The Female Militant Romanticised

By Sarala Emmanuel

Beauty and
the bullets

Leila Khaled, a Palestinian liberation fighter

english.planetarabia.com/content/article.cfm/103008/110918/

What is known of the woman militant or the woman suicide bomber? The relatively superficial accounts in the global and local media appear to reflect worryingly narrow and instrumental perceptions of these women. Within these, there appear to be two dominant popular identities that have been constructed for the woman militant and suicide bomber. One of these, promoted by media external to the militant movement or group, is the one in which the female militant's actions are framed by the descriptions of her beauty or her suffering as a woman (experiences of rape, for example). Here, the "beautiful" woman militant is seen to be primarily seeking revenge or justice for personal grievances with only a secondary commitment to the broader political ideologies or visions that are attributed to her male counterparts. Her identity as a feminised woman overshadows her identity as a political being or actor. The other account of the female militant, found in the literature of the militant movement and sympathetic media, ascribes to her the identity of an unwavering fighter, a "liberated" woman who fights for her people's freedom. Here the liberation of the woman is linked inextricably with the liberation of the land. The woman's motivations are subsumed by the dominant political cause of the movement she belongs to, and notions of brave and selfless daughters of the community are used to explain her actions.

This article looks at the identities ascribed to women militants and suicide bombers and discusses the importance of remembering that these constructed identities do not really help us understand the individual motivations that drive each woman who takes up arms.

The WOMAN Militant

Of the first wave of globally recognised women militants of the 20th century, one of the most romanticised was Leila Khaled, a Palestinian liberation fighter who successfully hijacked a TWA flight in 1969 and attempted to highjack another plane a year later. The publicity these acts received was not due to the hijackings alone (and her demand for the release of Palestinian liberation fighters from Israeli jails) but also because one of the hijackers was a "beautiful woman terrorist."

Interviewing Laila Khaled in 2000, Philip Baum, Editor of *Aviation Security International*, told her, "You were the glamour girl of international terrorism. You were the hijack queen. You had a very well known face." Khaled responded to this statement by saying "I didn't want to be known." She said she didn't want to be interviewed by the media at the time, but just wanted to be involved in another operation. Nevertheless, the media attention she received as a "beautiful" woman militant was used even by her own movement to publicise the Palestinian cause, and she was ordered to grant interviews to the press.

More recently, Palestinian women have again received special media attention for their part in violent resistance of Israeli occupation. In the flurry of interest in women acting as suicide bombers against Israeli targets, an article in *USA Today* (22 April 2002), described a Palestinian woman who has decided to be a suicide bomber as follows:

> The detailed romantic physical description given of the woman, rarely offered in the case of a male suicide bomber (certainly no account of his manicured nails would ever be given!), almost obscures her stated motivations for using her own body to deliver a bomb.

> "Her nails manicured and hair pulled from her face, the Palestinian woman asks that she be called by an Arabic name for a faint star–Suha. She talks about her decision to be a suicide bomber...She is barely 5 feet tall, fair-skinned and pretty, with a quick smile and handshake as she greets a visitor in the West Bank town of Tulkarem. This 30-year-old, college-educated woman in a sweater, dark jeans and clogs is one of the newest and most effective weapons in the Palestinian arsenal."

It is this focus on images of beauty, delicate and graceful movements, indeed of femininity itself, implicitly contrasting this with images of the devastation caused by a bomb that appears to typify media representation of women militants. The detailed romantic physical description given of the woman, rarely offered in the case of a male suicide bomber (certainly no account of his manicured nails would ever be given!), almost obscures her stated motivations for using her own body to deliver a bomb.

A recent article in a Sri Lankan newspaper referred to the women militants of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) as 'Armed Virgins.' The author describes the motivations of one young woman to join the movement, claiming that the trauma of her parents murder had, "driven her to the (militant) Tigers who promised salvation through bloody revenge." Although the author, herself, comments that female militants are trained to embrace androgyny and replace traditional forms of dress with combat uniforms and fatigues, she makes it a point to question these women about love and having boyfriends. These types of questions appear regularly in relation to women, whereas male militants are almost never questioned about their girlfriends or lovers. There appears to be a desire to represent feminine characteristics of women militants, whilst male militant experience is viewed exclusively in the context of the more masculine domain of politics, bravery, courage, violence, torture and brutality. Whilst both images are constructed, the identity of the male militant is strong and affirming (even when viewed as a violent perpetrator), whilst that ascribed to the female militant is framed in the context of femininity and/or victim-

www.focus.com/temp_index.htm

Suicide bomber Dhanu (middle) assassinated Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991.

hood. It is popularly believed amongst the many communities in Sri Lanka that the suicide bomber Dhanu who assassinated the Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991 was apparently avenging the rape she experienced at the hands of the Indian Peace Keeping Forces (IPKF). Her actions within the militant LTTE were, therefore, connected to her being violated as a woman. Dhanu completed her mission under the guise of garlanding the man who had deployed the IPKF who had raped her. Eerily, brides also perform this ritual on their grooms at a wedding–an observation that has not escaped public attention.

