

Sydney Terris  
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### **Silencing Female Suicide Bombers**

As a weapon of psychological warfare intended to instill fear into a targeted audience, suicide bombings represent violent attack strategies in which the attacker expects to die in the process. While suicide bombings have occurred throughout the course of modern history, few attacks drew international attention until the 1980s when the rate of attacks drastically increased as the Cold War came to an end and Middle Eastern tensions with the global West increased. Predominantly affecting Afghanistan, Iraq, Israel, Palestine, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, more than 45,000 people have lost their lives to suicide bombing attacks between the years of 1981 and 2015, making suicide bombings a deadly form of terror (Chicago Project on Security and Terrorism 1).

Whether depicted as a brilliant act of heroism or a heinous crime, suicide bombings necessarily involve horrific acts of self-implosion inflicting violent bystander fatalities. Amidst these irreconcilably cruel crimes against humanity, female suicide bombers confound westernized societal gender roles, disrupting gender politics that govern Western popular discourse interpretations and monstration of Islamic patriarchal societies. Bridging passive, unconscious femininity with active, agency-expressive violence, female suicide bombers fracture the global West's carefully constructed images of submissive femininity. Resultantly, western popular discourse recontextualizes female suicide bombers as vessels and as sufferers to reaffirm female conformity and docility familiar to established gender roles enduring in the

global West. Moreover, western discourse on female suicide bombers deliberately objectifies the female body, victimizes women who execute violence, and employs western rescue politics to recharacterize women exercising non-normative agency as passive, unconscious beings, ultimately suppressing Middle Eastern women's voices in the public sphere.

### **Objectifying The Female Body**

First, objectification of the female body fundamentally portrays women as objects to be acted upon by their male counterparts, rather than as agency-possessive, conscious individuals. Within western patriarchal society, "men diminish women's [agency] by reducing them to... subservient and vulnerable ...vessels and machines" incapable of achieving autonomy (McClintock 29). In other words, re-representing female bodies as dependent, passive objects intrinsically inhibits women's expression of agency in masculine-dominated societies. By objectifying the female body as a vessel subjected to violence and not as an active participant in violence, the global West characterizes women as lacking access to platforms of voice and visibility. Consequently, western societal depictions of female suicide bombers that objectify the female body inherently characterize females as unconscious citizens in order to suppress Middle Eastern women's voices in the public sphere.

To begin, western representations of female suicide bombers objectify the female body as a weapon of coercion to undermine women's expressed autonomy and silence Middle Eastern women's agency in the public sphere. To this point, "explanations of female suicide

bombings rely on interpretations of the bombers as... objects of manipulation, held hostage by a patriarchal Islamic system” and not as “subjects willing to fight for ... ideological, nationalist, political and/or religious beliefs” that threaten racially white, masculine dominance in western society (Janiewski 59). That is to say, societal depictions of female suicide bombers by the global West cite women’s bodies as vessels of male-perpetrated violence and subjected to outside coercion to comprehensively dismiss the influence of women’s personal autonomy in acts of violence. Furthermore, disqualifying women’s conscious participation in pre-meditated suicide bombings while highlighting women as vessels of violence disrupts women’s capacity to express agency in the public sphere. At the crux, the global West illustrates female bodies as unconscious, voiceless objects weaponized by men to recharacterize autonomous female agency as masculine-controlled violence and, as a result, hinder the expression of Middle Eastern women’s visibility in the public sphere.

Continuing, depicting female suicide bombers as reactionary, rather than consciously exerting agency, deliberately characterizes women as objects of manipulation to suppress Middle Eastern women’s narratives in the global West. Centrally, despite the testimonials of female suicide bombers that perceive “themselves as powerful agents of their moral standing” western “pulp nonfiction fixates on choice and freedom to paint its pictures of Muslim women’s ...behavior [as a reaction to] constraints on their autonomy imposed by men” in the context of patriarchy (Abu-Lughod 118). Most notably, western popular discourse sweepingly dismisses women’s testimonials in favor of illustrating female suicide bombers through a

westernized lens that perceives females as passive, unconscious objects subjected to masculine dominance. Reductive in nature, western discourse portrays women as vessels susceptible to violence and not as active, agency-possessive participants in violent acts. Moreover, divorcing images of female suicide bombers from the autonomous agency involved in committing a suicide attack retypifies women as objects to be acted upon instead of objects that act and, consequently, impedes Middle Eastern women's voice and visibility in the public sphere of the global West.

