

# Analysing the Depiction and Control of Women's Participation in Violence

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A successful analysis of the depictions of female participation in violence must primarily be critically aware of the prevalence of binary language present in the relevant themes. The debate and theories concerned with this subject area are inherently based upon these binary assumptions; man/woman and masculine/feminine, which must not be taken as synonymous identifiers, are the most apparent paired oppositions. False dichotomies occur with alarming frequency throughout the discourses of both academic and mass media. It is also important to look at who is controlling these depictions; it would be naïve to assume that the lazy stereotyping demonstrably present is to blame entirely upon male ignorance; feminist theory regarding women partaking in terrorism and counter-terrorism must also be critically analysed.

It has been acknowledged that the "wounded masculine pride which marks the post 9/11 international political landscape" has brought gendered violence to a wider audience (Parpart & Zalewski, 2008:1), and events post 9/11 provide relevant instances of the concerned depiction and control; specifically the cases of Corporal Sarah Bryant, the torture which took place in Abu Ghraib Prison and the actions and depictions of 'Jihad Jane'. These in conjunction with a reading of Sjoberg & Gentry's 'mothers, monsters, whores' identifiers and the contradictions regarding the 'beautiful soul' stereotype as discussed by Sjoberg provide an insight into the dominant narratives, specifically 'beautiful souls', 'whores' and 'monsters' surrounding women's participation in violence. In order to gain a rounded understanding of the perceptions involved, popular media coverage as well as academia will be analysed.

A critical analysis of the portrayal of women as beautiful souls, whores or monsters will demonstrate that, whilst these narratives may seem abjectly different, they are all based upon the same ideas founded in patriarchy. The perceived masculinity of violence, a fear of female sexuality and the denial of agency in women's violence all contribute to a destructive depiction of women's relationship with violence.

### **Gendering: the masculinity of violence**

In order to fully appreciate the nature in which women are depicted as participating in violence, it is necessary to be aware of the masculinisation of said violence, and the political ramifications of this. This is not to say that women are completely excluded from the international political arena, where conflict (whether violent or verbal) is played out, but that in order for women to be successful in such a situation they must "play at being men" and act within masculine lines. (Enloe, 2000: 13) Violence can be understood as a reaction to power (Parpart & Zalewski, 2008: 5); for terrorists this would be in response to power wielded by others, in counter-terrorist operations violence would be an expression of power wielded by an individual, reinforced by a state. In these circumstances, acknowledging that power has been described as "persistently coded as masculine outside the location of the sexed bodies usually assigned this identity" (Parpart & Zalewski, 2008: 9), it can thus be understood that violence is an expression of, or reaction to, masculinity.

A hetero-normative binary discourse has been observed as existing in the international political field, and is it is the

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mutually exclusive nature of this discourse that has been blamed for the resultant idea that to be masculine is to not be feminine. (Parpart & Zalewski, 2008:2) This concept is essential to understanding the difference in the depictions of men and women who undertake violence, and the hegemony of masculinity underpinning these discourses. Sjoberg & Gentry have identified secondary characteristics that further illuminate the gendered nature of politics and violence; "masculine violence [...] devastates women's lives". (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007:3) It is a conscious awareness of this binary opposition between man/woman and aggressor/victim that has proved problematic when encountering female instances of violence.

## **Corporal Sarah Bryant, the beautiful soul**

The 'beautiful soul' discourse relates to the involvement of women in military operations, and is founded upon assumptions regarding differences between men and women, specifically focusing upon the perceived innocence of women. (Sjoberg, 2010: 55) Women have been traditionally excluded from anything to do with war to the extent that the beautiful soul narrative was used to justify the American anti-suffrage movement; the opinion existed that if a woman was to participate in decisions related to war then the "purity of femininity" would be corrupted. (Sjoberg, 2010: 56) The innocence of the beautiful soul is not only used to exclude women from truly being cohesive within the military, but to simultaneously, and conflictingly, justify military action. Sjoberg identifies beautiful souls as a *casus belli* (justification for acts of war); men go to fight wars to protect the women at home. Thus, when a woman breaks the expectation of her gender to exist as a passive commodity, it is easiest to call her femininity into question than to be forced to alter existing perceptions. (Sjoberg, 2010: 66)