The MILITANT Woman

Within a community engaged in an armed struggle where notions of the unequivocally political female militant dominate, there is often little space to articulate individualised identities for woman militants. Writing from Sri Lanka, Neloufer De Mel claims that in such situations, "for the militants, individuality can only be creatively fictionalised..... The politics of self-representation otherwise denies the militant a personality and emotional expression of his/her own; the reality of his/her driving impulses lies in complete obedience to the will of the militant leadership on whose behalf s/he struggles." Even when individuality is given to a woman suicide bomber through fiction, this can often clash with strongly internalised ideas about female militants and their political commitment.

An example of this took place a few months ago at a screening of the South Indian Tamil film *The Terrorist* for a group of women activists in Sri Lanka. The film deals with a young LTTE militant woman's preparations to assassinate an important political leader by exploding a bomb worn on her body. During this process of preparation, she develops unexpected relationships with civilians around her and realises that she is pregnant. Consequently she begins to waver in her determination to carry out her mission and finally does not explode her bomb when she gets her opportunity. At the conclusion of the film, many women in the audience dismissed it as unrealistic, stating that LTTE women suicide bombers would never experience doubt or weakness in their resolve to carry out their liberation struggle. Although none of these women could claim to have known the elusive suicide bombers hidden in the very heart of the militant movement, it was clear that they had all held a strong concept of the militant woman that did not allow for any possibility of wavering in her political commitment. It is also particularly interesting that their viewpoint was challenged by other women who argued that the woman suicide bomber's change of heart was due to her burgeoning motherhood and the memory of the dead father of her baby–essentially feminised concepts. It is perhaps significant to note that the women who identified the militant as essentially a political being were from regions and communities where the movement's ideology and influence was very strong. Perhaps not coincidentally, the women advocating for a more feminised individualised understanding of the female militant were from outside these communities.

These strongly held perceptions of female militants must be re-examined in the context of these women's own experiences, resisting the viewpoints promoted by global, pro-militant or anti-militant media and propaganda. This is undoubtedly difficult in the context of an ongoing conflict.

...when the media tries to romanticise and feminise the woman militant, this is strongly linked to her sexuality (her virginity or rape or beauty), which also constrains her in defining her own identity once she has stopped fighting.

In El Salvador, women ex-militants looking back on their lives as fighters, speak of experiencing some kind of liberation from social restrictions; new sexual freedom and liberation from conventional perceptions of motherhood; hope of finding a means of overcoming poverty and oppression and bringing about a better future. However, the realities that peace and demobilisation brought were very different. The women were separated from their comrades, they lost their weapons, they had to suddenly go back to their families and reintegration was difficult. They felt lonely and isolated. They needed emotional care and support (Ibañez, A. C. p117-130). The reason that the experiences of El Salvador are important is that they show that romanticised images and identities of women militants during armed struggles don't necessarily match with the reality of these women's experiences, and makes it harder for the women during post conflict peace situations to negotiate an identity for themselves. For women, demobilisation not only means having to go back to traditional roles and be stigmatised in the process, but also often involves feelings of being let down by the movement they fought for. On the one hand the identity created by militant groups themselves of the liberated woman who is ready to die for a cause is an identity that can no longer be sustained when the woman-weapon is no longer needed. Secondly, when the media tries to romanticise and feminise the woman militant, this is strongly linked to her sexuality (her virginity or rape or beauty), which also constrains her in defining her own identity once she has stopped fighting.

Women militants may strongly identify with the representations that are made of them in the media. However, these are identities produced for other purposes and are often problematic for women after conflict has passed. It is vital, therefore, that women activists or feminists should resist internalising these views of the woman militant without question and critique.

Sarala Emmanuel works in the area of psychosocial support provision to persons affected by armed conflict in Sri Lanka. She is also involved in feminist activism and research.

Bibliography

Baum, P., *Leila Khaled in her own words, Aviation Security International*, http://www.avsec.com/leila_Klaled_frame.htm

Bulathsinghala, F., "Armed Virgins—Getting ready to celebrate life." *Sunday Observer*, 21 April 2002, p. 29. Associated Newspapers of Ceylon.

De Mel, N. *Women and the Nation's Narrative—Gender and Nationalism in Twentieth Century Sri Lanka*. Social Scientist's Association, Sri Lanka, 2001.

Hoole, R., Somasundaram, D., Sritharan, K., Thiranagama, R. *The Broken Palmyrah: The Tamil Crisis in Sri Lanka—An Inside Account*. Claremont: The Sri Lanka Studies Institute, 1990.

Ibañez, A. C., El Salvador: War and Untold Stories—Women Guerrillas. Caroline ON Moser and Fiona C. Clark (eds), *Victims, Perpetrators or Actors? Gender, Armed Conflict and Political Violence*. Kali for Women, New Delhi, 2001.

Zoroya, G. "Woman describes the mentality of a suicide bomber," *USA Today*, 22 April 2002, http://www.usatoday. com/news/world/2002/04/22