

# Contemporary Conceptualizations of Women in Conflict

Written by Birte Vogel

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## Contemporary Conceptualizations of Women in Conflict

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**“Does Jean Bethke Elshtain’s depiction of the ‘beautiful soul’ remain relevant in contemporary conceptualizations of women in conflict?”**

### Introduction

*Men are from Mars, women are from Venus.* Or are they not? Stereotypes, it could be said, are part of Western cultural daily life. In some cases, stereotypes are deployed to more or less “entertain” ourselves – as in the case of Gray’s mentioned bestseller. Others have much more impact on political and social decisions and their justifications. One of the stereotypes that Western culture has been shaped by is the picture of the ‘just warrior’ and the ‘beautiful soul’[1]. This dichotomy assumes a relationship between femininity and peace, the need of protection, motherhood and privacy, and, conversely, one between masculinity and combat and the public sphere. In the case of either gender, gender and stereotype can be seen as constructing each other. They do not exist separately from one another, the discourses overlap.

Taking into account the impact that gender stereotypes have had on Western culture, and the complexity of their construction, the question whether Jean Bethke Elshtain’s depiction of the beautiful soul is one of contemporary currency could be called quite far-ranging. The conceptualization of woman as ‘beautiful souls’ could be at the core of a range of research conducted within the field. The following quote from Elshtain narrows down the possible approaches towards the topic and also serves as a frame for my analysis:

We in the West are the heirs of a tradition that assumes affinity between women and peace, between men and war, a tradition that consists of culturally constructed and transmitted myths and memories. (Elshtain, 1987: 4)

First, we can see that Elshtain’s conceptualization of women can specifically be considered for Western countries (*We in the West*), she does not claim universal validity for her thesis. In very general terms, her perspective could be called US-American. This is why my study will focus on the roles women embody in contemporary American conflicts, namely the War on Terror. I consider it to be a good example as both sides, the American as well as the Afghan, have justified their positions partly with recalling the “myth of protection” (Tickner, 2008: 269). Therefore, this essay will attempt to shed some light upon how women are conceptualized for justification reasons in the *Operation Enduring Freedom*[2], and the impact of reentering a war for the American conceptualization of women.

I suggest that the image of women being rescued by the US military is constructed and women, thus, are conceptualized for legitimating the war in the public opinion and motivating soldiers to serve. The situation of Afghan women has not changed during the last two decades and however, there were no significant interventions from outside. Moreover, there are several women in similar situations, for example in Saudi Arabia, Iran or Kuwait to mention just a few examples.[3] I do not see the situation of women presented as the main reason for the military intervention, this certainly was the prevention of further terror attacks, but it was one major factor used to motivate men and women alike to support the war.

My approach will be discourse-analytical and postmodern feminist theory is the basis of my gender understanding. In

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this essay, the term 'sex' will refer to the biological difference between men and women, whereas 'gender' will encompass the social understanding of femininity and masculinity. In the first part, I will briefly illustrate and compare postmodern feminism to two other feminist theories (liberal and difference feminism). In the second part, I will evaluate myths and roles of female images: After analysing Elshtain's concept of the 'beautiful soul', I will turn to the topic of women in myths and memories and their function for creating nationalism. This should deepen the reader's understanding why women are described in a certain way and why it might be nowadays still politically desirable (and possible) to revive that construction of women. Furthermore, it is essential for the third and main part: The contemporary conceptualization of women in the Operation Enduring Freedom. Here, I focus on how gendered images have been used by the Bush administration but also how these images are challenged by modern society and reinforced by the political (male) élite. It will emerge that women are still presented in a context of gendered war narratives in the so called new wars. Furthermore, I argue that "[t]he discursive link between Al Qaida and Afghanistan, between supporting war and believing in peace, were reinforced through gendered articulations" (Shephard, 2006: 20) by a First Family embodying the perfect dichotomy of the 'beautiful soul' and the 'just warrior'.

