



RESEARCH ARTICLE

**GENDERED TRAUMA IN THE SHADOWS OF TERRORISM: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF *GROWING UP BIN LADEN* AND *BOMBSHELL***Swathi S Nair ^{1*}, Dr. Venkata Ramani. Challa ²^{1*}(Research Scholar of English, Department of Languages, Presidency University, Bangalore-64.)²(Professor, Dept. of English)<https://doi.org/10.54513/JOELL.2023.10408>**ABSTRACT****Article history:**

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Terrorism, a complex and emotional idea, intertwines human experiences across politics, psychology, philosophy, military strategy, and history. The challenge lies in acknowledging the moral outrage while grasping the rationale behind such acts. Notably, women's increasing role in terrorism, often overlooked, positions them as ideal stealth operatives due to their under-targeted status. This research explores the intersection of terrorism and trauma theory, focusing on two aspects: the lives of women connected to terrorists and those engaged as terrorists. Women, frequently coerced into this lifestyle by male counterparts or relegated to secondary roles, are profoundly affected. Drawing insights from "Growing up Bin Laden" by Jean Sasson, Najwa Bin Laden, and Omar Bin Laden, alongside "Bombshell" by Mia Bloom, the study aims to unravel the intricate impact of terrorism on women's lives.

Keywords: *Terrorism, Bin Laden, Gender, Trauma*



INTRODUCTION

Terrorism, a pervasive and intricate issue, has been a recurring challenge in human history, employing violence to achieve political, religious, or ideological ends since ancient civilizations. The distinction between violence challenging governance and military authority and violence inducing terror among civilians is crucial in understanding contemporary terrorism. Present-day terrorism entails the use of violence or threats against civilians, aiming to instil fear and intimidation. Throughout history, religious and political groups have utilized terrorism, targeting symbolic and crowded locations to maximize impact.

A historical instance of terrorism is evident in the Nizari group, known as the 'Assassins,' during the twelfth century. Politically motivated murderers within the Ismaili sect of Islam, they engaged in terrorism from 1090 to 1256 AD, assassinating figures and attacking holy sites. Despite their goal of Islamic unification, their actions led to internal conflicts. The roots of modern terrorism also trace back to revolutionary movements, notably the French Revolution, marking a shift in perceptions. In the contemporary landscape, terrorism has evolved, encompassing religious, political, nationalist, and separatist motivations, blurring distinctions between freedom fighters and terrorists. Media plays a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions, often portraying terrorists with biases. The 9/11 attacks globally spotlighted terrorism, though suicide terrorism's history predates it, seen in Japanese Kamikaze Pilots during World War II.

Women have borne the brunt of terrorism since a long time. The women in countries like Afghanistan and Palestine have been subjected to terror and political unrest for so many years that violence and fear are normalized. Afghan women have been facing the crisis of terrorism for the past few decades, and the constant intervention by the foreign countries has forced them to accept the way of their life, staying indoors and inferior to men. The Taliban-ruled Afghanistan is the perfect example for understanding the multiple layers of the effect of terrorism. The works of Khalid Hosseini, like *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, highlight life

under Taliban rule. The first focuses on the life and relationships of men in Afghanistan, the latter work revolves around the life of two women who become friends under unusual circumstances. In these books, the readers get to experience the contrast before and after the establishment of the Taliban.

On the flip side, women's role in terrorism is also gaining attention, with female suicide bombers proving highly effective due to blending into civilian populations. Some groups intentionally use women, exploiting stereotypes and lax security. Women within these organizations face brutal oppression, often drawn into extremism due to family influence or societal pressure. These experiences need to be considered through the lens of trauma theory to fully understand the ramifications, the acts of terrorism can have. Trauma, defined as a deeply distressing experience, profoundly affects mental development, disrupting an individual's ability to lead a normal life. Originating in the 1980s, the trauma theory resulted from critical examinations of the repercussions of traumatic events such as rape, war, and natural disasters. According to this theory, trauma creates a speechless fright, leading to the division and destruction of identity. In simpler terms, trauma is the emotional response to an event that not only shatters and reconstructs an individual's sense of self but also transforms societal perceptions. Cathy Caruth's pioneering trauma model views it as an event that fractures consciousness, hindering coherent linguistic representation due to irreparable damage to the psyche. Caruth suggests that trauma experiences are transmitted across generations through verbal or written acts of remembering, culminating in the development of a post-traumatic culture based on shared social characteristics.

