Media Representations of Women and the “Iraq War”

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Abstract
This essay examines media images of women in recent conflicts in the Middle East. From the Abu Ghraib prison abuses to protests in Iran, women have become the public face of violence, carried out and suffered. Women’s bodies are figured as sexual and violent, a potent combination that stirs public imagination and feeds into stereotypes of women as femme fatales or “bombshells.”

Because the so-called war in Iraq is unlike others in that there is no front-line, U.S. women have been engaged in combat along with men. Women soldiers, not technically allowed on the front lines, continue to see action, to kill and to be killed. A shortage of military personnel leads to stretching the rules regarding women in ground combat forces. But, reportedly, the American public is no longer shocked at the idea of women dying in war; there is no more attention paid to fallen women than fallen men. Women’s participation in integrated units for the most part goes unnoticed. The women in these units adjust by using newer forms of birth control to make their periods less frequent or eliminate them altogether; and the military has disbursed a portable urination device that women soldiers call a “weenus” for long road-trips. They find ways of adapting their bodies to the male standards of war. Women are serving and dying, but conservatives think women should be mothers and not killers. And some military policy-makers foresee reopening debates about women’s participation in combat once the war is over.

It is telling that although women’s deaths in Iraq 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 the war. In addition, the sexual nature of the abuse was used by some commentators to argue that women shouldn’t be in the military; and that their very presence unleashed sexual violence. Although the deaths of women in the war in Iraq received little attention, reports of women’s violence and abuse captured public imagination. Why? Why did the images of women abusers from Abu Ghraib generate so much press and media speculation? Elsewhere, I answer this question by analyzing both the media coverage and the events themselves within the context of a pornographic, or voyeuristic, way of looking at sex and violence, which is normalized through popular media. The pornographic way of looking or seeing takes the object of its gaze for its own pleasure or as a spectacle for its own enjoyment without regard for the subjectivity or subject position of those looked at. The pornographic way of looking reinforces the power and agency of the looker while erasing or debasing the power and agency of the looked at. This way of looking operates on both literal and figural levels: sex and violence literally have become spectacles to be looked at; and sex and violence figuratively have become linked within our cultural imaginary, evidenced by the fact that the phrase “sex and violence” has become part of our everyday

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1 Kelly Oliver, Women as Weapons of War: Iraq, Sex and the Media (New York: Columbia, 2007).
vocabulary—in terms of Hollywood films, it is difficult to think one without the other. This cultural connection between sex and violence in contemporary Western culture plays itself out in the theatre of war currently staged in the Middle East. Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind that this pornographic way of looking not only has played and continues to play an essential role in waging war, but also that it was developed within the context of colonial and imperialist violence. In this regard, the American occupation of Iraq follows in a long line of colonial and imperialist ventures executed by the “West” in the “East.” For example, in the 19th Century 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. As Zahid Chaudhary argues in an insightful analysis of the role of the camera in British occupied India, 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 playing with children. Chaudhary indicates how these photographs not only record but also reproduce colonial domination through both the normalization and justification of violence. The photographs justify violence by constructing or framing the colonial world in such a way that the occupier is in the position of the subject while the occupied are in the position of objects. In addition, Chaudhary claims that violence is mystified in that it becomes diffused in the manners of customs of colonial subjects through photographs. This is to say that the photographs present only a particular view of the colonial relation—that of the dominator. The camera extracts a particular scene from a particular perspective from the landscape and thereby renders invisible the colonial context or background against which its slice-of-life is taken. Further more, according to Chaudhary, the photographs taken by the British military depict the Indian “natives” as violent or barbaric in their natures. Violence, then, 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. When the photographs first became public, there was a flurry of outrage and accusation. The photographs 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. The faces of the perpetrators suggest that they could be photographs in a high-school yearbook. Judging by their gestures and facial expressions, they are photographs of triumph and victory, all smiles and thumbs-up.