## Feminist perspectives on women in war

Within feminist theory there are different approaches and trends looking at women and war. The postmodern feminist approach is, in my view, the most suitable approach for this essay, as it regards gender roles as constructed and not perceived as primordial (so does Elshtain even though she calls herself a *moral realist*). Nonetheless, I will briefly introduce two other schools of thought, namely *liberal feminism* and *difference feminism*. These three approaches are, according to Joshua Goldstein[4], the main schools of thought within feminist theory on war. *Liberal feminism* documents several inequalities between the sexes regarding income and individual rights. Basically, women and men are seen as equal in their abilities; therefore, the gendering of war reflects male discrimination against women. According to liberal feminists, women should have the same right to participate in all areas of society and political life, which includes the participation in war and combat.[5] Other feminists critique liberal feminism mainly for asking women to integrate into a man's world by getting more masculine instead of transforming and 'degendering' the system. *Difference feminism* on the other hand argues that there are existing differences between women and men because of their fundamentally different experiences. But instead of appreciating them, female attributes are devalued by society. They assume that women are naturally more peaceful and better at conflict resolution or group decision-making, which at the same time is the main critique other feminists have about difference feminism who consequently reject a binary gender system (Goldstein, 2001: 39ff). Especially *postmodern feminism* does not see primordial differences between men and women. For them gender itself is fluid and contextual. Claiming that we construct reality through our use of language they focus on meaning as it is codified in language. Meaning is always created by people in power, which means historically by men. Gender cannot be seen as a category of two real existing types of human beings. Consequently, women are not better or worse at war, but men construct them in certain ways to achieve certain purposes (Goldstein, 2001: 49/ Tickner, 2008: 267).

## The beautiful soul – women in myths and narratives

Along with Cynthia Enloe's *Banana, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Relations* (1989) and J. Ann Tickner's *Gender in International Relations: Feminist Perspectives on Achieving Global Security* (1992), Jean Bethke Elshtain's 'Bildungsroman' *Women and War* supplies a foundation for the subfield of feminist IR/ IR feminism (Sylvester, 2002: 15). It describes the construction of male and female stereotypes during wartimes and how the myth of the 'just warrior' and the 'beautiful soul' serves to legitimize and recreate men's identity as compassionate and dutiful warriors – and women as noncombatants (Elshtain, 1987: 4). According to Elshtain "women in Western culture have served as collective, culturally designated 'beautiful souls'" (Elshtain, 1987: 4). Women are defined by an image of innocence and associated with peacefulness and purity. As noncombatants they cannot defend themselves and are in need of male protection. During wartime women serve at the 'homefront' caring for their children and being, thus, uninvolved in the conflict. But they support the 'just warrior' by showing him that they admire him for his heroic behavior. Dissenting identities, as that of pacifist men and bellicose women will be marginalized in history during a process where gender identities attune to gendered norms as they do not underline the constructed (and wanted) gender images. Female violence does not become a part of the national narrative (Elshtain, 1987: 170). [6] It is essential to understand how and why those gender roles are created. To that end, I will

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now examine its influence on nation building and its motivation for men to fight.

