

Body and Terror: Women's Bodies as Victims and Perpetrators of Terror

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Terror is mediated by bodies. Bodies become the mode of communicating with people -- be it the body of the victim, which is often used to terrorize others, or the body of the perpetrator. Bodies become the site of multiple contestations. Women's bodies especially become the embodied symbols of honour and shame. While human beings should be treated as ends in themselves, in suicide bombing, human beings are turned into human weapons and used as a means for some other end. Women's bodies in situations of armed conflicts present a special historical and political meaning. They are produced from difficult contexts, as they live under siege, occupation, war and harsh living conditions. The body is also fundamentally social and inherently crafted by the social. To understand how bodies become a medium of communication, this article will try to study women's bodies as those of victims as well as those of perpetrators of terror. To understand the subjugation of bodies of women as victims of terror, this article will take a look at the experience of women caught in conflict areas. And to understand the use of women's bodies for perpetrating terror, it will talk about the strategy of female suicide bombers. Apart from these two aspects of terror, it will also discuss how such abject bodies like raped bodies can be re-signified and used to shame perpetrators.

Body as a Site of Conflicts

(a) Subjugation through rape

Rape in general discourse is crucial to the construction of a feminine body as numerically it is mostly women who have been at the receiving end of the said atrocity. Rape cannot be equated with other physical assaults. Feminists have in fact made a case for understanding rape as a sexual crime. This was in response to Foucault's advocacy of

rape to be desexualized and reduced only to its violent manifestations. His comments were expressed in a Round Table Conference held in 1977 to discuss his book *Discipline and Punish* (Cahill 2000: 44). For him, rape was something a man did rather than something a woman experienced. And the concept of rape revolved around penile penetration. As it revolves around male physiology it does not include a number of other ways in which a woman's body might be violated. But once the tables are turned and women are no more mere objects of rape but subjects, rape can be seen as dehumanizing. In fact it is something a social man does to a social woman and hence is intrinsic to the creation of the image of a social woman.

The significance of the violent act of rape also changes with the context. There have been reports of mass scale rape on women belonging to a rival community during partition. Urvashi Butalia in her *The Other Side of Silence* has documented the tormenting stories of women who are victims of partition related sexual violence. Even after independence, communal riots in India have often been accompanied by rapes of women of the opposing communities. Another event around which rape on a large scale takes place is war. Miranda Alison talks about wartime sexual violence where the military is the ultimate exemplar of masculinity as they are the saviours and protectors of the nation as well as of the population residing within (Alison 2007: 77). Gang rape which has been a common occurrence during war was declared a war crime as late as 2008. Civil war ripped countries also provide evidence of the women of the vanquished side being taken as sex slaves and raped over and over.

Coming to rape as a war crime, according to Alison it is a mode of bonding amongst male soldiers along with a reassertion of their masculinity. The trajectory of wartime rape shows how women of the vanquished enemy, first considered as booty of war and hence available to the soldiers, later were often used as exemplary bodies to send the message to the defeated. Raping women and murdering them was like sending a message to other women with an aim of terrorizing and hence taming them. While martial rape or the use of rape as a weapon is an ancient practice, it has recently acquired attention owing to the era of diseases of excess like HIV. The dreaded impact of HIV and its easy spread through wartime sexual violence compelled people to acknowledge martial rape as a menace (Claudia 1996: 7). Hence the concern for rape on such a mass

scale came within the scope of public health discourse but failed to respond to questions of dignity and human rights.

In case of a few recent events, studies consisting of interviews with soldiers who indulged in wartime sexual violence show that soldiers who were initially reluctant, took alcohol and committed the rape. It had more to do with the camaraderie that such an act infused rather than their own carnal desire. Martial rape is a weapon yielded by the soldiers of a country or a dominant cultural political group against unarmed women of other groups. In case of ethno national conflicts in an era of the nation state, rape is committed *against specific women* often belonging to ethnic minority groups. Binaries are crystallized into— ‘Our Women’ and ‘Their Women’. The violation of their women is inevitable for the protection of our women. It is a spillover of a highly militarized society where the civilian community is not insulated from such violence. Rape in such cases serves more than one purpose. It can be used for domestication of women and for taming them in the civilian case, in the situation of a war it can be used to tame an ethnic community which dares to question the sovereignty of the nation state. *Rape of enemy women is the symbolic victory over their men who failed to protect their womenfolk from utmost humiliation.* Such women are exemplars of humiliation for men who are socially connected to them. Thus rape becomes a cross cultural language of male domination and the vanquished communities are rendered as effeminate.