This idea that trauma is timeless and infectious suggests that individuals can experience trauma if they belong to a certain race, religion, nationality, or gender, even without experiencing it first-hand, implying that intergenerational trauma acts as the foundation of individual identity and racial or cultural identity. This theory blurs distinctions between individual and collective losses, complicating the representation of trauma in



literature. It adds nuance to the broader discourse on identity formation, particularly within the context of racial identity. The theory establishes an essentialist concept of identity organized around a notion of the intergenerational sharing of loss and suffering because the actual event is transmitted to the descendants of the same racial, ethnic, religious, or gender group.

In conclusion, examining the effects of terrorism on women under the microscopic lens of the trauma theory helps one understand how women's trauma as victims and perpetrators can be similar. Terrorism has evolved and adapted to changing contexts from religion driven to many diverse ideologies. Women's involvement challenges traditional notions and their experiences differ a lot from the men in the same domain as they experience trauma differently, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive understanding.

THE VICTIMIZATION OF WOMEN

Men and women experience distinct treatment within terrorist organizations, particularly concerning gender-based violence against women. Women, viewed as instruments of fear, often endure rape, sexual slavery, and forced marriages. Beyond this victimization, there is the additional plight of women directly associated with terrorists. Following the impactful events of September 11, 2001, Osama bin Laden, a figure synonymous with terrorism, reshaped perceptions of the East in the West. "Growing up Bin Laden," authored by Najwa Ghanem (later Najwa Bin Laden), the first wife and cousin of Osama Bin Laden, along with their fourth son, Omar Bin Laden, provides an insider's account of the Bin Laden family. The book sheds light on events leading to a global shift in perspectives on terrorism, revealing the innocence of a family kept in the dark by a man intent on altering global perceptions of Islam but ultimately achieving the opposite.

"People are not born terrorists. Nor do they become terrorists in a single stroke. But step by step, like a farmer preparing a field for planting, their lives unfold in a pattern that leaves them prepared for the seed of

terrorism. And so, it was with Osama bin Laden. And the man, men, and events that planted that seed faded away. But the seed grew, and the terrorist walked. And the man before became a terrorist thereafter. Najwa Ghanem Bin Laden knows only the man. The West knows only the terrorist." (Sasson XIV).

Najwa begins her narrative by reflecting on her childhood dreams before becoming Osama Bin Laden's wife, offering insights into the complexities she faced in that role. Raised in Syria, she emphasizes the dominance of male family members and societal restrictions on women's decision-making. Cultural norms limit pre-marriage travel for women, yet post marriage, Najwa finds herself following Osama during his years of terrorism. The narrative delves into the oppressive impact of patriarchal structures, stifling women's freedom and contributing to dysfunctional societal dynamics. Clothing becomes a tool of oppression as Najwa, who loved bright colors, is compelled to adopt modest attire. Education, a potential source of empowerment, is denied to her, aligning with the broader suppression of women's intellectual growth. The Taliban's rule in Afghanistan exacerbates these challenges, shutting down women's educational institutions and curbing their ability to work, resulting in harsh punishments for defiance.

Osama's rigid adherence to religious principles limits simple joys like music and laughter in the household. Despite an apparently content marriage, Najwa's realization that he would remarry solely to increase the Islamic population exposes the objectification of women as agents of procreation. Exile brought additional hardships, with Najwa forced into numerous pregnancies, risking her health. The narrative underscores the exploitation of women through forced marriages with Mujahids, pushing them into sex slavery at a young age, leaving families in anguish over their daughters' fates. The broader societal impact is evident as families grapple with uncertainty, unaware of their daughters' well-being. Some assume their children are dead, intensifying the heartbreak for young girls awaiting rescue. The



narrative sheds light on the profound trauma faced by women within extremist ideologies, underscoring the urgent need for societal awareness and change.

