Abstract: Why is it, that when we think about or see terrorism, we do not see women? Women, like men, are capable of violence. Women, like men, commit violence for a variety of reasons, some rational some irrational. Still, when women commit acts of violence, they have been characterized as anything but regular criminals or soldier or terrorists. Rather, women who are violent are discussed in one of three ways - the wife, the mother or the whore – which deny her agency and reify gender stereotypes and subordination. With the rise in global terrorism and female participation within such organizations, the implications of the terms we use to describe away a woman’s legitimate use of violence, are far reaching.

“Certainly when most of us think ‘terrorists’ we do not see ‘women’”
Jean Bethke Elshtain

Women who commit violence have, in recent years, become a central focus for scholarship and media. Current scholarship focuses on understanding women violence in terms of an a priori assumption about femininity and women’s agency and is never read as action in its own right. Women’s actions are often explained in ways that reinforce existing gender stereotypes and deny women agency. Accordingly, women’s terrorism is frequently characterized as “psychological rather than political, and involuntary rather than agential.” Whether or not one is considered an agent has a real life consequence for our understanding of violent action and specifically on women’s lives, and their ability to be considered rational violent actors.

As the acts and consequences of terrorism are widespread, this issue is considered to be a worldwide concern, having major political prominence in the international arena. Therefore, it is

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1 A priori assumptions refer to a type of constructed language that justifies certain arguments that proceed from observation rather than experience. For a more thorough discussion see Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason.
3 No agreement about the definition of terrorism exists to date. Definitions of terrorism typically consider terrorism as a political action used to intimidate an audience, leading to violence incurred on non-combatants or civilians, and definitions prioritize the security of the nation state, specifying that sub-state organizations or individuals use terrorism against the state. By terrorism, I mean an act committed "in whole or in part for a political, religious or ideological purpose, objective or cause" with the intention of intimidating the public "…with regard to its security, including its economic security, or compelling a person, a government or a domestic or an international organization to do or to refrain from doing any act". Criminal Code of Canada, section 83.01.
important to gain knowledge about the different actors involved – including women perpetrators – in order to put an end to these conflicts. This paper desires to examine the consequences when current discourses around women’s violence continue to treat women as an exceptional subject, rather than a legitimate actor with agency. This paper is ground in a post-structural feminist critique of current assumptions around women’s violence that continue to perpetuate stereotypical representations of women’s identity.

**Feminism, Agency and Post-Structuralism**

The notion of being denied agency remains highly problematized in feminism. Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry argue that, “from the beginning of feminist thought, concern for gender subordination has always been (at least in part) about agency”. Yet, the concept of agency remains largely unexplored, especially in terms of how agency frames the way scholars, the media and policymakers view issues such as women and terrorism. In order to understand agency, I follow Judith Butler who argues that agency is not related to a theory of the self but is an effect of the operations of discourse-power through which subjects are produced.

According to Butler, agency belongs to a way of thinking about persons as instrumental actors who confront an external political field. She argues, however, that politics and power exist already at the level at which the subject and its agency are articulated and made possible. In other words, the recognition of political subjects as agents relies on our ability to rationalize their actions – they are supposed to do certain things. If a certain person (woman) cannot live up to these rules then they cannot have political recognition. One only needs to think here of the popular conception that women are erratic, unpredictable and irrational. Therefore, agency can be presumed only at the cost of refusing to inquire into its construction. This is why agency cannot be wholly separated from context. In order to understand this definition of agency it is useful to discuss the distinction between political subjectivity and subject positions.

First, the concept of subject positions accounts for the multiple forms by which agents are produced as social actors. Subject positions are used to capture the positioning of subjects within a discursive structure, intelligible only with reference to a specific set of categories,

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7 Ibid
8 Ibid
concepts and practices.\textsuperscript{12} Similarly, there may be multiple physical individuals that constitute a single subject.\textsuperscript{13} Thus, subject positions should not be confused with individuals. On the other hand, the concept of political subjectivity is commonly used to account for the agency of subjects – it concerns the ways in which social actors act.\textsuperscript{14} To date, this action-based definition of agency has predominantly been used in analyses of women’s political violence in the study of International Relations (IR). In contrast, this paper follows Butler’s understanding of agency, one that looks at how agency is represented through discourses that produces subjects. Thus, by agency I mean representations of agency through subject positions within discursive practices.

