Female (Em)Bodied Justice: Terrorism, Self-Sacrifice, and the Joint Primacy of Gender and Nationality

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Synopsis

In *The Terror Dream*, Susan Faludi asserts that instead of processing the events of 9/11, Americans reverted to a 1950s style domesticity, with the media representing women as victims. Though the majority of that day's casualties were men, much of the fiction that has emerged from 9/11 appears to echo this media revision. However, closer examination of the women of an array of terror novels reveals that though they sacrifice themselves in ways that are tied to their nation, they participate willingly in such sacrifice. I contend that acknowledgment of this complicity subverts the Subaltern-like status normally attributed to submission.

Biography

Renee Lee Gardner is a doctoral candidate at Western Michigan University focusing on postcolonial theory, alternative feminisms, and transatlantic modern and contemporary literature. In her dissertation, she argues that the subject position of woman-citizen leads to voluntary self-abnegation, a phenomenon she subverts in an attempt to see vulnerability as personally and politically generative.

Essay

In *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America*, Susan Faludi argues that instead of thoughtfully considering the events of 9/11, Americans reverted to a 1950s-style domesticity, with the media representing men as heroes and women as victims in need of rescuing (5). This is ironic in that the majority of that day's casualties were men, and the attacks were perpetrated within our commercial and governmental centers. Yet many literary accounts of 9/11 can be said to echo this media revision in its focus on domestic disruption. Moreover, if we use Faludi's analysis to examine fictitious representations of other acts of terror alongside those of 9/11, we see the same gendered structures appear, regardless of cultural specifics.

At first glance, this indicates that novelists – in their effort to understand the troubling nature of terroristic violence – are perpetuating perceptions of female victimization. The readiness of this reading is a result of the influence of white, western (liberal) feminism over academic notions of women and power, because of which we tend to perceive women only as agents when they resist, or pursue actions translatable to us as *liberating* in nature. Thus, such a reading undermines any agency we might perceive at work in the female characters of terror novels. In Spivakian terms, I argue that this is an example of academic "[complicity] in the persistent constitution of the Other as the Self's shadow" ("Can the Subaltern Speak" 2197). In an effort not to further such complicity here, I argue that while these women employ various methods of self-abnegation, the fact of their doing so need not be read as indicative of weakness. Indeed, I contend that their sacrifices demonstrate a profound (if ironic) level of agency, and are demonstrative moreover of an acceptance of vulnerability that is not marked by men in these texts, nor stereotypically by men in the cultures they represent. I'll focus here not on acts of victimization, then, but of deliberate, well-reasoned self-destruction. Specifically, I will explore Ian McEwan's *Saturday*, Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, and Yasmina Khadra's *The Attack*. I claim that in each of these novels, women sacrifice themselves in ways that are tied to the political moves of their nation, that they participate willingly in such sacrifice, and that acknowledgment of this complicity subverts both the Subaltern-like status commonly attributed to submission and the media-driven notion of women as the victims of terror.

The specific women I'll discuss – Daisy in *Saturday*, Erica in *Reluctant Fundamentalist*, and Sihem in *The Attack* – demonstrate their submission to vulnerability in various ways; thus I don't mean to suggest that their sacrifices are identical. The first character I include offers herself sexually to an intruder, the second takes her own life, and the third blows herself up, along with a café full of people. They are citizens of different nations, react to different political structures, and fulfill different roles within the violence of which they are a part. Yet I find it useful to put their narratives into conversation with one another because doing so exposes a pattern of gendered behavior, and because such consideration likewise disrupts the reductive binary divisions of East vs. West. If self-abnegation is similarly performed by a young, pregnant, British poet, a secular, Princeton-trained, upper-class Manhattanite, and the Palestinian-born wife of a naturalized Israeli surgeon, then we cannot attribute it merely to local circumstances. Thus I also intend to subvert the oppositionality that undergirds our polarizing, academic gaze.

In my effort to consider these works outside of the tenets of liberal feminism, I make use of Jack Judith Halberstam's concept – from *The Queer Art of Failure* – of "shadow feminism," which exposes "the limits of a feminist theory that already presumes the form that agency must take" (6). Halberstam argues that, like resistance, compliance is an agented choice. "Shadow feminism" thus serves as an alternate version of feminism: one that explores the long-ignored assertion of will that can be found within self-abnegating action. I examine Daisy, Erica, and Sihem from this vantage point. What becomes apparent in doing so is what happens – personally and politically – when vulnerability is *not* avoided at all costs: what happens, indeed, when it is embraced. By

reacting to 9/11 and other moments of nationalistic vulnerability in ways that are polar to those advocated by liberal feminism, these women refuse to accept the mandates of resistance and liberation: mandates that I argue are foundational to national dominance.

An analysis of the danger of these mandates can be found in *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence*, in which Judith Butler claims that "although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own. The body has its invariably public dimension….Given over from the start to the world of others, it bears their imprint, is formed within the crucible of social life" (26). This serves as an acknowledgement of the inherency of human exposure. Indeed, Butler's project is invested in the exploration of a "vulnerability to others…that one cannot will away without ceasing to be human" (XIV). It is this vulnerability that I see acknowledged within the self-abnegation of these women. Such acceptance is not modeled on a national level, however, as Butler tells us that "contemporary forms of national sovereignty constitute efforts to overcome an impressionability and violability that are ineradicable dimensions of human dependency" (XIV). Innumerable problems arise from such national resistance to vulnerability, and these problems plague both nations themselves – in terms of local power structures, as well as international relations – and individual citizens. If we consider the actions of these characters as an acknowledgement of vulnerability, a complex perspective emerges. These women subordinate themselves in ways that invest others with power, which, according to the tenets of liberal feminism is antithetical to their own liberation. Yet, in terms of shadow feminism, they demonstrate a concomitant ability to use self-abnegation to disrupt the narrative of sovereignty promoted by their respective nation state.