humiliated, and naked; and by photographing these trembling and vulnerable bodies next to triumphant American military personnel, the clear message is that we can do whatever we want to these foreigners, these enemy combatants. We are in the driver’s seat, while they are just along for the ride, in this case apparently, a joy ride at their expense. 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. In deed, 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. It is necessary to peel away layers of visual and rhetorical meaning in an attempt to understand the deeper significance of the use of women by the military to “soften-up” prisoners, images of burka-clad women shopping in Afghanistan, the defense that the Abu Ghraib perpetrators were just “having fun,” technologies of war-reporting such as embedded journalism, along with the connection between sex and violence in recent Hollywood films. By interpreting these various events and images as they function within the larger context of a culture whose primary forms of entertainment revolve around sex and violence, we learn more about the function of women in this economy of violence. Moreover, by interpreting these events and images within the context of a cultural imaginary gripped by sex and violence, we can begin to understand our own investments in violence. And, the hope is that by understanding our own investments in violence, we can short-circuit violent urges and stop acting-out our violent fantasies in the real world.

In the case of Abu Ghraib, the fact that women seemingly forced men into sexual postures confused even human rights organizations as they tried to classify, even identify, these actions as abuse. The sexual nature of the photos makes us uneasy. On the one hand, the “perky grins” and “cheerleader’s smiles” on the faces of these teenage girls seems out of place in the theatre of war. But, the very idea that women can be interrogation tools, however, plays on age-old fears of women and the fantasy of female sexuality as a threatening weapon. The familiarity of this connection between women, sex and weapon makes the images uncanny—as strange as they are mundane. If women have been figured as bombshells and their sex characterized as a deadly weapon, the literal explosion of women onto the scene of war should be no surprise.

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 it 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 Guantanámo Bay prison, where reportedly women interrogators stripped off their uniforms, rubbed up against prisoners, and threatened them with fake menstrual blood. Army Sergeant, Erik Saar, who worked as a translator at Guantánamo Bay prison, describes various “interrogation” techniques used at Guantánamo Bay prison that he says compromised the Geneva Convention; but one session in particular caught the public’s attention: a midnight session in which a female army interrogator unbuttoned her uniform “almost like a stripper,” rubbed “her breasts against” the prisoners back and then later
"placed her hands in her pants" and wiped fake menstrual blood on the prisoners face.  

Saar remarks that "had someone come to me before I left for Gitmo and told me that we would use women to sexually torment detainees in interrogations to try to sever their relationships with God, I probably would have thought that sounded fine... But I hated myself when I walked out of that room, even though I was pretty sure we were talking to a piece of shit in there..."  

What does it mean when the "enemy" is characterized as "shit" and menstrual blood is used as a weapon of war?  

In January 2005, before the publication of Saar's book, nine pages of his manuscript held by the Pentagon were leaked to the press. The pages describe female interrogators using "sexual touching," "provocative clothing" (including miniskirts, bras and thong underwear), and "fake menstrual blood" to "break" Muslim prisoners by making them unclean and therefore "unworthy to pray." The pages were accompanied by a letter from Guantánamo officials, in which they marked for deletion a section describing a Saudi prisoner whose face was smeared with red ink pulled from the pants of his female interrogator who told him it was menstrual blood. The officials marked the section SECRET, advising the Pentagon that it revealed "interrogation methods and techniques that were classified."  

It seems that menstrual blood has become a top-secret interrogation technique. As bizarre as this seems, in a way it should be no surprise since within patriarchal cultures of all varieties menstrual blood represents the abject and unclean. Perhaps menstrual blood is imagined as threatening because it provokes fears of women's procreative powers, the power of life that can never be completely controlled. Even within Western cultures that consider themselves "liberated," menstrual blood is not commonly considered an appropriate topic for art or conversation. Menstrual blood is shocking. And popular culture typically avoids it altogether. In an interview, philosopher Angela Davis challenges the notion that these forms of abuse are effective because they are specifically designed to violate cultural taboos of Muslim men: "I am always suspicious when culture is deployed as a strategy or an answer, because culture is so much more complicated. The apparent cultured explanation of these forms of abuse reveals a very trivial notion of culture. Why is it assumed that a non-Muslim man approached by a female interrogator dressed as a dominatrix, attempting to smear menstrual blood on him, would react any differently from a Muslim man? These assumptions about culture are themselves racist." Even Erik Saar's somewhat self-congratulatory account of his disapproval of army interrogation techniques suggests that the invocation of menstrual blood--more than any other "technique" he describes--made him feel unclean. He describes taking a shower after the session: "There wasn't enough hot water in all of Cuba to make me feel clean... I sat down in our filthy tub and let the hot water hit my head and the steam thickened the air as I cried. I sat..."