In short, the global West depicts women's bodies as vessels of coercion susceptible to manipulation by men to recontextualize women's conscious, purposeful actions as unconscious, thoughtless reactions. In doing so, western popular discourse interprets female violence in the form of suicide bombings as representative of women's objectified societal role and, therefore, perceives female agency as passive. Correspondingly, the global West suppresses women's active participation in acts of violence and inhibits female suicide bombers' agency in the public sphere. To this point, western societal descriptions of female suicide bombers objectify the female body to parallel femininity with unconsciousness and silence Middle Eastern women's voices in the public sphere of the global West.

### **Victimizing Women Who Execute Violence**

Second, women who commit acts of violence innately disrupt patriarchal societal interpretations of females as passive. Most importantly, under western patriarchy, "women are

characterized by their victim status,” especially in societies “automatically and necessarily defined as religious (read: not progressive),...illiterate (read: ignorant), domestic (read: backward),” and inherently barbaric (Mohanty 25). To realign violent female agency with western gender roles, discourse on women suicide bombers emphasizes narratives of cultural backwardness oppressing women of the global South. Accordingly, despite expressions of violent agency, western rhetoric depicts female suicide bombers as passive victims rather than conscious actors to erode Middle Eastern women’s voice and visibility in the public sphere.

To start, the global West reductively addresses female expression of non-normative agency as a symptom of cultural victimization to re-represent females who commit violent acts as passive victims and dismiss Middle Eastern women’s agency. That is to say, “the female suicide bomber turns into a victim in the midst of what she may consider the most empowered act of her life. Her complex mix of ideological, psychological and sociological motivations is reduced by the media to a poignant struggle with her feelings as an outsider” trapped in a community classified as backwards, barbaric, and deviant (Patkin 87). In other words, the global West perceives female-executed violence as symptomatic of socio-cultural victimization oppressing women of the global South. Moreover, by effacing the catalysts driving women’s suicide bombings, western popular discourse engenders illustrations of women who commit violence as passive sufferers subjected to barbaric, backwards cultures and silences women’s testimonial narratives. Altogether, the global West diminutively asserts non-normative female agency expression results from Middle Eastern cultural victimization, intrinsically suppressing

narratives illuminating the conscious motivations driving female-executed violence and, correspondingly, undermining women's access to voice and visibility in the public sphere.

Essentially, silencing the narratives of female suicide bombers perpetuates patriarchal paradigms portraying Middle Eastern women as victims of their socio-cultural contexts and precipitates the erasure of female agency in the public sphere. Fundamentally, "the tendency to disregard women's bombers' testimonials (particularly Muslims, or those from Muslim-dominated geographies) is premised on Western stereotypes of Muslim women... That [proclaim] Muslim women bombers in particular are... victims" of violent cultures and, therefore, incapable of expressing autonomous agency (Rajan 161). To this point, western popular discourse classifies Middle Eastern culture as instinctually barbaric and, correspondingly, interprets Middle Eastern women as oppressed, voiceless societal victims regardless of women's testimonial narratives. By positing Middle Eastern women as submissive recipients of violence, the global West characterizes female suicide bombers as unconscious vessels victimized by masculine violence in lieu of recognizing women's active, conscious role in committing suicide bombings. Even further, portraying women's acts of violence as reactions to victimization instead of expressions of agency despite testimonial evidence erodes Middle Eastern women's access to platforms voice and visibility. Most notably, western popular discourse emphasizes women's victim status and devalues the motivations driving female suicide bombings to suppress Middle Eastern women's agency in

the public sphere by subverting women's capacity to express voice through testimonial self-narration.

At the crux, popular discourse in the global West addresses non-normative female agency expressed through violence as a symptom of cultural victimization to silence women's testimonial narratives of oppression that disrupt societal perceptions of femininity as passive and unconscious in nature. Attaching qualities of barbarism, backwardness, and corruption to Middle Eastern cultures, the global West posits Middle Eastern women as submissive sufferers unconsciously executing violence as a reaction to societal oppression. Most importantly, western popular discourse excludes women's testimonial narratives to silence women's self-expressed agency, motivation, and active participation in visible violence through suicide bombing missions. Centrally, despite the demonstrations of non-normative agency through violence, western rhetoric depicts female suicide bombers as passive socio-cultural victims rather than conscious actors to erode Middle Eastern women's voice and visibility in the public sphere.

### **Western Rescue Politics**

Third, western imperial narratives traditionally draw upon scientific racism to situate the global South as the culturally backwards, uncivilized, and feminized antithesis to the culturally progressive, civilized, and masculine global West. During the Era of Scientific Racism, "narratives and visual images projected non-white, non-Christian bodies as inherently deviant, violent, subversive, morally corrupt," and in need of saving by the enlightened,

morally superior global West (Rajan and Gabriel 111). These politics of rescue necessarily posit white, masculine bodies as the saviors of non-white, feminine bodies perceived as threatened by a barbaric cultural context. Centrally, the global West suppresses Middle Eastern women's agency in the public sphere by employing rescue politics that depict female suicide bombers as unconscious victims requiring rescue rather than as autonomous actors expressing violence-based agency.

