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WOMEN, THE “SECRET WEAPON” OF MODERN WARFARE?

Abstract

In her essay, Kelly Oliver argues that women’s violence is given more media attention than men’s violence, not just because it is less prominent or because there are not as many women soldiers or militants than men. Rather, she maintains that traditional stereotypes of women as “black widow spiders” or “femme fatales” who use their pretty smiles and their sex appeal to lure men to their deaths play into media representations of women’s involvement in recent military action. Because of the way that stereotypes of women’s sexuality as inherently dangerous and women’s violence as more threatening than men’s, the issue of women’s participation in the theatre of war is complex. She examines how, when military leaders or jihadists use women strategically as weapons, and when the media figures them as weapons in their very presence in the theatre of war, women’s agency in violence is complicated.

Discussing the traditional Indian ritual of sati in which widows throw themselves on the burning funeral pyres of their husbands, in her seminal essay “Can the Subaltern Speak,” literary theorist Gayatri Spivak shows the limitations of liberal notions of freedom, choice and agency when it comes to discussing subaltern women, or possibly women and oppressed peoples in general (1988). Spivak demonstrates how within the rhetoric of the traditionalists, these women are free agents who chose to burn themselves; but within the rhetoric of Western feminists, these women are the victims of repressive and deadly patriarchal customs of a “backward” culture. The double-bind in this situation is that, on the one hand, we don’t want to perpetuate the stereotype that women are merely passive helpless victims who don’t possess any agency of their own; but on the other hand, we don’t want to embrace a practice that not only serves patriarchal inheritance laws but moreover kills women. So, which is it? Do these women jump on the burning pyres of their own free will, or does their culture push them, so to speak? On Spivak’s analysis, it is precisely our stereotypes of women, and subaltern women in particular, that constructs this dilemma in which women do have agency but only the agency to kill themselves. Spivak complicates any simply idea that women’s choices are the result of their own autonomous free will apart from social pressures and political situations.

Spivak’s analysis of the dilemma or double-bind when it comes to women’s violence is apt as we consider recent representations of women’s violence in the Middle East. From the young American women soldiers involved in abuses of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison, to captured American and British women Private Jessica Lynch and Seaman Lynn Turney, to Palestinian and Russian women suicide bombers, women are figured as dangerous, even more dangerous than men, especially because of the cultural association between sex and violence. On the one side, you have conservative commentators suggesting that the very presence of women in the theatre of war brings out sexual “whore house” behavior

and leads to violence. And on the other, you have feminist commentators arguing that these women are being used and manipulated by men. So, which is it? Are they pushed or do they jump, so to speak? How should we interpret women's violence in the theatre of war? What is the status of women's agency in situations where their roles are circumscribed by patriarchal stereotypes of femininity, female sexuality, and the association of sex and violence?

In this essay, I argue that women's violence is given more media attention than men's violence, not just because it is less prominent or because there are not as many women soldiers or militants than men. Rather, as we will see, traditional stereotypes of women as "black widow spiders" or "femme fatales" who use their pretty smiles and their sex appeal to lure men to their deaths play into media representations of women's involvement in recent military action. Because of the way that stereotypes of women's sexuality as inherently dangerous and women's violence as more threatening than men's, the issue of women's participation in the theatre of war is complex. Indeed, as we will see, when military leaders or jihadists use women strategically as weapons, and when the media figures them as weapons in their very presence in the theatre of war, women's agency is difficult to locate. As with Spivak's analysis of the Indian widows, on the one hand, some conservatives blame women for their inherently violent natures, while some feminists blame male control of women for forcing them into these acts of war.

Although my analysis will be focused primarily on the media representations of women as inherently violent, it also has significant implications for how we answer the question of whether or not women are "pushed or jump." In other words, the actions of these women cannot be separated from the patriarchal context in which they take place. Moreover, they take place within a history of colonial violence in which, as Spivak's analysis makes clear, has revolved around rhetoric about women and women's freedom. As Spivak so persuasively argues, when it is convenient conservatives rally around women's rights to choose to kill themselves in the name of women's freedom and even in the name of feminism. On the other side, also in the name of women's freedom and feminism, both conservatives and feminists suggest the need to "save brown women from brown men," as Spivak puts it. As we will see, the role of women in military action is complicated by stereotypes of femininity, maternity and sexuality that inflect their violent actions with a titillating aspect that captures the imagination and puts them in the media spotlight.