5 Ibid., p. 228.  


there for half an hour. When I finally lay down in bed, I just stared at the ceiling. Sleep kept being chased away by shame.”

In his account of his participation in various abuses at Guantánamo, this is the only time that Saar mentions feeling unclean and crying. Saar took the shower that the female interrogator threatened would be denied the prisoner. Even as he reports his horror at the use of fake menstrual blood as an interrogation tactic, Saar’s account makes manifest his own disgust not just at the military but also at the specter of menstrual blood. The military’s use of menstrual blood as an interrogation method makes apparent the imagined threat of menstruation within patriarchal cultures, most particularly our own. The imagined threat is made explicit when menstrual blood becomes part of the arsenal of “sexual tactics” used by the military.

The use of women both in Guantánamo and at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq have been described as techniques to “soften-up” prisoners. Women also are used in these situations to “soft-up” public perceptions of abuse and torture. The image of Pfc. Lynndie England holding a leash wrapped around the neck of a prisoner, cigarette dangling from her mouth, caused international shock and awe, and rekindled debates over the presence of women in the military. But, it didn’t take long for the public to recognize in these images the dominatrix familiar from popular culture and pornography. The fantasy is that women’s bodies and female sexuality are in themselves dangerous.

News media repeatedly describes 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 “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; after news broke about female interrogators at Guantánamo Bay prison, a Time magazine headline read “female sexuality used as a weapon”; and the London Times described Palestinian women suicide bombers as “secret weapons” and “human precision bombs,” “more deadly than the male.”

Even Pfc. 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. Media and public reactions to the more recent capture and release of British Seaman Faye Turney display 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.

Both recovered heroines like Lynch and Turney and the “bad girls” of Abu Ghraib have galvanized debates over women serving in the military. In the wake of the photographs from Abu Ghraib, 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. Some commentators blamed feminism not only for women’s presence

8 Saar and Novack, pp. 229-230.
in the military but also for their violence toward men. They wondered whether feminism meant equal opportunities for abuse; others went so far as suggesting that the abusers were man-hating lesbian feminists getting even for Muslim men’s treatment of women. Not only women’s participation in abuse, but also women’s supposed vulnerability has been used in arguments against women in the military. Depending on the political bent of the reporter, Pfc. Jessica Lynch was described in the press with wildly varying characterizations from a “female teenage Rambo,” to a “princess” and “damsel in distress.”  

Although as we now know, Iraqi doctors actually saved her life, her capture was used on the ground to motivate male soldiers to kill the enemy who had captured this symbol of American womanhood. The fact that this pretty innocent girl found herself in a combat zone lead some people to question the wisdom of allowing women to join 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.”  

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. Recent events in Iran around the presidential election make evident the complexity of fixing institutions or practices as essentially oppressive or liberating. Since the 1979 revolution, women have been segregated in what Iranian activist Shahrzad Mojab who now teaches at the University of Toronto calls “gender apartheid, the separation of men and women in all spheres.”  

It is interesting that some of the policies designed to restrict women’s freedoms actually provided spaces to foster women’s resistance movements. The segregation in public institutions has meant separate educational facilities for women. Women gained greater access to education, although career paths were limited. And, this all-women space outside of the home actually allowed the feminist consciousness of Iranian women to grow in response to the repressive government. In addition, in the weeks before the presidential election, the government allowed groups to gather, planning to show the world the success of Iranian democracy; but their plans backfired as these groups, often lead by women, turned against them. Women capitalized on their voting power to demand greater rights before and after the election. One Iranian exile and former leader of Iran’s feminist movement, Mahnaz Afkhami remarks, “this battle between women and the government just keeps going on. Right now it shows itself vividly. Because of the election, they allowed people to come out and get together. They wanted a big demonstration of participation–and then it backfired.”  