Moreover, western rescue politics characterize female suicide bombers as in need of the global West's protection from Islamic oppression, intrinsically minimizing women's capacity to express autonomy and perpetuating the erasure of Middle Eastern women's narratives from western discourse. Notably, "the call to save Muslim women is reflective of a 'logic of masculinist protection' in which the West, specifically the United States, is envisioned as a necessary male protector" of Muslim women who "are seen as figures without agency that are in need of rescue" from Middle Eastern cultures (Deylami 179). Defined as objects to be acted upon in rescue narratives, Middle Eastern women embody voicelessness, weakness, and femininity vulnerable to Islamic oppression under the western patriarchal lens.

Correspondingly, rescue politics suppress women's agency in the public sphere by depicting female suicide bombers as unconscious victims requiring rescue rather than as autonomous actors expressing violence-based agency. Accordingly, the global West posits itself as a morally authoritative voice speaking for female suicide bombers perceived as needing rescue, innately silencing women's first-hand narratives of oppression to maintain western dominance



over platforms of visibility. Essentially, western politics of rescue instinctually efface the autonomy and agency of female suicide bombers by recharacterizing women as dependent, voiceless socio-cultural victims requiring western intervention.

Additionally, western societal discourse employs the politics of rescue to portray female suicide bombers as passive objects needing rescue from a victimizing, violent cultural context, ultimately undermining Middle Eastern women's capacity to express voice and visibility in the public sphere. That is to say, the global West represents women "as pathetic victims coerced against their will" into violent acts on behalf of barbaric socio-cultural institutions, discursively positioning female suicide bombers "as objects to be saved - never as subjects who act" autonomously (Mani 162). In other words, western popular discourse depicts the global West as the savior of voiceless, socio-culturally victimized Middle Eastern women to subvert female suicide bombers' ability to express independent, active agency through violence in the public sphere. To this point, western narratives divorce images of female suicide bombers from active, conscious expression of agency to typify female suicide bombers as vessels of manipulation and objects to be acted upon. Resultantly, western rescue politics that illustrate women as victims in need of rescue hinder representations of female suicide bombers as conscious, visible participants in the public sphere of patriarchy to silence Middle Eastern women's voices in popular discourse.

Altogether, western politics of rescue portray Middle Eastern women as in need of rescue from a barbaric, backwards Islamic culture, inherently minimizing women's capacity to

express self-determining autonomy in the public sphere. Even further, the global West interprets female suicide bombers as unconscious objects that need saving from a violent culture, intrinsically subverting women's role as conscious, active, agency-possessive participants in pre-mediated acts of violence. Positioning the global West as the savior of women of the Middle East fundamentally disrupts Middle Eastern women's access to platforms of voice and visibility by eroding women's narratives detailing the conscious motivations driving women to execute violence. At the crux, the western popular discourse suppresses Middle Eastern women's agency in the public sphere by employing rescue politics that depict female suicide bombers as unconscious victims needing rescue rather than as autonomous actors expressing violence-based agency.

## **Conclusion**

In summation, western discourse on female suicide bombers seeks to reaffirm docility and unconsciousness to narratives of femininity in the public sphere. By objectifying the female body as a vessel subjected to violence and not as an active participant in violence, the global West characterizes women as lacking agency in order to suppress Middle Eastern women's testimonial narratives in the public sphere. Furthermore, western rhetoric dismisses the violent agency associated with suicide bombings as symptomatic of socio-cultural victimization women experience in Islamic cultures perceived as backwards and barbaric. Consequently, in portraying women's acts of violence as reactions to victimization instead of expressions of agency despite testimonial evidence, the global West erodes Middle Eastern

women's access to platforms voice and visibility. Moreover, reductive western politics of rescue illustrate Middle Eastern women as in need of rescue from a barbaric, backwards Islamic culture, instinctually diminishing women's capacity to express self-determination. That is to say, rescue politics suppress women's agency in the public sphere by depicting female suicide bombers as unconscious victims requiring rescue rather than as autonomous actors expressing violence-based agency. Centrally, western societal representations of female suicide bombers purposefully objectify the female body, victimize women who execute violence, and employ rescue politics to recharacterize women exercising non-normative agency as passive, unconscious beings, ultimately inhibiting Middle Eastern women's voices in the public sphere.

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