This narrative is at odds with the 'lesbian/whore' dichotomy that has been identified as dominant within male members of the armed forces. (Enloe, 1988: 139) It can be clearly demonstrated that the challenging of the assumption that the military is a male realm, in which women are superfluous, has not been taken kindly. (Enloe, 1988: 7) Cynthia Enloe observes the goal of military policy makers as creating a climate in which the military can utilise women without having them pose a threat to the masculinity of their institution. (Enloe, 1988: 139) The lesbian/whore dichotomy (that is, that women in the forces are either identified as lesbians, thus not 'real' women; or nymphomaniacs, thus not a threat to masculinity) can be described as a way of separating the women who become members of the military from the normative feminine ideals not only present in the minds of the contemporaries of these women, but wider society. A bifurcated threat has demonstrably been established where women in the military will either taint the masculine force with feminine characteristics or who will threaten the dominant male hetero-normative atmosphere with their own sexual prowess between them. (Enloe, 1988: 141) It must not be ignored that both of these supposed flaws are based upon the assumption that masculinity and femininity are mutually exclusive. Thus, by exhibiting feminine characteristics, female soldiers are manipulated into not feeling truly part of the military.

Corporal Sarah Bryant, a member of the British Intelligence Corps, was the first woman to be killed in the current war in Afghanistan. She, along with four male colleagues, was travelling in a convoy that was hit by an IED, and was instantly killed. (Ministry of Defence, 2008) The Ministry of Defence press release regarding the incident contained almost 1500 words of information about and tribute to Bryant, whilst her colleague Paul Stout's death received just a 48-word statement in the same press release. (Ministry of Defence, 2008) The story of her death also received much coverage in the British media; she was portrayed as the archetypal beautiful soul. Much emphasis was put upon the inadequacy of the vehicle she was travelling in (an inquest later found that she and her colleagues had been unlawfully killed) to protect her. Bryant's youth, beauty and vulnerability to attack were all frequently cited in press articles about her death. Even Bryant's commanding officer, whilst paying tribute to her skills as an intelligence specialist, referred to her as "a beautiful young woman" (BBC, 2008).

Later coverage of the inquest of the four soldiers from broadsheets and tabloid newspapers would run with headlines only acknowledging the death of Bryant. The Guardian used the modifier 'woman' as a prefix to 'soldier', emphasising that gender roles regarding military are still prevalent within the press: "Lightly armoured Land Rover 'played part in death of woman soldier'". (The Guardian, 2010) The Daily Mail portrayed Bryant as being 'sent out', reinforcing the discourse in which she was a passive victim. "First British woman to die in Afghanistan 'was sent out on patrol with shortage of mine detectors'" (Daily Mail, 2010) Whilst The Telegraph identified Bryant by her name, not her sex, her colleagues received no mention in the headline "Cpl Sarah Bryant unlawfully killed in Afghanistan after

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'inadequate' training". (The Telegraph, 2010)

It can be clearly demonstrated that the beautiful soul narrative, whilst perhaps not as outrightly offensive as the lesbian/whore dichotomy, is still prevalent within the military in the modern era. The portrayal of Corporal Bryant by the Ministry of Defence and the British media demonstrate that this narrative is being actively reinforced, especially with regards to repeated references to Bryant's, youth, beauty and perceived vulnerability. Whilst this discourse might not seem as boorish as the lesbian/whore dichotomy, it still risks alienating women's participation within the military and perpetuating a perception of such women as vulnerable, inadequate or a 'special case'.