As pointed out by Ruth Seifert female body is the symbolic ‘body politic’ and is often equated with the nation or motherland which should not be violated (2009: 30). Women as reproducers are reinforcers of national boundaries which need to be upheld for the claim of national pride. They are the breeders of future citizens whose purity of lineage should be maintained. This makes forced impregnation of the enemy women crucial. Imperial rape is aimed at genetic imperialism by causing realignments in the loyalty of future generation subjects whose citizenry is put under question. It undermines family solidarity which is closely linked with the chastity of their womenfolk, which in itself is a patriarchal construct. Raped women are a cause of shame even after the war is over. Not only does forced impregnation of enemy women undermine the family which still enjoys the legal sanction of being the unit of the state, but it also destroys a group’s identity, which is tantamount to genocide. This cultural decimation manipulates the group’s

identity and brings into play the fact that ethnic cleansing has replaced ideas of enslavement. Hence imperial rape can be seen as a political institution. To cite an apt example, this was done in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the wars of 1992-1995 where enemy women were impregnated by Serbian soldiers and let go only when it was too late for abortion. Forced impregnation was a part of the systematic program of terrorization taken up by Serbian soldiers. Systematic mass rape is thus used as an instrument of genocidal campaigns to humiliate a nation by humiliating and violating the bodies of women (Claudia 1996: 9).

(b) *Subjugating the docile body*

Michel Foucault in his works has placed the body as a site of humiliation and hence of potential resistance. He talked of another way apart from rape in which the body can be dominated, subordinated and humiliated. This, as Foucault and Bordieau would have us believe is by the construction of a 'docile body' which can be subjected, used, transformed and even improved. It is ruled completely by its dominant other which, however, it has internalized as its own (Deveaux 1996: 213). The dominant other is not separate from the self. Power manifests itself in a *non intrusive* and *subtle way* and hence domination occurs through unconscious manipulation of the body. There is a constant self disciplining of the body to conform to certain dominant ideas. Bourdieu also uses concepts like *Habitus* and *Symbolic Violence* (Chambers, 2008: 82). While habitus points to habituating oneself in such a way that one perceives as one is meant to, symbolic violence points to the imposition of certain values as the legitimate ones on others. One's perception of self as well as others is manipulated by these means. Women conducting themselves in a particular way in terms of talking and walking, or behaving as good girls are expected to behave can be apt examples of such internalization. However it is this very power relation that gives space for resistance. For Foucault power and resistance are co-extensive. Power can never ensnare us. But he has also been critiqued for undermining the potential of transformation that resistance has.

Foucault talked of resistance only after power emerged as a central concept in his work. He is credited with giving a positive connotation to power. But does he celebrate any and every form of subversion and sanction them as resistance? For Foucault

resistance cannot be understood as the antimatter of power, rather it is the odd element in power. It eludes power and hence power targets it as an adversary. Power is diffused all over the social body and by its very nature it creates multiple nodes of resistance. Resistance to a diffused power must also be diffused (Pickett 1996: 458). As opposed to the beliefs that Foucault paralyzes resistance by portraying the adversary as an all encompassing and all powerful one, I would argue that he frees resistance from limits and gives it immense potential. Such struggles of resistance find their expression at the level of the body. Most prison disciplining and revolts have been around the body which is perceived as the object of power. Even in modern prisons there is a use of tranquilizers, forced isolation etc which regulates the body. For Foucault the use of the language of rights is not subversive, as it implies an acceptance of the principles against which the resistance is aimed. He does not however lay down how struggles should take place as that might also impose limitations. For Foucault engagement with power provides possibilities of change as well as self creation, which is essential if one has to resist internalization of the discourse of power. Both Foucault and Bourdieu state that the main mechanism of domination operates through the discursive manipulation of the body to render it docile and resistance should address it.

(c) *Subjugation through idealising*

Some other ways in which the body becomes the site of humiliation is through the *portrayal of a canonical body and the compulsion to conform to a standardized, ideal body which is normalized through media, films etc.* The canonical bodies of women are often sexually objectified. The point of reference of the construction of such bodies is the male gaze. An hour glass figure or a zero size excludes and hence humiliates. Bodies are often equated with dirt or filth, as in the case of a people in a particular social position in terms of class or caste. The discourse of hygiene also humiliates when it essentializes the linkage of filthiness to particular groups employed in a specific kind of work. Here the example of Dalits in India being engaged in the task of scavenging can be stated. Bodies are often marked as *criminal* and *tattooed* without the consent of the person, accompanied with derogatory remarks. Prisoners are often tattooed with their prison numbers. The tattoos ensure that bodies are marked for life.