It is telling that while women soldiers' rapes and deaths get little attention in the media or from the American public, women's involvement in abusive treatment of detainees at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq and at Guantánamo Bay prison in Cuba continue to haunt debates over acceptable interrogation techniques and American sentiments toward these "wars." According to the United States Pentagon's own Rand Report, approximately one third of the women soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan have been raped or sexually assaulted by their fellow soldiers (see Yaeger 2007 & Corbett 2007). These women return home suffering from the double whammy of post-traumatic stress disorder and sexual assault. At the extreme, women are dying from dehydration for fear of having to go out to the latrine at night where they risk being raped. Although rapes and deaths of women soldiers receive little attention, reports of violence and abuse by women capture public imagination. Why? Why does women's violence generate so much press and media speculation? In *Women as Weapons of War*, I take up this question by analyzing both the media coverage and the events themselves within the context of a connection between sex and violence that has become endemic to imperialism (Oliver 2007). There I argue that the American occupation of Iraq follows in a long line of colonial and imperialist ventures executed by the "West" in the "East." I trace this history back to the 19th Century when the latest technology, namely the camera, was already being used by

British military to document everyday life in colonial India for family back home. Photographs of violence and war were taken along with pictures of family and British high tea. The proximity of war and everyday life in these photographs served to normalize violence for those participating in it and for those back home; violence appears as a part of everyday life along with having tea or women playing with children (See Chaudhary 2005, especially pages 70 and 75). The camera extracts a particular scene from a particular perspective from the landscape and thereby renders invisible the colonial context or background against which this “slice-of-life” is taken. In this way, violence becomes part of the landscape rather than imposed on it by the occupying army (with its image-making technologies along with its weapons of war).

Placing the events at Abu Ghraib and their media coverage within the historical context of Western colonial violence allows us to see how they are a continuation of military practices that normalize violence, particularly in relation to women and sex, along with scenes of camels, street scenes, and daily life. These photographs were then sent via email to friends and family as so many post-cards from Iraq. When the photographs of abuse first became public, there was a flurry of outrage and accusation. These photographs of pretty young women giving thumbs up over dead bodies and naked prisoners stacked in piles or in sexual poses were considered “shocking” and mind-boggling; some considered the photographs themselves to be the real problem. Yet, at the same time, there was something strangely familiar about these photos. And, it is that combination of shock and familiarity that we must seek to understand. Remember, the smiling faces of Private Lyndie England and Sabrina Harmon, the poster girls of Abu Ghraib. One of the most famous images was of Private England, cigarette dangling from her mouth, holding the end of a leash around the neck of a naked Iraqi prisoner. And, Harmon was shown smiling giving the thumbs up signal over a dead body. The faces of the perpetrators suggest that they could be photographs in a high-school yearbook.

These “shocking” images, however, are not only familiar to us from a history of colonial violence associated with sex, but also they are familiar to us from a history of associations between women, sex and violence. Indeed, in some sense, the association between sex and violence trades on stereotypical images and myths of dangerous or threatening women upon which our culture was, and continues to be, built. Women have been associated with the downfall of man since Eve tempted Adam with forbidden fruit. It is productive therefore to analyze recent media representations of women from war in the Middle East, including Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine, in terms of both the legacy of colonial imperialism and the legacy of patriarchal associations between women, sex, and death.

From mythological characters such as Medusa and Jocasta, to Biblical figures such as Eve, Salome, Delilah or Judith, to contemporary Hollywood femme fatales, women’s sexuality has been imagined as dangerous; even more so because we imagine that women’s sexuality can be wielded as a weapon by women against men. Perhaps the most extreme example of this fantasy as it appears in recent military engagement is the seemingly intentional use of female sexuality as a top-secret “classified” interrogation technique in Guantánamo Bay prison, where reportedly women interrogators stripped off their uniforms, rubbed up against prisoners, and threatened them with fake menstrual blood in order to break them by making them feel unclean and therefore unworthy to pray (Saar 2005 222-228).