Important to the study of post-structuralism is to explore what structures and practices are repeated – how modes of order are produced, imposed, problematized and resisted. It is also important to understand the effects of social spacing and framing and to understand the workings of power and power’s relation to knowledge. In other words, post-structuralism is about examining the limits of the present in order to think about and move beyond them.\textsuperscript{15} Furthermore, from a post-structuralist perspective, there is no single discourse that produces the subject woman. But rather, it is practices, institutions and discourses that produce such a social category.\textsuperscript{16} Within certain subject positions, women may be powerful whereas in others they can be distinctly powerless. Hence, the category of woman can never be fixed and there cannot be a singular feminine subject.

According to post-structuralism, a gender hierarchy is formed through discursive identity construction. Such identity constructing practices are not mere descriptions of how certain identities are, but rather normative statements of how they should and are perceived to be.\textsuperscript{17} Peterson and Runyan develop ideas around gendered identity constructions in their work and they both refer to the above mentioned gender hierarchy as the \textit{power of gender}. They see the \textit{power of gender} as a set of gendering practices through which a hierarchical order between men and women is established.\textsuperscript{18} These practices involve perception, thought, speech and act – all of which are part of discourse.

Stereotyping is one aspect of the \textit{power of gender} that Peterson and Runyan argue is a misleading practice, as it homogenizes entire groups by ascribing generally applicable characteristics to all members.\textsuperscript{19} In this instance, stereotypes divide characteristics into two categories, masculine and feminine. Where the male subject is discursively described as rational and strong and the female subject is described as passive, weak and irrational.\textsuperscript{20} By usefully

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid, 309.
\textsuperscript{14} D. Howarth and Y. Stravrakakis, “Introducing discourse theory and political analysis”, 12-13
\textsuperscript{15} M. Lloyd, “Beyond Identity Politics: Feminism, Power & Politics”, 118
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, 19
\textsuperscript{17} Spike V. Peterson and Anne Sisson Runyan, “Global Gender Issues in the New Millenium,” (Boulder: Westview Press, 2010).
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
ordering and simplifying the complexity of the world these categories become widely accepted and unquestioned. As a result, socially constructed gender divisions are perceived as common sense and give way to discriminating practices based on them.

Feminist perspectives insert gender as a framework for analytical study that deconstructs the masculinity that dominates the intrinsic assumptions of women’s intelligible reality. Feminists argue that neglecting the reality that gender and women exist creates a narrow conception of world affairs and that it does not account for changing realities in IR. Thus, feminists argue that our current understanding of the world is derivated exclusively from a masculine perspective “that sustains patriarchal authority and legitimizes a patriarchal political and social order”. Feminist critiques of IR have demonstrated the significance of gender in the study of IR and therefore have practical and epistemological implications to the study of IR. By asking, “where are the women?” one can perceive the world through a gender lens that facilitates the ability to see IR in a different light.

Women and Violence

Laura Sjoberg argues that when women are discussed in relation to terrorism, it is in gendered terms. They are not “terrorists” but are “women involved in terrorism”. Women, she posits, have a special place in terrorism, as women are terrorists in the same way that men are terrorists. Sjoberg has a point. Women are playing an increasing role in terrorist operations in all types of organizations. Therefore, an important part of the examination of terrorism through a post-structural gender lens is to dispute the assumption that only men are capable of violence.

In Women and War, Jean Bethke Elshtain examined the extent to which conflicts have been represented in highly gendered ways in the Western tradition. Bethke Elshtain declares that the Western tradition,

…assumes an affinity between women and peace, between men and war, a tradition that consists of culturally constructed and transmitted myths and memories. Thus, in time of war, real men and women - locked in a dense symbiosis, perceived as beings who have complementary needs and exemplify gender-specific virtues - take on, in cultural memory and narrative, the personaes of Just Warriors and Beautiful Souls. Man construed as violent, whether eagerly and inevitably, or reluctantly and tragically; woman as nonviolent, offering succor and compassion: these tropes on the social identities of men and women, past and present, do not denote what men and

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21 Ibid, 47-49, 51
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid, 6
25 Ibid.
27 Laura Sjoberg, “Feminist interrogations of Terrorism/Terrorism Studies,” International Relations, no. 23 (2009): 69
28 Ibid.
women really are in time of war, but function instead to re-create and secure women’s location as noncombatants and men’s as warriors.⁵⁹

Bethke Elshtain contends that during wartime men and women have been simplistically represented in terms of one-dimensional archetypes, what she calls *Just Warriors and Beautiful Souls*.⁶⁰ As a result, identities and action running counter to these archetypes are overlooked or accused of being strange exceptions to the rule.⁶¹

