. These women, (sub-) consciously perceived as 'irrational' – sometimes even as 'hysteric' tend to be made out either as hyper-feminine or as masculine[10]. In either case, the depictions of female terrorists as 'irrational' and 'non-conform' lead to the conclusion that these women are *not* women in the traditional sense of the word. According to Gentry and Sjoberg, women who are portrayed as 'rejecting' their female attributes are, as a result 'de-womanized' in media portrayals[11]. These women are depicted as actively refusing to accept their femininity. Or, as mentioned earlier, they are portrayed as being hyper-feminine. Such representations tend to be underlined by a notion of 'deviant' sexuality. La Tigresa, a female terrorist affiliated with the Basque nationalist and separatist organization Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) is described as 'cruising discotheques for young policemen for one-night stands and then calmly pumping bullets into others a few days later'[12]. This account characterizes La Tigresa as actively pursuing her own sexual pleasure, while being unnaturally cold-blooded at the same time. According to Gentry and Sjoberg, such illustrations are part of a larger 'whore narrative'. They argue that women portrayed as irrationally violent tend to be associated with wayward, dysfunctional or perverted sexuality. In such cases, female sexuality is highlighted as a causal explanation for female violence.

Indeed, Toles Patkin writes that Western media representations of female terrorists consciously seek out 'alternate explanations behind women's participation in terror in a way that does not seem paralleled in the coverage of male suicide bombers, whose official ideological statements appear to be taken at face value'[13]. In the case of the RAF, these alternate discourses led to public perceptions of male members as effeminate and weak in contrast to their manly, brutal female counterparts[14]. Subsequently, this perception influenced the way that female liberation and terrorism were conceptualized in the public space, positing feminists and female activists as untameable and dangerous. In other cases, the narratives go even further; female terrorists thus associated with 'irrationality' and 'non-femininity' are actively located *outside* the norms and conventions of mainstream society. While this tactic is often applied to delegitimize terrorists and their cause more generally, it strikes home in the case of female terrorists: that is, they are viewed as 'aberrant' and 'abnormal' not simply in terms of their (ir-) rationality, but also their sexuality.

Undermining the feminist cause

Discussions of female terrorism in academia and the media insist that such violent actions necessarily will lead to the social and political disenfranchisement of the perpetrators of violence, as well as their organizations and the feminist cause more generally.

Margarethe von Trotta makes this one of her main concerns in the 1981 production 'Marianne und Juliane'[15]. The film is based on a fictionalized account of Gudrun Ensslin, member of the RAF, and her turbulent relationship to her sister Christiane. The film focuses on the moral dilemma that Juliane (as Gudrun's sister) is faced with when her sister begins engaging in terroristic methods to win the struggle for women's civil rights – a fight that both sisters are part of. While the film does not openly judge Marianne for using violent methods, it hints at the moral and emotional implications that her involvement has for the feminist cause more generally. Juliane directly refers to this dilemma when she accuses Marianne of jeopardizing the successes that her peaceful protesting has achieved. Interestingly, Von Trotta's critique is aimed at questioning the use of violence to obtain political goals, while the implications that she outlines are clearly linked to Marianne's actions as a *woman*: Jan, Marianne's abandoned son thus plays a major role in the film by representing the entirety of 'female responsibilities' which his mother rejects. Jan's anger and disillusionment with his non-mother culminates to mirror widespread notions that women associated with violence, and feminists are 'non-women'. This argument surfaces repeatedly, implying the public's fascination with this

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'bogeywoman', as Susan J. Douglas calls her[16].

Section Two: Power, knowledge and the construction of discourses

In order to fully understand and assess the impact of the aforementioned discourses on public perceptions, it is necessary to scrutinize the role of media outlets and academic research in determining public opinions. The French philosopher Foucault argues that the knowledge produced by such units is strongly influenced by dominant power relations in society. He states that,

' (...) Truth isn't the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude, nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is a thing of the world (...) and it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its general politics of truth: that is, the types of discourse, which it accepts and makes function as true. (...) "Truth" is centred on the form of scientific discourse and the institutions which produce it; (...) it is produced and transmitted under the control, dominant if not exclusive, of a few great political and economic apparatuses (university, army, writing, media); lastly, it is the issue of a whole political debate and social confrontation'[17]

From this paragraph it transpires that 'truth' and 'knowledge' to Foucault are not primordial, but that they are informed and constructed by society. Foucault goes further in asserting that power and knowledge are *instruments* of regimes, as they reflect dominant power relations and work in ways that reinforces these[18]. Starting from Foucault's premise, it becomes crucial to question the role that hegemonic discourses play in constructing dominant conceptions of 'female terrorists'. In the above-mentioned quote, he implies that academic and media communities are particularly important in formulating and establishing these authoritative narratives. The guiding force when examining these discourses should then be: how and why do academic and media depictions of female terrorists impact on society, and which implications could this have for the way in which female terrorists are viewed by society? More specifically, what role do academic research and media portrayals play in fortifying public perceptions of 'female terrorists'? Struckman argues that the '(...) media industry assumes an increasingly prominent role as producer of cultural messages and a dominant ideological framework that shapes the way people think and act, modern culture has gone through a process of "mediatization". This means that the media have substantive power to define the boundaries of acceptability and deviance[19]'. Thus, academia and media could be conceptualized as highly normative nodes of 'knowledge' – creation. Such constructed knowledge is commonly mistaken as authoritative and is generally mistaken for 'pristine' or 'ultimate' wisdom. This assumption has tremendous implications for the way in which female terrorists are perceived and dealt with by society. It therefore may be more useful to view academic and media networks as made up of rational actors, who are driven by personal, economic and social objectives. Indeed, these networks could be perceived as economic corporations, as funding – among many other considerations – is crucial in determining which topics will be covered, and how much attention these will be given. Furthermore, Foucault argues that it is only natural for these discourses to be guided and formed by overarching power structures. State security agendas, for instance, are paramount in creating a framework for the formulation of female terrorist narratives.

