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Book Review
Women Suicide Bombers: Narratives of Violence
By
Julie V.G. Rajan

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Routledge Press

Suicide terrorism is a controversial tactic that has been employed by rebel groups for many centuries (Zedalis 2004: 3). Since the 1980s, suicide bombing has become a commonly used tactic in terrorist missions, and more women have become involved in the organization and execution of these operations. With the growing participation of women in suicide bombings, recent public and scholarly debates have focused on the circumstances and motivations of women bombers. In *Women Suicide Bombers: Narratives of Violence*, V. G. Julie Rajan acknowledges that these different realms express diverse and often contrasting views regarding the motivations and characteristics of women suicide bombers.

Rajan argues that the dominant frameworks in the West as well as in cultures and societies condoning suicide bombings perpetuate stereotypes about women bombers and females in general. Western discourses tend to promote ideologies of patriarchy by emphasizing the gender and femininity of female bombers and by undermining their agency. Conversely, rebel groups and Third World countries tend to present these women as active agents in their martyrdom operations. Both of these opposing representations are problematic, as they confine women bombers into rigid categories and disregard the complex motivations and circumstances that propel them to commit these acts. It is crucial that both of these narratives are examined and critiqued in order to move away from these sweeping generalizations about women suicide bombers. The book demonstrates how Western narratives often depict women bombers as being irrational, socially deviant, motivated by their emotions, androgynous, and subversive, in order to uphold the dominant

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patriarchal ideology. These patriarchal narratives are employed precisely because women bombers challenge general ideologies and prevailing notions of patriarchy. To exemplify the stereotypes that are often employed in Western narratives of suicide bombers, Rajan refers to Western journalist Barbara Victor's coverage of the renowned case of Wafa Idris, the first female suicide bomber in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Victor recounts that "[Idris] tried to hold the door open with one foot while holding the mirror so she could apply her make-up, the knapsack got stuck... killing Idris instantly" (p. 83). This coverage illustrates how the West often portrays women suicide bombers as being careless, inept, and focused on aspects of femininity such as physical appearance.

Western narratives further marginalize the agency of women suicide bombers by depicting them as being victims of their cultures and of male-led rebel groups. These narratives assume that women are coerced, raped, and forced to become suicide bombers. Rajan, however, notes a paradox: "in highlighting how women bombers are objectified by their cultures and male-led rebel groups, these narratives themselves follow a similar pattern that *also* objectifies the very same women" (p. 185).

The author also critiques rebel movements' discourse. She observes that rebel movements in places like Chechnya, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka overemphasize the agencies of these women in terms of their martyrdom operations, while maintaining the hegemony of the males in the rebel groups. These narratives tend to "misguide interpretations into women bombers' social agencies by submerging and dismissing the violent experiences of and attitudes against women affected by the rebel movements and cultures themselves" (p. 187).

Rajan returns to the case of Wafa Idris to illustrate the skewed representation of women suicide bombers in nations supporting these terrorist activities. While Western sources define Idris as socially deviant and dangerous, the Palestinian media celebrate her actions and regard her as "the *ultimate* form of motherhood: the mother of Palestine" (p. 248). Palestinian media portrayed Idris as acting within normative gender roles and discourses of nationalism, perpetuating stereotypes that inaccurately portray the women bombers.

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The book uses case studies, testimonials, historical accounts, and references to academic sources to detail the fundamental role that patriarchy plays in the social construction of women suicide bombers across the globe. It examines the many different cultural, historical, and societal factors that have contributed to this, and how they each intersect. The main argument is well supported, with the author bringing in various examples from Western media of profiling and stereotyping in which women suicide bombers were portrayed as dangerous, violent, and foreign. That said, one of the book's weaknesses is its neglect to present sufficient statistical data to support the claim that portrayals are by in large distorted or are in fact incorrect. In fact, one might argue that Western assumptions about women suicide bombers can be verified in bombers' testimonials. For example, Palestinian terrorist Leila Khaled justified her actions by saying that she "was deprived of [her] home, [her] family, children living like [her] were living in a miserable situation" (Post 2007:24). It seems that at least in some cases female terrorists really were victims of abuse, which may partly explain why they agreed to participate in a terrorist mission.

While the book does possess few weaknesses, the author identifies the limitations of her study. For example, Rajan notes the lack of video testimonials for some terrorist groups such as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Because her study was highly reliant on theoretical and empirical data, this imposes limits on her analysis of the motivations of female suicide bombers.

In conclusion, Rajan's book teaches us that in order to abandon the prevailing patriarchal frames of women suicide bombers, we must adopt a more critical reading of Western and rebel-led groups' reports about these women. If we wish to develop a better understanding of the motivations and circumstances that propel women to become suicide bombers, further research in this field is needed. We must pay greater attention to statistics and to the unique personal, societal, cultural, and religious factors that intersect and influence the participation of women in suicide bombing missions.

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