Both male and women “tropes” are limited and limiting and, as Bethke Elshtain emphasizes, unrealistic.⁶² Men and women do not behave according to rigid pre-conceived gender patterns, particularly in times of conflict. There are models of behavior to which individuals may be expected to conform. However, these have further variants depending on factors such as class, race, religion, sexual orientation or group dynamics.⁶³ The multiplicity and complexity of lived experiences are so significant as to make stereotypes and pre-conceived notions redundant.⁶⁴

The *Beautiful Soul* narrative can be understood, most importantly, by its emphasis on women’s difference from men. Bethke Elshtain also draws attention to the issue that this dichotomy between *Beautiful Souls* and *Just Warriors* serves to make men’s violence ordinary or expected and women’s violence unthinkable. In this understanding of women in relation to war, there is no room for women fighting in wars or perpetrating acts of violence. An extension of this thinking is that when women are violent, there needs to be an explanation provided for this behavior. It is not viewed as natural. This assumption stems from the idea that by engaging in violence, women are violating their nature.

Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry have argued that violence committed by women is often explained by resorting to narratives that construct the subjectivity of women in different ways. Sjoberg and Gentry explain,

[W]omen who commit acts of violence in defiance of national or international law are not seen as criminals, warriors or terrorists, but as *women criminals, women warriors, or women terrorists*. The operative element of this characterization is that these narratives include a group that is “suicide bombers” or “war criminals” or “perpetrators of genocide” and a separate group that is women who would otherwise be members of those groups but for their femininity. Because women who commit these violences have

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⁶⁰ The protagonist in the narrative is the just warrior, who is a hero because he protects his innocent women and children from the evils of the enemy. He sacrifices his time, his body, his fear and even his life for the good of the life back home. Thus, women become the cause men die for. Women are at once the object of the fighting and the just purpose for the war. They are the beautiful souls who are passive and naïve to the nature of war. See Jean B. Elshtain, *Women and War*, for a more thorough discussion.
⁶¹ Ibid, 6
⁶² Ibid, 4
⁶³ Ibid.
⁶⁴ Ibid.
acted outside of a prescribed gender role, they have to be separated from the main/malestream discourse of their particular behavior.\textsuperscript{35} Violent women in many cases are perceived as separate from the rest of their sex, people who require explanation and understanding because of the severity of their breach of acceptable behavior. Violent women can either be seen as driven by “an intense and desperate link to motherhood”, which affects their personhood and ability to reason, as evil and deeply affected in their femininity, or as sexually depraved.\textsuperscript{36} These three narratives the ‘mother’, ‘monster’ and the ‘whore’ highlight the ways in which women’s violence is represented and dealt with, which cannot be separated from the construction of women as violent subjects. This, in turn, often draws on myths and sexist prejudices that deny women’s humanity and agency.

\section*{Representations and Gendered Assumptions}

One such assumption in the literature on women terrorism appears to be that women, who become involved with terrorist organizations, do so for personal reasons. Mia Bloom states, “women across a number of conflicts and in several different terrorist groups tend to be motivated by revenge, redemption, relationship and respect”.\textsuperscript{37} Support for these assumptions can be found in a study done by Karen Jacques and Paul Taylor.\textsuperscript{38} The authors proposed that in order to establish a proper framework of the unique motivations of women terrorism, a statistical analysis of case studies was necessary. They compared thirty case studies of women terrorists against thirty case studies of male terrorists to determine the prevalence of different types of motivations. They found that women were significantly more driven by personal reasons or the will to avenge than were men.\textsuperscript{39} Male terrorism, on the other hand, was significantly more associated with religious and/or nationalistic motivations.\textsuperscript{40}

Anne Nivat traced the motivations of the women who joined the Chechen independence movement. Nivat describes the motivations for these women engaging in terrorist activities as born out of desperation due to the “decimation of the male population and determination to join their men in paradise”.\textsuperscript{41} Nivat implies that the only way a woman can participate in terrorist activity is through an established emotional trauma.\textsuperscript{42} Sjoberg and Gentry describe this point of view well – “if women have any decision-making power in their actions, it is limited to decisions about their femininity and maternity – taking care of or avenging their men”.\textsuperscript{43}

\begin{footnotesize}\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{35} Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry, “Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics,” 9.
\item \textsuperscript{36} Ibid, 31
\item \textsuperscript{37} Mia Bloom, “The many faces of women terrorists,” (Toronto: Viking Canada, 2011), 235.
\item \textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{40} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{41} Anne Nivat, “The black widows: Chechen women join the fight for independence-and allah,” \textit{Studies in Conflict & Terrorism}, (2005), no 28: 419
\item \textsuperscript{42} Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry, “Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics,” 35
\item \textsuperscript{43} Ibid, 32
\end{itemize}\end{footnotesize}
women’s violence through grief effectively separates their action from those of men and misses any alternate underlying motives. Such a viewpoint hampers our ability to understand violent women as a real threat to security.