## **The whores of Abu Ghraib**

Sjoberg & Gentry have identified a tripartite narrative within discussion, whether in academia or the popular press, where women who partake in violence are categorised as 'mothers', 'monsters' or 'whores'. (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007:27-57) The vilification of women because of their perceived sexual degeneracy is not a new narrative, and has remained in existence throughout history. Sjoberg & Gentry emphasise that this 'whore' category exists because of the tendency for any evil women do to be sexualised where the same is not in men. (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007:41-42) Whilst this narrative has previously been employed to denigrate camp followers of wars and (from World War II onwards) women who participate in service for their country, a more modern version of the whore narrative has emerged in reference to women who are involved in proscribed violence. (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007:43) Bernardine Dohrn, a leader of the Weather Underground, was described as keeping male members engaged not with her rhetoric, but with her breasts. This method of responding to a perceived threat to the masculine hegemony of violence by dehumanising women who participate in violence by way of referencing their female sexuality has been identified on multiple occasions. (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007:45-46) The secondary aspect of the whore narrative is that uncontrollable sexuality causes women to partake in violence; they cannot satisfy men sexually (supposedly women's life purpose and primary function), which is purported to inspire insanity due to them being 'less' than a woman. (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007:47-48) The tertiary element of the whore narrative as identified by Sjoberg & Gentry is one of passivity; women's bodies are owned and controlled by men and are 'whores' in the most literal sense, reduced to pawns within the dominion of normative masculine violence. (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007:47-50)

The massive mistreatment of prisoners by US military police personnel which took place in Abu Ghraib Prison, Baghdad in 2004 offers an absorbing segue between the role of women in mandated violence and terrorist violence; whilst the women and men involved were US armed forces staff, their actions were not endorsed by officials (with all those involved charged with dereliction of duty) (The Guardian, 2009) and is thus categorised as proscribed violence. The Abu Ghraib scandal is worthy of being, and is, the focus of many discussions, but where this case becomes relevant to a dialogue regarding the depiction of women's violence is the existence of a correlation between the 'whore' discourse and the depiction of and focus on the women involved in these events, particularly Lynndie England. Eight people were trialled regarding the events, three of whom were women, but it was England who received the most publicity. Her defence for the torture, a lot of which was documented as having sexual overtones, was that Specialist Charles Graner, who was also present, was unduly influencing her. Graner is the father of England's child and also served a prison sentence for his involvement. (Guardian, 2009) This defence clearly corresponds to the literal understanding of the whore narrative; England was supposedly reduced to sexually deviant behaviour because a man manipulated her. There is also a convincing argument to be made with respect to the other elements of the whore narrative due to England's depiction as remorseless in the media. The Daily Mail ran an article in March 2012 that quoted England as saying "They got the better end of the deal. They weren't innocent. They're trying to kill us, and you want me to apologise to them? It's like saying sorry to the enemy." (Daily Mail, 2012) The article also goes on to describe England being abandoned by Graner. The insanity aspect of the whore image of violent women is clearly being satisfied by the discourse of this article; England's lack of apology for her role in the emasculating torture is thus not because she is an evil human being, but because her failure to conform to societally imposed gender norms had turned her insane.

Whilst the comment could be drawn that the 'whore' identifier is not harmful to anyone other than women who commit sexual violence, this argument is fallacious. The narrative, which has been clearly demonstrated as being present in the discourse of popular media, is based upon the understanding that everything women do is because of their

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sexuality. This type of attitude can be seen as encouraging misogyny by propagating a fear of female sexuality. A woman's perceived ability to rationalise and act autonomous of male influence is incredibly degraded by narratives such as this.

## **Jihad Jane, the monster**

The theme of women being dehumanised because of their involvement in violence can also be demonstrated with regards the 'monster' narrative also identified by Sjoberg & Gentry. (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007:36-41) The key characteristic of the violent, female monster is that the violence is portrayed as a biological flaw that prevents women from acting as such. (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007:36) This narrative is based entirely upon the belief that women cannot rationally decide to engage in violence, thus a woman who is not coerced into proscribed violence must be "pathologically deviant". (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007:37).