## Myths and history as source of contemporary gender roles and national identity

“[L]anguage [...] is not only world-disclosing but also world-constituting” (Lazarus, 1999: 11). In *Women and War*, Elshtain shows the reader that empiric and narrative realities of war are quite different from one another. This is not an accidental but purposefully undertaken process by the powerful élite. This construction is necessary because „war does not come naturally to men (from biology), so warriors require intense socialization and training in order to fight effectively. Gender identity becomes a tool with which societies induce men to fight” (Goldstein, 2001: 252). This socialization can be achieved via ‘world-constituting’ narratives. The collective memory primarily remembers male heroic acts. “Certain other participants, deemed Beautiful Souls, are continuously disallowed war-telling by virtue being assigned the homefront, where their protection becomes one reason men will to go to war at all.” (Sylvester, 2002: 4). Anderson has argued that historically those myths and narratives were necessary to create a feeling of communion between strangers. “[T]he members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson, 1991: 6). This might be important for the role and the purpose of women in conflict as we will see soon. This missing ‘face-to-face contact’ (p 6) needs at least a corporate history to construct the feeling of a nation (according to the Latin origin of the word “natio” meaning “birth”) and therefore a political community with identical goals. Technically, the personal nation is the own family consisting of a man, his wife and children. Critics such as Anne McClintock, Cynthia Enloe and Yuval-Davis and others take Anderson’s important realization that nationalisms are imagined further. Their theory is based upon the notion that nationalisms are always constructed upon certain cultural signifiers and norms. In this, they transcend Anderson’s suggestion that communities are essentially imagined in the absence of the individuals’ ‘face-to-face- contact’. Focusing on the discriminatory potential of nationalisms against women, they claim that in patriarchal cultures national cultural signifiers have been constructed through “masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope” (Enloe, 1989: 44). One is reminded of Anne McClintock’s essay *No Longer in a Future Heaven*, where she argues that in patriarchal societies traditionally the nation is constructed as natural and normative implying that the nation can be aligned to the patriarchal family structure: the woman (our beautiful soul) at the centre with the children providing a nucleus of warmth, a sense of home – and on the other hand the father/ husband (the just warrior) defending “home” in a political, military sphere. Throughout time, this alignment of nation and family has constructed woman’s relation to power as an indirect one – as mediated by her (inferior) relation to her husband. It is, thus, the man’s duty to protect his wife and his children and in a broader sense, the nation.

The military historian Martin van Creveld, whose tenor can be seen as antifeminist for his antiqued image of women, describes several reasons why men were and still are fighting wars. Even though I think van Creveld basic assumptions of existing primordial differences between men and women are wrong, the outcome of his theory shows how the constructed gender images still motivate men.[7] For him, women are and always have been “one of the principal objectives for which war is waged” (van Creveld, 2001: 33). If women do not feel protected “they may go over to the other side” (p 33), the only thing which gives women not a passive but an active role during wartime. Furthermore, van Creveld sees wartime rape as “the ultimate dehumiliation of the enemy men” (p 34) as the men are not able to defend their families anymore. This harks back to Anderson’s explication where the family takes the part of the nation and defending the nation means defending the family. To van Creveld, only women’s physical weakness and their inability to fight makes war make sense. “Conversely, if they [women] could fight then much of the war’s purpose would be lost. This, then, is another reason why women hardly ever fought and, even more rarely, killed” (p 37).

## The conceptualization of women for Operation Enduring Freedom

Thinking of today’s society, we see modern US-women in more positions than motherhood and heads of households. Moreover, a family is not necessarily a heterosexual union with at least one child anymore. We have divorced people, homosexual marriages, childless unions or just people who cohabit as well as a growing number of single households. The classic family Anderson might have thought about when talking about the function of the family as a nucleus nation has no monopole anymore. Elshtain’s binary system of the just warrior versus beautiful soul depends on this image of family as well. Additionally, American women are accepted into armed forces, and also homosexuals

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may in due course become openly part of the US-military.[8] Furthermore, during the 1990s, after the end of the Cold War and in a phase of relative peace, society got accustomed to less militarized models of masculinity (Tickner, 2008: 269). Some might even argue that men got more 'womanly'. All this makes the picture of contemporary American society much more complicated than it was 50 years ago. "Yet, [...] myths have been important in upholding the legitimacy of war." (p 269). From my point of view, a changing society and the fact that 90 per cent of total war casualties are women and children (p 268) challenge the myth of protection too much as it could motivate men to go to war and society to accept war without massive political support of this image. Therefore, the American administration had to reconstruct and reinforce the gender image of the helpless and peaceful beautiful soul – in which ways I will illustrate now.