WOMEN AS PERPETRATORS OF TERROR

This section aims to analyze the Bombshell by Mia Bloom, which discusses life of female suicide bombers, and understand the psychological, cultural, and societal reasons that pushed women to take these extreme measures. As discussed in the previous section, women were tied down by familial and cultural ties and were manipulated and forced to take part in activities of terror just because the men of the family were involved in such activities. In some communities, certain extreme circumstances force women to willingly and consciously make a choice to undertake suicide missions. After an attack carried out by a female terrorist, the media and other related fields tend to jump into developing a psychological autopsy, examining the family background and upbringing of these terrorists to understand what might have gone wrong in their lives, this tendency can sometimes romanticize female terrorists.

Female terrorists like Ahlam at-Tamimi, belonging to the terrorist organization Hamas, have risen to prominence due to their involvement in deadly attacks. Their ability to influence other women around them serves as proof that women are not the weaker sex and can be equally, if not more, dangerous than their male counterparts. Historically, the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) was widely seen as an organization dominated by men, and until recently, the contribution of women and their role within the group was not well-documented. However, women played a significant and strategic role in PIRA's activities, including luring British soldiers to their deaths during the resistance in Northern Ireland. They were involved in intelligence gathering, acting as couriers, and participating in various acts of violence. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) also witnessed women at the forefront, fighting and organizing attacks that led to the assassination of prominent figures, including the Sri Lankan president and the Indian Prime Minister, Rajeev Gandhi. Surprisingly, even infamous groups

like Al Qaeda saw a rise in women fighters after the death of their notorious leaders, such as Osama Bin Laden and Ayman Al Zawahiri. These women, working from different countries in Europe, contributed to ensuring the survival of such extremist organizations.

"For the Tamil women raped at government checkpoints, their future marriage options disappear. For Iraqi women raped either by soldiers of the occupation or by members of the Ansar Al Sunnah terrorist group, there is no way to escape death at the hands of their family for violating the honor code. By becoming suicide bombers, they manage to reinvent themselves in one fell swoop. With one act of violence, they go from being a source of family shame to a source of family pride." (Bloom 31)

In the Chechen conflicts, the first and second wars resulted in a rise in the number of women suicide bombers working for the Chechen separatist groups. The subsequent attacks in Moscow and Dagestan saw active participation from these female suicide bombers. Termed as the "Black Widow" bombers, these women were often coerced and unwillingly made part of the operations. They were widows of terrorists who were sold into jihadi networks or under the pretense of marriage joined the network where they were subjected to unimaginable sexual violence. The involvement of Chechen women as suicide bombers has been extensively documented by journalists. They had motivations ranging from avenging their family to becoming zombified beings through drugs and driven by grief. The Russian authorities often blamed societal dynamics in Chechnya and drug influence rather than taking responsibility for their role in radicalizing these women. The historical context of Chechnya provides insights into the political unrest in the region. This ethnic cleansing fueled intense feelings of nationalism and xenophobia, laying the foundation for the Chechen Wars that followed.

During this period between conflicts, Chechnya became a hub for various organizations like



the Taliban, as many mujahideen fighters shifted to the area after the Soviet Afghan War. This influx brought with it arms, ammunition, and funding from various Arab nations, which played a crucial role in the Second Chechen War. The situation escalated with aerial bombardments and increasing hostilities, leading to significant violence and disappearances at checkpoints, with women held captive becoming vulnerable to sexual violence. As the Chechen resistance faced the powerful Russian armies, they began to resort to suicide bombings. This marked the involvement of women as suicide bombers in their first attack against Russian checkpoints.