Bodies as a site of resistance

Because bodies can be humiliated they can also be re-signified to humiliate the humiliator. Hence bodies can also be the site of resistance through re-signification, that is, subverting the meaning that is imposed on a humiliated body and investing newer meanings in the same body, which renders it more powerful. This re-signification can take place in a number of ways. One mode of re-signification of bodies is through subversion during carnivals. As understood by Bakhtin, carnivals do not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. Carnival is not merely a spectacle seen and admired by others; people live in it and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all. It has an equalizing effect on social relationships. The unattainable equality between subjects which is so lamented by Sartre becomes the cornerstone of Bakhtin's carnival. Hence carnivals create a different order of human relations from those constructed by and associated with representation. A destitute can dress up like a king. There is a collapse between the self and the other or the segregation is never complete. In fact there is continuity. Bakhtin's 'carnavalesque' body or the body of 'grotesque realism' loses its individual definition and is collectivized at a trans-individual level through the epitomization of the body in terms of events and activities in which boundaries between bodies are obscured and eroded. Also the evaluation of a woman's body is completely transformed through carnival (Lachmann 1989: 126). As opposed to the ascetic tradition of medieval Christianity which saw the woman as an 'incarnation of the sin, the temptation of the flesh', she is portrayed as the incarnation of the *'materially bodily lower stratum' which degrades and regenerates simultaneously*. Similarly, the degradations which characterize carnivals bring joy rather than the dreadful humiliation of being an outcast. At the same time it has the potential of challenging the dominant social relations through re-signification since hierarchies do not hold good during carnivals and are toppled in a deliberate gesture of irreverence.

Nakedness as a Weapon of Resistance

Another equally strong way of re-signifying the body is through baring it. Barbara Sutton talked about a paradox in western societies where on the one hand, human bodies

and female bodies in particular are turned into sexually objectified commodities and on the other, the naked bodies of resistance can lead to social outrage and violent punishment (Sutton, 2007, 142). *Nakedness is filled with multiple, context bound, historically specific meanings.* Nakedness can be a pleasurable experience, a mundane activity or a humiliating event depending on the situation, on who is shedding the clothes, on whether there is a spectator and, in that case, on the spectator's relationship to the naked person. Nakedness carries gendered connotations that are embedded in history and cultural baggage of different societies-- intertwined with the ideologies of racism, sexism, classism, colonialism, homophobia and other types of oppression. In case of the women of colour in USA, raped bodies which were paraded as spectacle became fuel for colonialist fascination and white men's desires. Hence it is hard to articulate a 'vision of resistance, of decolonization that provides strategies for the construction of a *liberatory, black female body politics*'. Black female bodies are often portrayed within the context of *patriarchal, pornographic, radicalized sexualization.* – Nudity is neither unusual nor unnatural in an era of capitalism in western society. It turns woman into a sexualized object which can be consumed by an implicit male spectator. According to John Berger's conceptualization of nudity, while nakedness refers simply to the body without clothes, nudity entails a level of sexual objectification. He argues, 'Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display' (Sutton, 2007, 143). While a nude body is used to fulfill desires of consumption of a *male gaze*, a naked body asserts its agency in the shedding of clothes. Coming back to body as a site of resistance, Sutton goes on to say that the body (clothed and unclothed) is the tool of protest par excellence. Most political protests are enacted through the body—from marches, to political theatre, to the act of chaining a body to a tree or a building. Not only is the body a key vehicle of protest, but it also serves as a symbol, as a text that conveys political meaning. She gives an example of an incident that happened at the World Social Forum in 2003 in Porto Alegre in Brazil. On the site of the forum which itself represented a platform for resisting atrocities, a young woman was hassled by the police for bathing without clothes in the open. To protest against this, some women took off their clothes and a number of men sympathized with them and supported them. They showed their solidarity by stripping their clothes as well. A particular woman amongst these protesters who caught Sutton's attention made a

statement that under our skin we all are equal. This woman with her naked action perhaps strove to reclaim a position as an active subject and reconfigure nakedness on her own terms away from objectification in order to convey a broader political message. This was a performance but was it effective? Her performance might challenge the popular imagining of women's bodies without clothes which is voyeuristic. But at the same time we may ask-- does it subvert patriarchy? Men supporting them might recreate and reinforce the dominant notions of exotic, vulnerable women who need to be rescued.