The First Family, President George W. Bush and his wife Laura Bush presented themselves as the archetype of the just warrior/ beautiful soul dichotomy and embodied ancient gender roles in daily modern wartime life. Second, the female Afghan population was conceptualized as a compensatory beautiful soul (pictured as helpless women and children tyrannized by the Taliban) to underline the myth of protection and closing the gap modern women might create. Bush's moral propaganda of the American just warrior who saves the Afghan virgin from the Taliban dragon sounds even in contemporary America anachronistic and noncredible at the same time. It is likely that Afghan women were only used for legitimating the counterattacks as their rights played a minor role after the Taliban regime was removed. "Various women groups lobbied the White House to encourage the involvement of women in a new framework for governance" (Charlesworth/Chiniki, 2002: 602) without any major success. The American President, on the one hand promised to rescue these women at home and, on the other hand, left them alone once in Afghanistan.

## President Bush's reinforcement of the (masculine) nation

According to Elshtain, there was a clear division into "good and bad – we and them" (Elshtain, 1987: 3) during the Cold War. After the attacks of 9/11 there was, again, a clearly visible enemy: Moslem men in general and Osama Bin Laden in particular. According to Tickner there was an immediate masculinization of the public sphere where women in news broadcastings were replaced by male war experts briefing the nation about 'America's new war' (Tickner, 2008: 269). However, we should notice that Tickner's assumption has to be questioned in at least one point: Condoleezza Rice was neither male nor white but one of the most prominent people in promoting the war on terror. Maybe we can see her as an example for a woman "masculine enough" to be part of the political élite. However, President Bush subsidized the masculine identity of the nation and the image of the just warrior in some ways. As we have seen before, the nation is the 'home' of the just warrior and the beautiful soul. That is one reason why Bush needed his nation to be strong and loved. He constructed a positive link between "every American family and the family of America" (Bush cited in Shephard, 2006: 22) which underlines Anderson's theory of the imagined community where the family has to represent the whole nation. Immediately after 9/11 Martin van Creveld declared in an interview: "[O]ne of the principal losers [of the attacks from 9/11] is likely to be feminism, which is based partly on the false belief that average the woman is as able to defend herself as the average man" (van Creveld cited in Faludi, 2007: 21). This conservative attitude represents an image of gender roles which got common after the attacks. By thanking the new American heroes for their "work past exhaustion" (Bush 2001 cited in Shephard), Bush reminded the population of male virtues. He released a large list of men America must be grateful to: New York's "Major Rudolph Guiliani, the firemen, the police officers, the rescue workers who raised the American flag in the wreckage." (Charlesworth/Chiniki, 2002: 600). The world and the President forgot about all the females in same positions. America's heroes were constructed as male and "[t]his glorification is reinforced by the active valorization of the 'manly men' by their heterosexual female counterparts" (Shephard, 2006: 22). Bush himself was one of the just warriors 'having a job to do' (saving the country and whole female population), acting out of duty and encouraging his fellow citizens to fight on his side. And he was encouraged by his female counterpart Laura.

## Laura Bush as a modern American beautiful soul?

According to Enloe we must ask: Where are the women? In the public opinion women were neither part of the terrorist attacks nor of the rescuers – they were mainly represented as victims. Broadcasting stations reported about women killed in the attacks and their children left behind. In contrast to Condoleezza Rice, Laura Bush was the

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embodied femininity which should be presented to the American public.[9] Shephard sees Bush entering „into the construction of the US-self-as-nation as a supportive counterpoint to the ‘real/ men’s’ world” (Shephard, 2006: 24). Laura Bush is an example for a woman who actively uses and reproduces the beautiful soul image to manifest her own position in power. She presented the image of the caring mother of the nation taking welfare of America’s children (p 23f) by writing in an open letter to a New Yorker elementary school: “I want you to know how much I care about all of you” and ensuring them “people [...] love and care about you and are looking out for your safety” (Laura Bush cited in Shephard, 2006: 24). Like in Elshtain’s depiction of the beautiful soul, Laura Bush can be associated with motherhood, taking care at the homefront, and passivity. Furthermore, she supported her husband, the just warrior, and made his decision to rescue Afghan women heroic. According to Shephard, all visible American females were constructed as the ‘Happy Shopper’ assumed with words like mother, care, shop and support. In contrast to the beautiful soul the Happy Shopper has a lack of being in real danger. It is not assumed with ‘protection’ in first place. Therefore, it was indispensable to involve Afghan women as they took the part of women in real danger. Soon, she started to decry the inhuman treatment of Afghan women by the Afghan regime. Charlesworth and Chiniki see Bush’s intervention as a message that the position of women in Afghanistan is a woman’s business instead of a governmental. They describe her as a ‘woman without official position’. I question this assumption strongly. For me, Laura Bush can be seen as a model for all American women created by the Bush administration. By drawing attention to the issue of Afghan women she solicited the American population to rescue “these helpless women” terrorized by their men. That, again, shows that even modern American women are constructed as passive and not able to act. They have to ask men, in this case the US military, for help.

