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Still just victims or villains? The ‘jihadi brides’ and the representation of politically violent women

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Still just victims or villains? The ‘jihadi brides’ and the representation of politically violent women

In February 2015 three schoolgirls from Bethnal Green Academy left the UK to join the Islamic State (IS). Kadiza Sultana, Amira Abase and Shamima Begum became emblematic of the group’s ‘pull’ and were the focus of intense media interest as authorities attempted to intercept them before they crossed the border to Syria. The journalistic framing of their story invited the public to engage as mediated witnesses in a familiar drama, complete with heroic police officers, grieving families and the three so-called ‘jihadi brides’ as classic damsels in distress: naïve, vulnerable and unaware of what awaited them in IS territory.

The defection of these three in particular, and the ‘jihadi brides’ in general, was situated simultaneously as a novel trauma in an ongoing ideological and material war against jihadism, and as more of the same as far as women’s political violence was concerned. On the one hand, the ability of IS to attract women to its cause indicated a new rupture in the war on terror. Of the 41490 foreign IS affiliates in Syria and Iraq between 2013 and 2018, 4761 were women, including 1023 from Western Europe (Cook and Vale, 2018, p. 14), and the visibility of women in IS as recruiters and propagandists on social media was understood as requiring urgent intervention and surveillance. On the other hand, the domestication of this rupture, through the familiar representation of these women as victims of jihadist men, is familiar territory for feminist scholars of political violence. This narrative draws on Jean Bethke Elshtain’s sketch of the (female) Beautiful Soul, for whom wars are fought, and the (male) Just Warrior, who fights for her honour and protection (Elshtain, 1995), and has been ever-present during the twenty years since the September 11, 2001 attacks. The war on terror was famously sold as a rescue mission to save the women of Afghanistan, through the

portrayal of the entire female population as damsels in distress who needed saving by brave American soldiers (Masters, 2009; Eisenstein, 2016), and gendered stories have surfaced whenever the war was not going well. As Caron Gentry and Laura Sjoberg have noted, the ‘rescue’ of Private Jessica Lynch in March 2003 and the focus on and sacrifice of Lynndie England for her role in the Abu Ghraib abuses relied on gendered narratives of ideal victims and femininity gone awry (Sjoberg, 2007; Gentry and Sjoberg, 2015).

This victim/villain discourse, that has enveloped narratives about women’s participation in the war on terror, has resurfaced in the recent war against Islamic State. Women loyal to IS were portrayed as victims of IS men and villains in comparison to other women involved in the conflict, particularly female Kurdish fighters and Yazidi women (Kollarova, 2016). Assessed against both, female supporters of IS were constructed as villainous ‘bad’ women, lacking agency in comparison to the (liberated, emancipated, ‘Westernised’) Kurdish women of the YPJ and possessing too much agency in comparison to the (victimised and enslaved) Yazidis (Dean, 2019).

Anti-radicalisation discourse in the UK and elsewhere relies on similar gendered stories. Women have been co-opted by state anti-radicalisation programmes, via assumptions about their inherently moderate, liberal, and peaceful natures. As Katherine Brown (2020) has argued, their power is understood to emerge exclusively in the private sphere, as mothers, sisters and wives but rarely as active political subjects. The UK’s anti-radicalisation programme, Prevent, draws explicitly on a gendered conceptualisation of radicalisation that understands the feminised ‘vulnerable subject’ to be passive, naïve and ideologically groomed, and tasks responsible citizens (teachers, health workers, academics) with keeping particular sites under surveillance in the name of ‘safeguarding’ those vulnerable to radicalisation (Heath-Kelly and Strausz, 2019).

These narratives played out for the Bethnal Green girls a few weeks after their disappearance when it emerged that counterterrorism police had interviewed the three at their school. The gendered framing of radicalising subjects as vulnerable seems to have guided official action in this case, as the officers aimed to determine whether they were being ideologically groomed and, apparently satisfied that they were not, entrusted them to deliver letters to their parents requesting permission for formal interviews, letters that were, predictably, swiftly concealed as they continued to plan their exit. This incident illustrates the problems with the gendered understandings central to radicalisation discourse. Police apparently assumed that groomed young women were easy to spot and not capable of deceit. That the three were committed to joining IS and perfectly able to hide their intentions was seemingly unthinkable for those tasked with investigating them, and it is hard to believe that officers would treat suspected radicalised men in this way, largely because men are less likely to be viewed as vulnerable.

But the logic of the victim/villain discourse also means that those not vulnerable are automatically cast to the other side of the binary. In February 2019, as IS collapsed, Shamima Begum was located by *Times* journalist Anthony Lloyd in a refugee camp in Northern Syria. In her interview with Lloyd, Begum was neither contrite nor sympathetic, stating that she had no regrets about joining IS and had had a good time in Syria. Within two weeks the Home Secretary had removed her British citizenship, effectively rendering her stateless.

Damsels in distress are not supposed to be defiant. They are required to be worthy victims, repentant and forlorn, on whom the state can bestow chivalric and paternalistic forgiveness. Begum's self-presentation failed to meet these requirements and she was roundly condemned in the press not for her activities, but for her "total lack of remorse" (Parsons, 2019) and her failure to demonstrate "an ounce of contrition"

(The Daily Telegraph, 2019). The reality of Begum failed to correspond with the vulnerable victimised identity that had been constructed for her. Consequently, this identity was revoked and she was reconstituted as a “monster” (Glover, 2019) and a “wicked teenager” (The Sun, 2019).

We see in these stories a replay of the instrumentalisation of women that has been central to the last twenty years of the war on terror. They have served as a ‘good war’ rationale for a bloody and prolonged conflict in Afghanistan, and as distractions from moments when the war in Iraq was not going well via the performative rescue of Lynch. And through the sacrificial body of England they have served as a means of singularising the abuses of Abu Ghraib and protecting the Just Warrior honour of the US military. In the Syrian conflict they have been cast as sexualised Westernised heroines through the YPJ, as vulnerable and groomed ‘jihadi brides’ and as monstrous anti-Western villains in the form of IS women.

The 9/11 attacks and the war on terror did not institute these narratives, but arguably, as far as women are concerned, we remain temporally in the same, ever-repeating moment: politically violent women are either vulnerable damsels in distress or monstrous, unfeminine villains. As the story of the Bethnal Green girls shows, viewing women through the lens of victimhood neither helps us prevent them becoming involved in politically violent projects nor does it tell us very much about why they do so. We urgently need new narratives that challenge these tendencies to instrumentalise women as proofs that the war is ‘good’ or as sacrificial victims to ensure state agents remain chivalric Just Warriors. This project begins with a recognition that women’s participation in political violence is not reducible to grooming or naivety, that most, if not all, of the ‘jihadi brides’ were at one point invested in IS’s project, and that women are ideologically engaged in politically violent movements of all stripes as much as

men. Feminist and critical scholars of terrorism have, over the past twenty years, intervened in these narratives, and it is in this consistent questioning, destabilising, and unravelling of these gendered stories that our best hope for a more nuanced and realistic portrayal of women's political violence lies.

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