The military’s “strategic” use of women both in Guantánamo and at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq have been described as techniques to “soften-up” prisoners. And a recent article published in the U.S. military’s own journal *Small Wars* discusses the use of all female Marine units currently being used in Afghanistan to “wield the culture as a weapon” to “soften” interactions with local men and children (2010 4). At the same time that women are being used to “soften-up” the enemy, women also are used to “soft-up” public

perceptions of abuse and torture. Women are imagined as soft and vulnerable, but this seemingly is also what makes them so dangerous. Their seemingly innocent pretty smiles seduce and kill. The fantasy is that women's bodies and female sexuality are in themselves dangerous. Age-old stereotypes play into the military's use of women as strategic "weapons" because their very presence, particularly their sexuality, is imaged as dangerous and threatening. Again, it becomes difficult to discern women's agency in these situations. Internet blogs and late night talk shows suggested that female interrogators performing the equivalent of a "lap dance" is titillating rather than abusive.

In *Women as Weapons of War*, I show how news media repeatedly describe women soldiers as "weapons." Women warriors are not referred to as women *with* weapons or women *carrying* bombs, but their very bodies are imagined as dangerous. For example, a columnist for *The New York Times* said that "an example of the most astounding modern weapon in the Western arsenal" was named Claire with a machine gun in her arms and a flower in her helmet (Kristof 2003 A31); after news broke about female interrogators at Guantánamo Bay prison, a *Time* magazine headline read "female sexuality used as a weapon" (Dodds 2005a 11); and the *London Times* described Palestinian women suicide bombers as "secret weapons" and "human precision bombs," "more deadly than the male" (Jaber 2003 1). An essayist for *New York Times Magazine* called women suicide bombers in Iraq one of "the extremists' most lethal weapons" because insurgents "could use to advantage their traditional dress" to hide bombs (Rubin 2009). And in April of 2010, after two Chechen women blew themselves up at a subway station in Moscow, *The New York Times* and other mainstream media asked: "What Makes Chechen Women So Dangerous?" (Page 4/29 2010). Their answers echo the sentiment that there is something inherently dangerous about girls, about the lure of their smiles and ponytails, about their seeming innocence, that puts them above suspicion. One story of the Russian suicide bombers began "Baby-faced, she looks barely a teenage" (Levy, April 2, 2010). The article entitled "What Makes Chechen Women So Dangerous" answers that female suicide bombers are more deadly than males not only because women can enter crowded spaces inconspicuously but also because they inspire others.

According to media reports, these so-called "Black Widows," seeking revenge for Russian soldiers' violence toward their families revive "a particular fear in the Russian capital, one that goes beyond the usual terrorism worries of a metropolis: the female bomber," one that has become "a lurid obsession" in the Russian media since the 2002 hostage taking in a Moscow auditorium that involved several women captors (Kramer 2010). After using sleep-inducing gas, although most of the captors were male, "when [Russian] soldiers entered the auditorium they reportedly, as a first precaution, shot dead the Black Widows where they lay, lest they wake up and explode" (Kramer 2010). Women suicide bombers stir particular fears because "the women are indistinguishable on the street or in the subway — until they detonate their lads in the name of revenge." According to a *Los Angeles Times* article "there was a pervasive fear of Muslim women who might be stalking the streets, indistinguishable until they detonated their explosives" (Stack March 31 2010). This so-called "pervasive fear" is of Muslim women who can pass themselves off as non-Muslim Russian women. These fears play off of stereotypes of women as inherently dangerous and as Muslim women as even more so.