Western German media reports of the Rote Armee Fraktion (RAF), a violent political German organization active throughout the 1970s, are for instance indicative of such 'power bias'[20] According to Rosenfeld, this bias was visible in the way that West German media prioritized female guerrilla members in reports on the guerrilla group. Set in a context in which conservative parties were frantically seeking to retain 'traditional' values, these media portrayals helped shape the widespread notion, that women's liberation was intrinsically tied to violent female action. Analyses of the RAF's female members thus served as 'lightning rods for the expression of broader societal anxieties over rapidly changing gender relations and the (in-) stability of the nuclear family'[21].

Interestingly, this conceptualization of female violence as extreme could be seen as bound to a larger paradigm shift in the conceptualization of female violence and delinquency, which culminated in the United Nations' organization of a conference on 'women's delinquency' in Geneva in 1972[22]. This example demonstrates the nature of the 'female terrorist' discourse: Observation, interpretation and a socially embedded understanding of 'women' are essential in producing (academic or media) 'knowledge', which then contributes to formulating overarching societal perceptions

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of 'female terrorists'. However, these perceptions are also central to governmental and policy assessments of the threat; such threat assessments are fundamental to the creation of security agendas, which then go on to narrow the production of knowledge to certain specific areas deemed to be 'important'. It is therefore not surprising that female terrorists have consistently been given a lot of attention by media and academic communities. Once the central focus of knowledge (re-) production, female terrorists have offered much material for academic and media research. Violent women have successfully managed to generate interest over long periods of time – understandably so, as direct female participation in violent acts, such as suicide missions, continues to be relatively small; many academics such as Mia Bloom note though, that the numbers are steadily increasing[23].

Yet still treated as a an exception by academics and media agents alike, these women have captured the public imagination, leading to the most bizarre explanations as to why they partake in violent action. The authors of the Baader – Meinhof report, published in 1972 by the Federal Criminal Bureau in West Germany, for instance came to the conclusion that it was 'because they no longer have serious fears about unwanted pregnancy, (and) are on the look-out for new forms of danger to titillate them'[24]. One can find numerous peculiar conclusions like these in the study of female terrorism. Arguably, this is due to the perception that female terrorists must have motivations, which are far beyond logical comprehension. As demonstrated earlier, it is felt that they are motivated by very different sets of interests than their male counterparts, guiding the analysis of their behaviour in very different directions to analyses of 'male' terrorism. Thus, questions of motivation, functions/roles and agency – or the lack thereof – are identified as highly significant in explaining female terrorism. One could argue that this is partly due to the disproportionate representation of women in the study of terrorism more generally[25].

Lacking alternate views to the dominant, patriarchal understanding of global, regional and domestic power structures, Sjöberg argues that the subject of Terrorism Studies is in dire need of more feminist perspectives[26]. If this is the case, it should not come as a surprise that the view of female terrorists adopted by Terrorist experts resounds with general, hegemonic discourses of violent women as 'socially' and 'sexually' deviant. As this discussion demonstrates, academic and media portrayals of female terrorists ultimately serve to reinforce existing patrimonial power structures in society. From this follows that the analytical frameworks, which are applied to understand the emergence and dynamics of politically violent organizations are inherently skewed. Accordingly, the supposedly 'objective' analysis could be seen as being subject to a strongly 'hetero-normative' perspective of (political) violence.

Conclusions

As demonstrated in this essay, female terrorists have been made out to be 'exotic' actors in the male-dominated sphere of terrorism. Presenting a puzzle to many, media and academic depictions of female terrorists have sought to explain their violent behaviour by referring to established Western gender norms, implying that their actions are somehow linked to their sexuality. The portrayal of these women either as conform or non-conform with these gender norms has nurtured a one-dimensional understanding of violent female agency, which focuses solely on the gender of the individual for explanations. This has wider implications for society, as shown by Section Two: ultimately, these descriptions of female terrorists and 'violent' women serve to undermine and delegitimize female agency. Conflating female terrorists with lesbians and feminists, the thus constructed narratives imply rigid boundaries, within which female agency is seen as 'legitimate': that is, as long as women adhere to Western gender norms, act peacefully and fulfil their societal roles as mothers, daughters, sisters and lovers, they can be seen to be 'true' women. In the case of infringement of these boundaries, a woman can be legitimately stripped of that title, thus being left to become a societal outcast. While this description may seem exaggerated, it holds true for most women understood to be 'abnormal'. Social outcastism therefore continues to loom large for women who do not fit societal expectations of female behaviour and characteristics. As this essay has argued, this is largely due to the deep, structural patriarchal notions, which till this day shape and influence the production of 'knowledge'. The ways in which Western media and academia depict female terrorists are thus highly reflective of women's actual status in society. Far removed from 'female liberation', the creation and perpetuation of certain narratives and discourses ensure that women remain in these positions; attempts at undermining these social hierarchies are therefore viewed as 'dangerous deviance'.

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[26] *ibid.*

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