## Afghan women as compensatory beautiful souls

All of a sudden, Afghan women had to be rescued. Again we could ask: Why not before? Why not in other countries as Pettman (cf. Pettman 2004) asks. Maybe because they were now needed. The ‘Happy Shopper’ was not in enough danger to be an adequate beautiful soul. Afghan women somehow had to complete the role of the beautiful soul modern American women may not fulfill on their own anymore – due to the mentioned changes in society and the lack of real danger they are in. “In the famous ‘axis of evil’ speech, one of the things that separated good and evil in President Bush’s parlance was how civilized people treat women – which is not to involve them in terror” (Sjoberg, 2009: 72). Fighting becomes an act for the women in Afghanistan who are in real danger. It goes back to the romantic appeal of liberating women through liberating states (O’Gorman, 1999: 1) or as Pettman puts it “[O]ur men are setting out to rescue their women [...]”.

The myth of protection foists upon male responsibilities of soldiering and the conceptualization of women as those for whom men must fight, underlining men as agents and women as “passive prawns in international politics” (Pettman, 2004: 89). This goes back to the discussed myths and narratives in part two and Elshtain’s explanation of the citizen-warrior – protecting pure women and the homeland. Laura Bush linked Afghan and American women by demonstrating that for now, the soldiers are fighting for women’s rights in Afghanistan, but in the long run, they guarantee Western women’s peace. In a radio interview she said:

Civilized people throughout the world are peaking out in horror [...] because our hearts break for the women and children in Afghanistan [...] because in Afghanistan we see the world the terrorists would like to impose on the rest of us.

According to Shephard this declaration denies Afghan women again both adulthood and agency (Shephard, 2006: 20) but it does imply something else as well: it brings the women back to the image of beautiful souls, peaceful and helpless and at the same time it shows the potential danger for all women of being oppressed by the terrorists. So American (male) soldiers are fighting once more for the rights of ‘their’ women which again make men the subjects and women the objects of war (Youngs, 2006: 8). Likewise, Afghan women served in yet another way for legitimizing the war: OEF received substantial support from the American feminist community after listing women’s rights in Afghanistan among its reasons for the war on terror (Sjoberg, 2009: 72). Here, men and women alike take Afghan women away their agency and construct them as victims.[10]

## Conclusion

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My essay has shown that men and women are both from earth, and gender identities are not organic, natural entities. Rather, they are (re)constructed through discourses by powerful élites, in this case the US government under George W. Bush. What one might consider are quite anachronistic stereotypes were “warmed up” in the context of 9/11 and its aftermath. We have seen, thus, that these gender-based stereotypes do not only exist in the state-to-state fighting Elshtain wrote about, but also in contemporary counterterror conflicts. Harking back to Anne McClintock’s essay *No Longer in a Future Heaven*, where she explains the historic relationship between the family and the nation we understood how men are socially introduced to fight. In danger, the alignment ‘family’ has incited men to defend what is “naturally” theirs: “their” country as the place they were born (*natio*) and “their” family and “their” ‘beautiful soul’.

(cf. Anderson 1983). In the case of Operation Enduring Freedom, this kind of ideology was consciously deployed, with one addition: here, feminism was also “used” by giving the impression that freeing women from the terror of the Taliban was one major interest in going to war. All this shows how “dangerous” (McClintock, 1997: 89) nationalisms, and ideologies (also Western Feminism) at large, can be as they can still today be easily used to manipulate people.