Once again, stereotypes of women as inherently dangerous play into media and public perceptions of women's violence. These reports in the popular press make it clear that women are considered more dangerous than their male counterparts. Because women and girls supposedly can pass themselves off as pretty, cute, and innocent, they are not as suspicious as men. On the other hand, their feminine wiles

through which they use their beauty and innocence to commit violent acts, seemingly makes them more dangerous than men. Women's violence is complicated by these stereotypes that color the way we see women militants and women soldiers. In other words, their violent acts are interpreted in ways that are overdetermined by cultural stereotypes that continue to associate sex and violence.

Even Private Jessica Lynch (the U.S. soldier who was captured and rescued early in the Iraq invasion) was labeled a "human shield" and a weapon in the propaganda war (Bragg 2003 122). Media and public reactions to the more recent capture and release of British Seaman Faye Turney displayed some of the same tendencies; the British media accused the Iranian President of using Turney as a weapon in a propaganda war, at the same time that conservatives used this image of a mother prisoner of war to argue against women warriors. And, even more recently, initial reports of Osama bin Laden's killing maintained that he used his youngest wife as a "human shield," while later these were revised to say that she threw herself in front of him to shield or protect him. Again, women are imaged as weapons, only now defensive rather than offensive weapons in a propaganda war. It is interesting to note that even Zahra Rahnavard, wife of primary Iranian opposition candidate Hossein Mousavi, who played a critical role in his campaign when she broke with conservative traditions by appearing in public with her husband, was called Mousavi's "secret weapon," again suggesting that powerful women are dangerous weapons (see Putz 2009 1). Again women's bodies and sheer presence are figured as inherently threatening.

Both recovered heroines like Lynch and Turney and the "bad girls" of Abu Ghraib have galvanized debates over women serving in the military. Some reports said that the "whorehouse" behavior at the prison was the result of the presence of women, who trigger what they referred to as the "natural" sexual impulses of men (see Thomas 2004 10). This attitude that the very presence of women triggers sexual violence resurfaced recently in the media wake of the mob rape of American journalist Lara Logan in Cairo during the protests early in 2011. In the blogosphere, some suggested that because Logan is attractive, she brought the rapes on herself. One blog, *LA Weekly* said "OMG [Oh My God] if I were her captors and there were no sanctions for doing so, I would totally rape her" (Feb 3 Simone Wilson, 2011). And, established journalist Nir Rosen lost his fellowship at New York University when his tweets suggested not only that Logan deserved it because he sees her as a "major war monger," but also that he thought it was funny. In addition, some said that women journalists should not be covering these situations; again, suggesting that somehow the women are in to blame just for being there, and in Logan's case for being attractive. The media reports surrounding Logan's rape suggest once again that women are held responsible for violence in ways that men are not. She was blamed simply for being a woman, for being pretty and for being on the scene of protest. Once again, cultural connections between sex and violence make women's association with violence complex and overdetermined. This example makes manifest the way in which women are both seen as vulnerable victims and blameworthy agents responsible for their own rapes. Which is it, is she a victim or the agent of violence? Did she jump or was she pushed, so to speak?

Women's supposed vulnerability also has been used in arguments against women serving in the military. Similar questions appeared after the capture of Seaman Turney. Many people wondered why a mother of a three year-old was in the Navy in the first place. Like Lynch, Turney captured the hearts of people back home, who saw her as a heroine, a brave example of English womanhood. Much of the public outrage was over the fact that Turney was forced to wear a headscarf while in captivity. One British feminist historian wrote that the "shapeless garments and a headscarf" made Turney appear as "a nobody, a vulnerable,

defenseless little woman” (Jardine 2007 2). And, photos circulated after her release show her holding the floral headscarf between her index finger and thumb as if it were a dirty rag

The headscarf has become a symbol of the victimization of Muslim women. But, once again this symbol is overdetermined by Western stereotypes and the rhetoric of women and war. Human rights analyst Mariam Memarsadegi points out that wearing hijab or wearing makeup has vastly different political ramifications in different contexts, a fact that Westerners do not always appreciate (see Erbé 2009 2). While in Iran all women no matter what their religion are forced to veil with threats of imprisonment or even death, in Egypt, the veil was sometimes worn as a symbol of protest against the Mubarak regime and against Western values.