'Jihad Jane', real name Colleen LaRose, is an American woman who was part of a plot to kill a Swedish cartoonist who depicted the Prophet Mohammed as having the body of a dog. (FBI, 2010) What is perhaps most interesting about the depiction of LaRose, both in the popular media and in governmental press releases, is the prevalence of fear; not a fear of terrorism as a whole, but a fear of the threat posed by LaRose's actions to the dominant discourse that men are aggressors and women are victims. LaRose is described as wanting to 'frighten' the non-Muslim world. (FBI, 2010) The double-transgression theory, noted by Sjoberg & Gentry, can be clearly demonstrated in this instance; not only has LaRose committed the crimes she was indicted with, but has also shown disregard of a narrative which denies her mental capacity to commit such crimes, which is such that it becomes perceived as criminal. (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007:15)

The differences between LaRose's physical appearance (white, blonde, petite) and her character help to perpetuate the monster narrative and emphasise her danger. Beliefs that "real women do not commit violence" (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007:37) dehumanise women such as LaRose by emphasising or imagining a disturbed mental state. This protects the hegemonic masculinity of violence; a woman has not impinged this hegemony, as she is supposedly a monster, not a person. LaRose, despite never being found to be mentally ill, is still described as a "confused and disturbed individual". (Boston Globe, 2010) Emphasis has also been put upon LaRose's decision to change her plea, portraying her as unstable. (CNN, 2011)

What is perhaps most dangerous about the 'monster' narrative is not the women who are categorised as such, but that it holds that female 'monsters' are not responsible for their actions, again removing their agency and subordinating the female gender as a group to below the mental capacities of men. A presumption towards mental illness in violent women not only denies such women any chance to justify their actions, but also means their victims may not receive justice either.

## **The female/violence false dichotomy: Conclusions**

It has repeatedly been demonstrated that the dominant discourse of a patriarchal society is that women cannot partake in violence of their own volition without somehow compromising their femininity or betraying their gender. Whilst male assumptions and narratives have dominated the portrayal of violent women, feminist theory can also be identified as perpetuating this false dichotomy. It has been claimed that women who commit violence are discredited and denied by radical feminists who believe that women are not partial to stereotypically male transgressions. (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007:14-15) It follows that violence has been identified as the "final barrier" to achieving political equality between men and women; once it is acknowledged that women can and do commit violent crime, and they are trialled based upon their actions and not societal expectations of their gender, women will be truly equal players on the international political field. (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007:20) The question can be raised here regarding the role women's violence plays; does it expose the weaknesses of women, or is it another area where female strength can be applied appearing? Whilst this question as yet is unanswered, a wider conclusion can be drawn that the perpetuation of a mutually exclusive relationship between women and violence is a false dichotomy.

A primary theme present throughout any discussion of women's violence is the reliance on binary terms to simplify

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and categorise women's relationship with violence, whether terrorist or counter-terrorist. The basis of this is the masculinity of violence and the feminisation of victims, but extends deep into the portrayal of women; they are either innocent or irrational, lesbians or whores. The lack of acknowledgement this reliance on binary terms allows has resulted in the mental capacity of women to rationally commit acts of violence being denied.

The lack of acknowledgement of agency and the alienation of feminine qualities are themes that occur throughout the narratives of beautiful souls, monsters and whores. All three are based upon a portrayal of female sexuality as a dangerous cause of degeneracy in men and women; whilst masculinity is the basis of a military, Enloe describes the use of female physiology as "ideological sandbags piled up to construct a essentialist barricade that many senior military policy-makers hope will protect their institution against the onslaught of 'feminisation'". (Enloe, 1988: 139) Whilst these comments were made with regard to the military, instances of a "climate which allows [the use of] women as soldiers without being threatened by them" have also been observed in proscribed violence.

A woman's sexuality is of course a part of her life, as is a man's, but the obsession with the relationship between female sexuality and her decision to undertake terrorist or counterterrorist action has been demonstrated as damaging. Until gender considerations (much like other factors such as socioeconomics) can be taken into account when discussing violence, without entrenching gender subordination, recognition of women as being capable of rationally undertaking violent action cannot be achieved.

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