False Victimisation Narratives: Female Suicide Bombers of the Developing World

Since Wafa Idris's self-immolation in 2002, the existence of female suicide bombers as part of the militant efforts of groups in the Global South has become increasingly addressed by Western feminist scholarship. However, whilst academic acknowledgement of these violent women have certainly increased over the last decade, the dominant discourse remains a discursive and reductive narrative, essentialising these Third World Women according to patriarchal and colonialist stereotypes and silencing the diversity of experiences and motivations associated with female participation. By analysing scholastic text which surrounds the actions of female suicide bombers, particularly in Chechnya and Palestine, the assertions in Mohanty's ground breaking text, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses'[1] is given impetus, displaying the trend of discursive colonialism and homogenisation which continues to dictate Western inquiry into women from the Global South. As engagement of women becomes increasingly powerful and important to the practice of violent groups around the world, Western feminist scholarship must challenge itself and deconstruct these harmful hierarchies to better combat the harm that female suicide bombers can and do propagate.

In 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses', Mohanty exposes the discursive manner in which Western feminist scholarship perpetuates colonial hierarchies and subverts the voices and viewpoints of so-called 'Third World Women'.[2] Mohanty argues that all women of the third world are reduced into a single, oppressed group even before the point of analysis, with Western feminist texts casting these women as 'universal dependents' who are viewed as victims in every discussion.[3] Such a classification reinforces negative and unhelpful images of the average, powerless and uneducated Third World Women, who is defined by the patriarchal traditions of a homogenous traditional 'culture' and a 'third world' life of poverty and domesticity.[4] In contrast, Western feminists are self-represented as sexually liberated, educated, and modern; thus fortifying colonial hierarchies and self-superiority.[5] This binary mode of analysis essentialises the diverse struggles of women from the Global South, stripping them of personal and political agency and reducing these women into caricatures that fit nicely within comfortable Western narratives.

The existence of subversive female terrorists is not a new phenomenon. Since the 1960s, women have represented around 30% of militants in violent political action and organisations.[6] However, women suicide bombers was not treated seriously by Western scholarship until Palestinian paramedic, Wafa Idris blew herself up in Jerusalem in January, 2002.[7] Prior to this, female terrorists had existed in countries and political contexts that did not directly threaten Western national interests. For example, 14 women committed suicide bomb attacks on behalf of Chechen rebels during the civil war between 1980 and 2003, which constituted 60% of all suicide missions during that time.[8] However, Idris' attack on Israel pushed the presence of female suicide bombers into the forefront of Western media and scholastic consideration.[9] As such, despite evidence to the contrary, Idris was taken as the first female suicide bomber in the world.[10]

Immediately, the West began to respond with one-dimensional responses. Instead of acknowledging these female suicide bombers as the real security threats they posed, and attempting to understand the variety of possible motivations behind such a violent action, scholarship from the Global North reinforced long-held narratives of female oppression in the third world, seemingly only able to conceive of these violent women as victims of patriarchal

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manipulation and coercion. Instead of expanding modern academic discussions of terrorism to include gender, a new strain of scholarship began to develop that dealt with these Third World Women suicide bombers as completely separate and different to their male counterparts, and which accounted for the continuance of existing notions of the safe and innocent female stereotype by shifting culpability to the relevant cultural context.[11] By framing these women merely as submissive and passive products of their oppressive societies, Western scholarship immediately and implicitly deprives these violent women of agency, persistently 'Othering' their experiences and reinforcing colonial hierarchies.[12]

It is important to note that there are certainly justifications for claims of coercion and manipulation that surround many women's entrance into terrorism and suicide bombing. Evidence of female exploitation in many third world contexts from which female suicide bombers emerge, and the patriarchal violence that persists, could certainly imply cases of mediated agency.[13] However, to precede any critical analysis of women bombers with an assumption that such victimisation and lack of consent is true for all relevant individuals delegitimises third world female voices in favour of reinforcing Western colonial narratives of the weak and silent 'Native woman'.[14] Additionally, offering up alternative explanations or speculations about other potential motivations of third world female suicide bombers would similarly contribute to the silencing of these women.[15] Instead, one must critically analyse the discourse that surrounds these individuals and better engage with these women for any effective and accurate scholarship about the issue to be created.

When the relevant militant women are actually engaged with, a diversity of motivations are revealed. In a study conducted by Jacques and Taylor about 'Myths and Realities of Female-Perpetrated Terrorism', the authors examined data on both female and male suicide bombers (rather than treating women automatically as a distinct and homogenous group). They found that female and male militants were equivalent in age, religion, and role within terrorism, but women were actually more likely to have a higher education and less likely to have a past in activism.[16] Straightaway, by removing the implicit characterisation of militant women as separate from their male counterparts, the stereotype of the passive uneducated woman is debunked. Similarly, Berko and Erez's interviews with incarcerated Palestinian female terrorists women revealed a diversity of motivations that range from the personal to the political, and reflect that women cannot be pigeonholed into a homogenous group for analysis.[17]

Despite such research, scholarship about third world female suicide bombers continue to be dominated by texts which seek to strip women of agency for their actions. Western research shifts the onus of female violence from woman to tradition, effectively framing women as mere puppets or victims of male-led movements and the patriarchal culture they belong in.[18] When discussing Palestinian women bombers, former Israeli Defence Force informant Yoram Schweitzer called their 'contribution of a suicide mission' a 'form of employment in the male-dominated domain of suicide bombing', nothing more than 'pawns and sacrificial lambs'.[19] Academic Clara Beyler dismisses Palestinian women bombers as mere products of brainwashing, stating that 'by accepting their mission or volunteering for suicide bombings they acquire the status of an object'.[20] The image of a self-aware and violent Third World woman threatens Western hierarchies and self-assurances of superiority over their so-called 'Oriental' Third World counterparts. As such, the insistence of the West to recast women bombers as the victims of male-led violence and their patriarchal society may reflect the need to frame Third World Women according to long-held and familiar Western imagery.[21] Instead of accepting and evaluating the capacity for militant females of the Global South, Western anxieties instead continue to elucidate a trapped and exploited woman, so as to strengthen the pre-existing colonial narrative.