As prevailing norms in most contemporary societies prescribe the use of clothing in public spaces, naked bodies can be used in quite sensational ways to call the public's attention to a social problem. Naked protests dramatically enact protesters' willingness to put their bodies on the line to advance a political cause, such as opposition to powerful capitalist and military interests -- especially in a context where this kind of protest might trigger violent responses against activists. For example, women in Niger Delta used the 'curse of nakedness'. Niger Delta, located between mid-western and eastern parts of Nigeria is a crude oil producing area which caters to the need of a number of Transnational Oil Corporations. The oil companies' disregard for any form of good oil field practices has led to the destruction of natural environment. While the locals have often peacefully protested, a militarized state retorted violently. Women in Niger delta pushed against the wall resorted to a variety of protests like dancing, singing, demonstration, strikes, testimonies, silence and the extreme act of stripping oneself (Amwake, 8). In the cultural context of Nigeria naked protest enjoys a social sanction. It is used under extreme provocation and hence has remained a powerful weapon of women's collective resistance. It is effective also because stripping by married and elderly women is a way of shaming men and some of them believe that if they see the naked bodies they will go mad or suffer great harm.

However these protests because of their very nature are often on slippery grounds. For Sutton, the message sent by the naked protesting women might be reduced to something sexual. Nudity might be imposed on their nakedness and hence result in robbing them of agency. In a similar way the western media sidelined the exploitation in Niger Delta and feasted on the threat of nude protests. Such protests should not be understood as an event of flaunting their nudity, or as a practice of communal

prostitution. Nude protest was not specific to black women who were sexually immodest and ready to employ their sexuality for anything. The tendency of giving it a primitive touch would rob the protest of its conscious assertion by right bearing citizens.

The Body of the Female Suicide Bomber

While the above mentioned form of resistance is a unique way in which women question dominant power structures, there is another way in which women's bodies have become the site of instigating terror. With suicide bombing on the rise and simultaneously an increase in the use of both women and children, there is a need to understand this phenomenon. As body is central to suicide bombing, this part of the article looks at bodies of women as perpetrators of violence along with victims of violence. The suicide bomber's body becomes a medium of communication—it has to disintegrate to impart its message.

Religiously and politically motivated acts of violence take many forms and body is often the specific site of such petitions against oppositional ideologies. The perpetrator makes the body a symbol of devotion and submission to a greater cause. The martyr's body is simultaneously ephemeral and enduring—it disintegrates at the moment of self destruction, but is preserved in a lasting collective memory as the vehicle of heroism.

Female suicide bombers tend to problematize every discourse on nationhood and gender. Women's bodies which embody impulses and emotions are to be kept in its proper subordinate position. Female suicide bombers bring out the monstrosity and the abject in them. Women are to be kept out of the public sphere; they are to be kept in seclusion. But suicide bombing is an intimate form of killing which brings the bodies of the victims and the perpetrators together. The woman suicide bomber blurs the boundaries between nature and culture, biology and technology. It is turned into a cyborg body. The body itself becomes the weapon. Female suicide bombers defy many norms—they challenge the traditional private/public divide, victim/protector dichotomy and violate gendered division of roles.

Such bodies are seen as dangerous in their threatening deviation from traditional roles. They don't fit into our normal conception of violence. Female suicide bombers are seen as having a flaw in their humanity. The disfigurement coupled with the violence

inflicted fascinates the public and fuels the narratives of monstrosity. These women are treated as non-human monsters. The sole purpose of such criticism is keeping the heterosexist idea of femininity intact. The body of a Muslim female suicide bomber is particularly problematic. The Orientalist stereotype of the Eastern woman is that she is 'powerless, backward, sensual, emotional and not able to determine' her life (Avoine 2013: 92). As such, Eastern women are denied all political agency. Even in case of suicide bombing, their act is seen as that of submission. They are reduced to such hapless victims that they don't even choose their death.

But is that always the case? Women in Chechnya, Palestine and other places have been involved in various forms of protests and political resistance. The nation is often referred to as body politic and seen as a feminine entity. Individual bodies become sites of security or insecurity depending on the confluence of one's national identity, gender and geographical location. One can give an example of how bodies of women belonging to particular ethnic communities become a target during internal disturbances in India. In Manipur, the raped and mutilated body of Thangjam Manorama was made a spectacle to humiliate the entire community which tried to challenge the national hegemony imposed by means of paramilitary control.

We see therefore that women's bodies often become the site of multiple contestations. Bodies are vulnerable because they are intrinsically linked to death and decay. Bodies are also socially crafted and cannot be taken away from their cultural, social and political contexts. When victimized, women have tried to respond by re-signifying the body with powerful meanings. But how far has such re-signification given women political agency? While nakedness has often slipped into nudity and runs the risk of being sexualized, women suicide bombers' political agency has also been questioned. Suicide bombers are often referred to as self sacrificing mothers, or the brides of the nation. Even the body of the bomber is subjected to gendered and heterosexual norms. Her body is reproduced as a sexed body under the regime of heteronormativity. Women's political agency is recognized only through gendered and heterosexual narratives. Thus in a patriarchal context, subversive women also fail to break free of the binaries of gendered stereotypes.

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