The image of the ‘beautiful soul’, thus, stays relevant even though it is challenged by modern society. However, American women can hardly be used as fully-fledged ‘beautiful souls’ due to their lack of being in danger, their presence in public and in the armed forces. In spite of all moral propaganda it rings hollow. Therefore, the proper ‘beautiful soul’ was transferred from modern American society to a culture where women are suppressed by men and gender roles are still traditional and society patriarchic. Soldiers, no matter if male or female, feel heroic about rescuing Afghan women from their men. Afghan women are denied their agency by Western men and women alike.

When hearing ‘women’ we still think ‘victim’ in many cases which supports political manipulation and conceptualization of women as war legitimating and justification reasons. I would like to suggest that in nationbuilding processes of any kind it is necessary for people to understand to an extent the constructedness of their “imagined communities” – and social gender roles. This is an essential precondition for tolerating the other, and thus, also, for peace.

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and conflicts, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, Vol. 8 (1), 3-18

1 The term of the *beautiful soul* is originally a motive from the German philosopher Hegel and was not gendered. Instead, Hegel described a human being with a pure soul and a noble mind (Hegel, 1986:399). Mainly, Elshtain transferred that image to the social construction of women in war times at which we will have a close look later on.

2 As a reaction to the attacks from 9/11 the USA began the international war on terrorism. Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) is part of these measures against international terrorism and was started on October 7th. It is based on the UN resolution 1368 passed by the UN Security Council. OEF consists of four major military projects: Afghanistan, Philippines, Trans Sahara and the Horn of Africa. Speaking of OEF commonly refers only to the operation in Afghanistan (OEF-A), which is also meant in the context of this essay.

3 I do not argue that women should not be liberated by men or anyone else in general when their rights are mistreated, but that women's rights were only presented as one of the justifications for the OEF. In which way an intervention into other cultures is legitimate and if liberal peace is the answer or not cannot be discussed in this paper even though it is an essential question for feminists. Doubtlessly, women in Afghanistan were (and still are) in a bad situation. This should not be questioned by any of my argumentations.

[4] See Goldstein: 2001

5 An exclusion from combat can also be a disadvantage for other positions within state institutions. During the American presidential campaign 2004 both candidates emphasized their military and National Guard Services as qualifications for being a good president able to protect the country (cf. Tickner, 2008: 270 / Goldstein, 2001: 39).

6 Elshtain does name some exceptions, for example the French Revolution where women led partisan units into battle, women who fought in the streets with men during the liberation of Paris (Elshtain 1987: 177) or Soviet women, who formed the only regular female combat forces during World War II serving as snipers, artillery women and tank women. At their peak in late 1943, up to one million women served (Elshtain, 1987: 178).

[7] We do not have to go back in history to female concentration camp officers in Nazi-Germany to see women using sexual assault against men. We just have to remember the Abu Ghraib (prison in Bagdad used by American soldiers during Operation Iraqi Freedom) torture and prisoner abuse. One prominent example was the female soldier Lynndie England who was photographed in several poses humiliating naked males. This behavior reported with great media attention to the public, attacks and denies the image of purity as well as the weakness of women.

8 Soldiers accused of 'homosexual conduct' can still be banned from service in the US-army because the "presence in the Armed Forces of persons who demonstrate a propensity or intent to engage in homosexual acts would create an unacceptable risk to the high standards of morale, good order and discipline, and unit cohesion that are the essence of military capability." (10 U.S.C. § 654). Current President Obama announced that it is his wish to change this during his turn in office not without fundamental critique from leading militaries.

9 At the same time, UK President Tony Blair's wife Cherie was presented in a similar way, fronting a campaign on behalf of Afghan women (see for example Charlesworth/Chiniki)

[10] Western feminists have been under massive critique from African feminists and other regions for their behavior. They argue western feminists treat other women like the colonial rulers did before and deny them their right of self-determination (see for example: Trinh, Minh-ha T. (1989): *Women. Native. Other. Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*)

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