Still, in the Western imaginary the veil has become a symbol of women’s oppression, even more important than education or career status as a measure of women’s rights. Women’s freedom has become defined in terms of the right to “bare arms” and the freedom to shop for clothing. Some feminists in Afghanistan and Iraq, on the other hand, are donning hijab as a statement of protest against U.S. occupation. Are veiled Muslim women victims of oppression, symbolized by their covered bodies? Or, are their veils protests against the imposition of Western values? Are they the victims of oppression, or do they freely choose to veil? These questions are not so easy to answer. While we might interpret wearing a veil or hijab as a form of oppression, women in Muslim countries might see the ideals of femininity and motherhood in the United States and Britain as oppressive. Indeed by pointing to the lack of women’s freedoms elsewhere, we ignore the ways in which women are coerced at home, where ideals of femininity lead young girls to eating disorders; religious conservatives try to prevent young women from using birth-control and limit their access to abortions; women continue to have the lioness’s share of childcare; soccer moms resort to caffeine, Prozac, and sleeping pills to maintain their busy schedules; and most of the people living in poverty in the U.S. and in the world are women and children. Are women in the so-called Western world free to choose their fates in ways that Muslim women in the Middle East are not? Or, do we need to consider the ways in which patriarchal stereotypes and cultural expectations play into women’s lives in different ways in different contexts? This is what I suggest in *Women as Weapons of War*.

Is wearing a bikini and lipstick essential to women’s freedom? Or, is the expectation to look sexy just as much a patriarchal stereotype as the expectation of feminine modesty? In the context of Iran’s conservative and repressive government with strict laws circumscribing women’s dress and movement, as part of what since 2005 they call a “modesty campaign,” adornments such as fingernail polish and make-up that in the United States we might associate with buying into ideals of beauty that objectify women become means of protest and rebellion (See Carpentier June 16 2009 1). In 2006, the “one million signatures” campaign was born after women protesting the new modesty laws were attacked by security forces. Although some women activists involved in this movement have been jailed, it continues thanks to Internet and new communications technologies. Indeed, the Internet and technologies such as Twitter have deeply impacted the women’s movement in Iran. For example, images from Iran of Neda Agha Soltan dying were sent around the world almost instantaneously thanks to cell phone and internet technologies, technologies that are difficult to police. The image of a beautiful young woman dying shocked people in the United States, who are usually shielded from the realities of war and death even while they crave more representations of violence in their entertainment. Given our fascination with the connection between women and violence, it is telling that this image of a pretty young woman’s death became a rallying cry for Westerners even while several others died in the protests. The connection between women’s sex appeal

and the fantasy of their danger is implicit in another Western journalist's comment on the "pretty" Iranian women at the forefront of protests over the election with what she calls their "bombshell make-up" in the "nose-job capital of the world" (Clark Flory 2009 1). Once again, it is women's appearance, their beauty, their sex appeal that attract media attention, even when they are protesting for their rights. Moreover, the metaphor of the "bombshell" makes explicit the deep cultural connection between women and violence. Their very bodies are bombs; their sexual appeal is dangerous.

In conclusion, conservative politicians employ feminist rhetoric to justify war even as they cut programs that help women at home, including welfare, state sponsored childcare, Planned Parenthood (a nonprofit organization that gives poor women access to birth control and other services), and affirmative action. They can simultaneously blame feminism for the abusive women at Abu Ghraib and invade Afghanistan to liberate women. Women are seen as both inherently blameworthy because of the supposed natural connection between sex and violence and as vulnerable victims in need of protection. U.S. justifications for the invasions in Iraq and especially in Afghanistan, revolve around what Gayatri Spivak calls Western imperialist discourse of "saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak 1988).