Khava Barayeva, one of the first female suicide bombers, became an idol for many Chechen women and girls. Subsequent plans for suicide bombings in various parts of Moscow followed. One of the most notable attacks was the Dubravka theater siege in Moscow. The main motive behind this attack was to force President Putin to publicly announce the end of the war in Chechnya and restore peace to the region. The terrorists sent out footage declaring their willingness to die for their cause and threatening to kill hostages one by one if their demands were not met. However, the operation ended tragically, with two-thirds of the people in the theater losing their lives due to an unnamed chemical gas used by Russian forces. The female terrorists wore suicide vests, but the detonators were with the men, and they had to seek permission for their actions, highlighting their submissive status. Survivors of the attack provided insight into the motivations of the female terrorists, revealing that some were driven by personal loss and a desire for revenge against Russian forces. However, many women were impressionable and vulnerable, forced into these actions and often unable to fully understand or articulate the doctrines and practices of Islam.

Many of the male terrorists were planning escape but all females had to perform final rituals even though many were not versed with religion as if they were taught recently, whereas most men were. In the conversations that the hostages had with the female terrorists it was understood that they were

driven by a personal loss and did not aim to serve the same purpose as the men. Most of them spoke of the brutalities they and their families had to face at the hands of the Russians in Chechnya. Some of them were there because they had no family to go back to, some of them were abandoned by their families for bringing shame to the family and some of them were willing to give up their own life to ensure a better and safer future for their children growing up in Chechnya. Some of the women did not qualify as martyrs because one of them was mentally unstable, another suffered from tuberculosis and three others were pregnant, and shared their excitement to get back home to have their babies; and by the Islamic law they were not permitted to go on a suicide operation. It is hard to know if these stories are true as there are chances that the Russians would have disseminated these stories to make the attackers look more monstrous and inhumane.

The engagement of women in terrorist activities presents a nuanced and often overlooked issue. While some may be compelled or coerced into such actions, others willingly choose this path driven by personal grievances, trauma, and ideological convictions. Recruiters play a significant role, employing manipulative tactics within these networks. The motivations behind their involvement are diverse, encompassing coercion, force, and voluntary embrace of extremist ideologies. Understanding these intricacies is crucial for addressing the root causes of terrorism and preventing further recruitment and violence.

In conclusion, Chechen women's involvement as suicide bombers is complex, influenced by diverse factors like revenge, coercion, and radicalization. The Chechen conflict highlights varying responses to trauma, emphasizing the importance of understanding both the trauma of women perpetrators and victims for a comprehensive view of gendered trauma in terrorism.

CONCLUSION

The advent of women in terrorist activities may be considered a natural progression from their engagement in revolutionary struggles of the past.



Women have been actively participating in various revolutionary struggles in third-world countries, often going against strong and authoritative groups and governments. Despite extensive research in the field of terrorism, studies have revealed very little about what motivates people, particularly women, to commit acts of terror. Many research studies tend to focus on understanding the condition of women as victims rather than analyzing them as perpetrators. The women in rebel camps women are subjected to the same kind of treatment and subjugation as any other women outside of this institution. The women are given combat and weapon training yet are made to cook and clean for the men in the camp. Women suffer as victims undoubtedly, but they suffer as perpetrators as well like the innocent Najwa who came from a family of music and arts.

Women can be considered the most oppressed group throughout history, where they face the brunt of belonging to a gender group and their caste. We have seen how they suffer as victims and perpetrators alike. Sexual violence contributes to the development of their psyche, the effects of which are intergenerationally passed. Thus, terrorism and its ensuing trauma make an excellent area for further understanding the trauma theory. Women in war zones and militarized areas often have stories of generations of abuse.

The trauma theory helps us understand that the women's experiences might be the same but what is different is their response to this treatment. They are exposed to the same kind of violence and subjected to torture, but their response to this treatment differs. The number of women in the perpetration of violence is relatively less when compared to the number of women who experience the brunt of the violence. As the theory suggests, what makes them different from one another is their response, which can be considered to be the result of generations of trauma that they were subjected to. This research aimed to understand the effect the institution of terror had on women and the similarities between the two kinds of women under terrorism.

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