Another frequent assumption emphasizes that women terrorists have a deep attachment to the ideological or cultural goals of the group, such as, the desire for emancipation. Mia Bloom has argued that women terrorists aim to achieve gender equality and change the gender roles prescribed by the societies that they live in. It is through their deviance from accepted gender norms that they challenge the social order. Sjoberg and Gentry put it well, “in today’s world, once a person acts outside of the ideal-typical gender role assigned to them, that person is open to criticism not only for their behavior but for the gender transgression involved in its perpetration.” The choice of women terrorists to engage in violence thus becomes a statement of autonomy and agency through the challenge to gendered norms and the participation in political violence.

Women terrorists face the challenge of protesting against their conditions, while at the same time protesting the patriarchal nature of those conditions. In Cynthia Enloe’s words, they are crafting “their own complex, realistic narratives to explain their own evolving conditions and to legitimate their own aspirations”. Yet even as these women terrorists are crafting their own narratives, those who write about them are crafting a narrative based on age old assumptions about the female subject that seek to deny these women agency and remove responsibility for their actions.

Rather than treating women’s terrorism as a phenomenon in its own right, scholars suggest that understanding this kind of violence is simply a matter of describing how it differs from male violence. In other words, women’s involvement in terrorism is the exceptional behavior that requires explanation. This results in a portrayal of women as selfishly motivated by personal revenge rather than by a cause, which leads to the presumption that women are incapable of choosing violence rationally, rather they are led to violence through an emotional response. This inhibits effective response to terrorism because it removes responsibility for violence from the shoulders of women. Rather, we need to recognize that like men, women can be motivated by political goals, ethnic/nationalistic pride, and a desire to protect their loved ones. In being unable to respond effectively to terrorism perpetrated by women, we amplify the vicious cycle, which leads terrorist groups to recruit women because they can avoid detection. The preconceived notion that women are nonviolent gives women attackers the shock value so esteemed by terrorist organizations.

44 Ibid, 129
47 Cynthia Enloe, “Foreward”, in (En)gendering the War on Terror: War Stories and Camouflaged Politics, ed. Hunt K. and Rygiel, K. (Burlington, Ashgate, 2006), xi
48 Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry, “Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics,” 14
It has been found that attacks made by women are more lethal than the attacks carried out by men. Lindsey O’Rourke analyzed all known suicide attacks between 1981 and 2008 and found substantial differences in the effectiveness of suicide bombings committed by men and women.\(^49\) The average number of victims resulting from an attack conducted by a male acting alone was 5.3, while the number for attacks committed by a lone woman was 8.4.\(^50\) This high degree of women terrorist lethality seems to be a direct result of the way in which gender aids women in avoiding detection.\(^51\) In cases identified by O’Rourke, women were able to use their femininity “to smuggle a larger explosive device” and avoid detection because invasive searches threaten “a woman’s honor”.\(^52\) Given the discourses of maternalism that often accompany understandings of femininity, this is an interesting example of using the accepted idea of women as mothers and carers to make them more effective killers. Moreover, the employment of women erases the imagined barriers between terrorists and non-terrorists - women terrorism carries with it the message that terrorism is all around you.

Women terrorists are newsworthy because they violate established norms around femininity. The news value of women terrorists and the quest to understand what motivates them has gained urgency, because they violate social expectations, women who kill become the subject of news coverage, which in turn tries to make their acts intelligible.\(^53\) Scholarship has examined the media’s role in framing militant women. Much of the media coverage perpetuates a constructed dichotomy of male warriors and female peacekeepers.\(^54\) That is, men kill and women do not.