Selective appropriation of feminism and concern for women have become essential to imperialist discourses. For example, at the turn of the 19th century, English Lord Cromer, British consul general in Egypt, founded the Men's League For Opposing Women's Suffrage in England at the same time that he used arguments about women's oppression to justify the occupation of Egypt. And in the 1950's much of the rhetoric used to justify French colonial rule in Algeria focused on the plight of Algerian women, whose oppression was seen as epitomized by the veil. We saw a similar concern with the veil in media used to justify military action in Afghanistan, where the burka and veil became the most emblematic signs of women's oppression. The media was full of articles referring to the US invasion as liberating Afghan women by "unveiling" them and then President Bush talked about freeing "women of cover" (see Abu-Lughod 2002 783).

The irony is that conservatives will use feminism when it suits their purposes and defame it when it doesn't. It is not just conservative Christians, however, who hold this double standard that allows them to deploy feminism as a strategy of war even while simultaneously denying women certain freedoms or privileges. Reportedly the actions of Palestinian women suicide bombers lead several Islamic clerics to proclaim that women, like men, can reach paradise as martyrs despite earlier beliefs that women could not be holy martyrs. Training women from conservative religious groups requires loosening restrictions on their freedom of movement and contact with men outside of their families. It also means changing regulations on what they wear and on showing their bodies, which are not to be seen by men even in death (Daraghmeh 2003, A22). After Palestinian nineteen year-old Hiba Darahmeh blew herself up on behalf of Islamic Jihad in May 2003, one influential cleric said that she didn't need a chaperone on her way to the attack and she could take off her veil because "she is going to die in the cause of Allah, and not to show off her beauty" (Sheik Yusef al-Qaradawi quoted in Bennet 2003, 1). The conservative patriarchal religious restrictions on women's movements and bodies become fluid as leaders begin to imagine the strategic value of women as weapons of war. In 2008, Al Qaeda allegedly used two mentally impaired women to carry out suicide bombings in busy markets in Baghdad; reportedly their use of women suicide bombers is on the rise because women more easily pass through check-points without arousing suspicions (see Farrell & Al-Husaini 2008). It is apt that on the morning of January 27, 2002 just hours before Wafa Idris, the first Palestinian woman suicide bomber blew up, Yaser Arafat spoke to women in his compound at Ramallah

and told them, “women and men are equal... You are my army of roses that will crush Israeli tanks” (see Victor 2003 19). In the name of women’s equality, Arafat develops his deadly roses. Women are not just carrying guns, rather their very bodies have become figured as bombshells, black widows, or roses with thorns, deadly flowers that can be used as part of the modern arsenal of war on both sides. From Yaser Arafat’s “army of roses” to the U.S. soldier named Claire with a flower in her helmet,” women’s bodies are figured as weapons by the media and used as weapons by conservative war-makers on both sides. And both sides have enlisted feminist rhetoric of women’s equality when it suits their purposes in the service of waging war.

On the other hand, some feminists have suggested that women suicide bombers are forced into their situations by oppressive patriarchal cultures that give them no choice, that they are pushed rather than jump. For example, in her book, *Army of Roses*, Barbara Victor suggests that Palestinian women suicide bombers are outcasts from their traditional culture because of failed marriages, divorce, the inability to have children and other “amorous disasters” as French psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva calls them (2010). Victor wonders how these “bearers of life” become “killing machines.” But, interpreting their violent actions solely as a result of their marginal status within their communities denies their agency and figures them merely as victims. It is also important to acknowledge that their bombings are political acts in the theatre of war. It is telling, however, that women suicide bombers attract more media attention than their male counterparts. This is not just because there are fewer of them. Rather, somehow the fact that they are young women and mothers blowing up themselves and others seems more shocking to us than men’s violence. Some Islamic Jihad commanders have started recruiting women specifically because they can more easily pass through check points by donning pony-tails and smiles or pretending to be pregnant. Media reports frequently discuss these young women as employing their femininity as a dangerous cover for their murderous schemes. Because of this, women suicide bombers are imagined as more dangerous than male suicide bombers. In large part this view is the product of age-old stereotypes of women’s bodies and femininity as inherently dangerous, as seductive lures or secret weapons. In one sense, then, it should come as no surprise that women continue to occupy the position that we have built for them discursively. At the extreme, women become weapons, literally blowing up, the “bombshell” become the bomb.

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