Foucault’s analysis of power and resistance is apt here as we see oppressive government policies not only spawning resistance but also opening up the spaces for its growth. In the words of the Nepalese

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14 See Oliver, 2007.  
philosopher Yubraj Aryal, "If on one hand, postcolonial theories exhort us to resist the strategic mindsets embedded in western systems of thought, on the other we need knowledge and strategies not only to properly resist them but also . . . to absorb them in order to create and enrich our own humanistic traditions." Many news reports in the Western media credit Zahra Rahnavard, wife of primary opposition candidate Hossein Mousavi, for playing a critical role in the campaign when she broke with conservative traditions by appearing in public with her husband. Along with demonstrations by women in the streets, she helped make women’s rights became a central platform in the election. She is a successful professional and artist and a devout Muslim who changed her name in the 1960’s to reflect her religious beliefs. It is fascinating to me, however, that one Western journal called Zahra Mousavi’s “secret weapon,” again suggesting that powerful women are dangerous weapons. Again women’s bodies and sheer presence are figured as inherently threatening. 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. 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. In deed, the Internet and technologies such as Twitter have deeply impacted the women’s movement in Iran. For example, images 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 my analysis in Women as Weapons of War of our fascination with the connection between women and violence, it is telling that this image of a pretty young woman’s death has become a rallying cry for Westerners even while several others have died in the protests. In terms of my argument that women are figured as weapons, it is also telling that one Western journalist commenting on the “pretty” Iranian women at the forefront of protests over the election refers to what she calls their "bombshell make-up" and identifies Iran as the "nose-job capital of the world." In an interview in U.S. News and World Report, human rights analyst Mariam Memarsadegi points out that wearing hijab has vastly different political ramifications in different contexts, a fact that Westerners do not always appreciate. She says:

20 Ibid., p. 1.
It is important to remember that the political and cultural context of hijab varies from place to place. In Iran, for example, women—even Jewish, Baha'i, Zoroastrian and Christian women—are forced by the regime to veil. They have absolutely no choice in the matter. If they do not, they are subject to imprisonment, flogging and even death. It’s just that simple. In Egypt, however, we have a fundamentally different political reality. There, women are free to dress as they choose, and given the biggest challenge to Mubarak's rule comes from the Muslim Brotherhood, hijab has taken on political undertones of resistance and purity from corruption. So when young women choose hijab in Egypt, even while their mothers reject it as a symbol of women's repression, this signifies a commitment to a politics that is against the government's repression, but is also Islamist and often vehemently anti-West and anti-liberal.23

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. 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. are women and children.

It is telling that 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, and affirmative action. They can simultaneously blame feminism for the abusive women at Abu Ghraib and invade Afghanistan to liberate women. U.S. justifications for the invasions in Iraq and especially in Afghanistan, revolve around what literary scholar Gayatri Spivak calls Western imperialist discourse of "saving brown women from brown men."24 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 have seen a similar concern with the veil in recent 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 President Bush talked about freeing "women of cover." If you look closely at these articles, however, the freedom that we are bringing to these women is figured as the freedom to shop, which suggests that the notion of American freedom offered to the rest of the world through war, can be reduced to the freedom of the market. Within this rhetoric, women’s right to shop and dress as they please becomes the watermark for global freedom. Women’s right to bare arms is taken as a sign of freedom and progress. The irony is that conservatives will use feminism when it suits their purposes and defame it when it doesn’t. As we now know, after the U.S. invasion, women in Iraq had much less freedom of movement than they did under the rule of Saddam Hussein. Many were forced to quit their jobs and quit going to school for fear of bodily harm or kidnapping. 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 has 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. After 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.” 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. Last year, 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 checkpoints without arousing suspicions. 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 that "women and men are equal. . . . You are my army of roses that will crush Israeli tanks." Women are not just carrying guns or wearing flowers in their helmets, their bodies have become figured as roses with thorns, deadly flowers that can be used as part of the modern arsenal of war on both sides.

27 Ibid.