Dan Berkowitz described the response by U.S. news outlets when women began to carry out suicide missions in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, challenging the belief established in popular cultures and news that terrorists were male fanatics bent on destruction.\(^55\) Journalists adopted a new narrative and reported that these “women warriors” possessed traits similar to male warriors.\(^56\) To explain their violence, they were gendered as men. But when one suicide bomber was also a mother, journalists could not fit her into the narrative. Instead, they explained her behavior as deviant rather than that of a heroic warrior in order to safeguard the myth of the “good mother”.\(^57\)

Other studies of women terrorists have described similar distinctions. Sarala Emmanuel found that U.S. media tended to describe women militants in terms of their physical beauty and victimization.\(^58\) She says, “the beautiful woman militant is seem to be primarily seeking revenge

\(^{49}\) Lindsey O’Rourke, “What’s special about female suicide terrorism?” *Security Studies*, no. 18, (2009)
\(^{50}\) Ibid, 687
\(^{51}\) Ibid.
\(^{52}\) Ibid, 690
\(^{53}\) Ibid.
\(^{54}\) Ibid.
\(^{56}\) Ibid, 612
\(^{57}\) Ibid, 616-17
or justice for personal grievances with only a secondary commitment to the broader political ideologies or visions that are attributed to her male counterparts.\footnote{Ibid, 15} Militant men, by comparison, were viewed in the context of “politics, bravery, courage, violence, torture and brutality” affirming their identity as warriors.\footnote{Ibid, 16}

These gendered narratives are apparent even today, most specifically in the media coverage of Tashfeen Malik. Tashfeen Malik was an accomplice in the terrorist attack in San Bernardino, California. American journalists labeled Malik as a “shy housewife” or the “woman on a deadly rampage”.\footnote{Chicago Tribune, “san bernardino shooting,” http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/ct-san-bernardino-shooting-20151204-story.html (2015)} The authors went further and attributed her violence to “wearing a head scarf” and “{becoming} more fervent in her Muslim faith”.\footnote{Ibid.} But above all, they were careful to point out that Malik was a mother who had left her helpless child at home in order to commit violence.\footnote{Ibid.} Even though Malik helped gunned down and murder 14 people, she was not a terrorist. Rather, Malik was a deranged wife and a careless mother. Even through her violence, she was still assumed incapable of it.\footnote{Ibid.}

Conclusion

In essence, current epistemology of terrorism locates the possibility of women’s violence firmly in a woman’s immediate surroundings, never in the abstract. Similarly, her violence is always rooted in pain caused by a traumatic experience in her immediate sphere, and thus becomes a consequence of her vulnerability to her own emotional state. She is never quite the rational master of her own work and therefore deprived of any agency. Most troubling of all, as so few women living in the same conditions resort to violence, the woman terrorist or suicide bomber is represented as an even greater aberration because she alone is unable to tolerate the conditions she is living under. The current study of terrorism suggests she alone deviates from an infinitely tolerant feminine norm in her turn to violence.

It is arguably this perception of misbehavior that circulates beneath the fascination with women and terrorism within political, media, and academic discourses. It is accepted that a specific set of circumstances and strains will lead a man to deploy his agency violently and that this action is logical and rationally undertaken. Yet, when women choose to do the same under the same combination of motivating factors, her engagement is read as both exceptional and deviant: for a woman to shun the natural tolerance and passivity of femininity, something out of the ordinary must have happened to her personally.

The idea that terrorism can be naturally associated with men, that it is just another example of the patriarchal structure of violence which victimizes women, leaves out part of the
story, or perhaps gets the story wrong all together. As discourses on terrorism in the media and scholarship consider the phenomenon of women terrorism, this assumption is reinforced. By failing to see women as legitimate actors of terrorism our knowledge and understanding of terrorism is incomplete. As Cynthia Enloe writes, “men are just naturally those who wield violence, whether that violence is organized by the state or by non or anti-state actors {…} “naturally” is a powerful and dangerous notion. It informs a lot of political narrative building when men are the actors”. Women terrorists are viewed as interlopers in a male domain, a mechanism of justification for the fact that we cannot fit their participation in a linear correlation between gender and terrorist violence. This leaves us as a society incapable of understanding women terrorists and skews our perspective of the problem of terrorism as a whole.

Given the growing significance terrorism discourses have in shaping counter-terrorist strategy on the national and international stage there is a very real risk that such reductive stereotypes will be, albeit unconsciously, installed at the highest legislative levels. Therefore, it becomes imperative that we critique the mechanisms that determine our understandings of the world. It is only when we recognize the possibility of women terrorists as legitimate and rational actors that we can truly interrupt our constructions in order to see them.

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64 Cynthia Enloe, “Foreward”, in (En)gendering the War on Terror: War Stories and Camouflaged Politics, ed. Hunt K. and Rygiel, K. (Burlington, Ashgate, 2006), viii
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