The trend of rejecting the notion of a female Third World militant in favour of a passive woman trapped by a patriarchal culture becomes particularly evident when considering the rise of Islamaphobia.[22] In a post-9/11 world, the increasing fear of Islam and the perceived threat that it poses to Western society has propagated negative images of Islamic tradition and society, and the active role of women in terrorism and suicide bombing contradict Western assumptions.[23] Consequently, there is much more focus on the exploited and submissive Islamic woman, and how perceived oppressive religious practice coerces women into violence.[24] Even where the women are not Islamic, such narratives prevail – for example, 30 out of 42 Lebanese female suicide movements against Israel were part of anti-Islamic organisations; three of them were Christian.[25] However, Western-led discourse about violence and terrorism that threatens Israel, female or otherwise, continues to operate in conjunction with criticisms and

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stereotypes of Islam.[26] This not only reinforces Western preconceptions of Muslim oppression, but also ignores the diverse political contexts and incentives that operate throughout the Middle East, thus reducing female suicide bombers into a powerless stereotype.

Even in texts that are more receptive to consenting female suicide bombers, there continues to exist a clear distinction between the treatment of violent women and men. Whilst male militants are generally considered to commit violence for political or religious reasons, this is a realm that female militants seem unable to enter.[27] Instead, Mia Bloom reduces the motivations of female bombers to 'four Rs': revenge, redemption, relationship, and respect.[28] Every one of these four classifications defines female actions in reference to men, and constrains women within the private sphere.

'Revenge' refers to the impetus of the death of a close family member to inspire female involvement. In particular, scholarship about Chechen female suicide bombers has been dominated by a revenge discourse.[29] Chechen women are framed as emotionally vulnerable individuals who are open to exploitation, particularly in the wake of the death of male loved one.[30] Indeed, because they are 'vulnerable and dependent with little social experience', the Black Widows are seen to need the deaths of their husbands and family members to become necessarily motivated to commit violence of such a scale.[31] The regular rape of Chechen women at the hands of Russian soldiers is identified as another important impetus to their vengeance.[32] However, when interviews with the families of Black Widows were conducted, there was more evidence of the women engaging in political activism than actually experiencing rape, contradicting the revenge imagery that surrounds Chechen women bombers.[33] Additionally, trauma is not a uniquely female condition, and both sexes are open to exploitation.[34] Research conducted by Jacques and Taylor supports this, stating that 'a desire for revenge is unrelated to gender'.[35] Thus, when scholarship about Third World female suicide bombers assigns trauma and revenge as a distinctly female motivation, they deny them access into the political realm, silencing potential agendas and reinforcing colonial assumptions of women in the Global South.

The second R, 'redemption', is similarly damaging, and particularly reflective of reductive colonial Western stereotypes when considering non-Western violence. It describes the idea that women choose to become a suicide bomber, as the associated martyrdom will save them from their sins and indiscretions.[36] For example, between 2002 and 2004, female Palestinian suicide bombers were all characterised as women who pursued suicide missions to restore their, and their family's, honour.[37] This preoccupation with honour reinforces the narrative of weak women victimised by oppressive cultural standards with little supporting evidence.[38]

Bloom calls the third R, which represents a relationship with a 'known insurgent or jihadi', 'the best single predictor that a woman will engage in terrorist violence'.[39] This again frames women's action as a consequence of male leadership and manipulation, reducing diverse and individual women bombers to their relationships with men and silencing the variety of other motivations that may be at play. Additionally, in both Jacques and Taylor's study about female bombers, as well as Berko and Erko's experiences with incarcerated female Palestinian terrorists, the overwhelming majority of women in question were or are single, with their relationship status having no more and no less effect on their participation in violence when compared to their male counterparts.[40] Such a category is thus entirely based on wrongly-held conceptions of Third World Women as universal dependents.[41]

Finally, 'respect' is the only one of Bloom's categories that allows female forays into the political realm when understanding the motivations of suicide bombers in the Global South. It encompasses women who decide to become involved in terrorism so as to gain status and respect in a society where she is otherwise discriminated against.[42] It is more relevant to women in positions of leadership in terrorist groups than female suicide bombers. However, it bears noting that it still does not encompass women who become involved because of nationalism or a true commitment to the cause; female action are thus still defined with accordance to their victimisation from their patriarchal society. Ultimately, Western feminist scholarship displays little to no appreciation for political and nationalistic ideals as legitimate motivations of Third World female suicide bombers.

Through an examination of the scholarship that surrounds female suicide bombers of the Third World, Mohanty's claim of a discourse of colonialism and essentialism that continues to define Western feminist scholarship is verified.

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As implicitly held notions of the passive and uneducated Third World Woman continue to precede and define analysis, the victimisation narrative homogenises women from a diverse range of political, religious, and personal affiliations, so as to reinforce Western historical assumptions about the Global South. As the role of militant women continues to grow in importance around the world, Western feminism must challenge itself to deconstruct these colonial preconceptions and empower Third World Women with the agency necessary to be appreciated as an individual with unique and valid motivations. Only then can their violence be truly understood and resisted.

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Written by Rachel Hao

Written by: Rachel Hao
Written at: Australian National University
Written for: Chris Hills
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