Part of their motive for doing so, I argue, is a desire to avoid what Paul Gilroy terms "postcolonial melancholia." Gilroy argues that until the harms of colonization have been fully acknowledged, a complex discomfort will linger on for those whose governments have taken the liberty of establishing a hierarchy of human worth. In my first two examples, women perform vulnerability in ways that undermine the denial promoting such melancholy. The first of these is Daisy Perowne of Ian McEwan's *Saturday*, who volunteers her body in an effort to dispel violence. Set in London in 2003, *Saturday* functions as an allegory for 9/11 (and for our subsequent retaliation), as an encounter protagonist Henry Perowne has one morning leads to two men forcibly entering his home that night, and (among other invasions) ordering his daughter, Daisy, to strip. Though Henry resists, Daisy intuits the wisdom of compliance, and – as the lead man, Baxter, holds a knife to her mother's neck – she undresses quickly, saying, "I'll do anything you want. Anything. But please move the knife away" (227). Daisy's repetition of the word "anything" conveys the sexual lengths to which she's willing to go to protect her family.

Throughout *Saturday*, Henry experiences Gilroy's "postcolonial melancholia" in a number of ways. Where he grapples with, but does not cede to, such guilt, however, Daisy's willingness to degrade herself demonstrates a feminized understanding that the sins of the state carry consequences, and that someone must bear the brunt of them.

Daisy submits to Baxter's sexual demands (she willingly strips, and she agrees to do more). However, when Baxter realizes Daisy is pregnant, his intentions shift, and, instead of raping her, he demands that she read him a poem from her own manuscript (which sits on the table). At this demand, Daisy falters. We read, "all her resolution is gone. She closes the book. 'I can't do it,' she wails'" (228). Though she is willing to degrade herself bodily to protect her family, she balks at this unorthodox demand. The complexity of Daisy's vulnerability becomes apparent when these two scenarios (being raped and reading one's poetry) are considered in light of one another. Her resistance to Baxter's demand for a reading indicates that Daisy is possessed of agency, which tells us, in turn, that – though we might be inclined to take her compliance with his sexual demands as an indication of her powerlessness – she is agented, and she's aware of that fact throughout the encounter. Her choice to strip, then, and to offer herself bodily to the invaders, is just that: a choice. Moreover, that choice puts her in opposition to the doctrine of resistance that is integral to the illusion of sovereignty at work in British politics at the moment of her submission. In keeping with her opposition to the pending invasion of Iraq, Daisy refuses to deny her own inherent vulnerability.

While this example is not without cost, Daisy survives, while the other women I discuss do not. In *Diary of a Bad Year*, J.M. Coetzee's protagonist, J.C., claims provocatively that – in light of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq – "if [he] heard that some American had committed suicide rather than live in disgrace, [he] would fully understand" (43). This suggests that we are all complicit in the goings-on of our nation-state, and that the shame of that complicity might well overpower our will to live. It seems, however, that while the suicide of a male citizen might be perceived in such noble terms, the suicide of a female citizen would incite assumptions of weakness. In an effort to disrupt this distinction, I'll follow Coetzee's logic – and make use of Halberstam's shadow feminism – to read my next two examples as fully demonstrative of will.

The first of these is Erica, from Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. By name and by action, Erica is a clear representative of both pre- and post-9/11 America. It seems important to note that Hamid houses this national allegory in a female body, which allows us to read U.S. culture through the lens of its female inhabitants. Here I make use of Kristiaan Versluys's argument, from *Out of The Blue: Fiction and September 11th*, that the events of 9/11 exposed an emptiness that had been present in the lives of Americans for some time, and that as such, 9/11 merely provided an outlet for – and was not the origin of – the cultural grief felt in that day's wake. This notion is helpful in considering the apparent suicide of Erica, who, after 9/11, is inconsolably struck by the grief of an old loss. As Changez, the novel's Pakistani protagonist, attempts to win Erica's affection, she withdraws further into herself, succumbing to self-pity, nostalgia, and a destructive eating disorder. In allegorical terms, her unraveling offers insight into America's self-absorbed response to the terrorist attacks. The America portrayed via this character is not the violent, aggressive, retaliatory America we might expect, but a submissive America, longing for the past and punishing itself (herself) as a result. The danger in this America is not its outwardly-focused vengeance, but its navel-gazing obsession with the self.

It's easy for readers to see this aspect of America's national consciousness manifest in a female character. Erica punishes herself in the decisive act of suicide in response to a perceived wrongdoing (a terrorist attack), but she does so by wracking herself with grief for events beyond her control (the death of her lover, as well as those killed in the towers), by denying herself sustenance (she starves herself in keeping with governing cultural norms), and by refusing to let go of the single-minded suffering through which she ultimately destroys herself. It is tempting – because of the feminized nature of her self-abnegation – to read Erica merely as a victim. Yet ironically, her allegorical status prohibits us from doing so. Erica represents a nation that is deeply averse to weakness, even as she herself performs vulnerability. I argue, then, that in her resistance to the notion of "liberation," Erica works against the postcolonial melancholia that arose in the wake of America's immediate militaristic retaliation to the attacks of September 11th. Erica's self-abnegation can thus be read as a national-abnegation, as well. Though her suicide has no literal impact over the imperialistic decisions her government makes on her behalf, her death functions to resist complicity in those decisions, and might thus be read as in keeping with the kind of deliberate nobility about which Coetzee's protagonist theorizes. As an allegory, Erica demonstrates a manner of vulnerability that America fervently resists.

My final example is Sihem Jaafari, of Yasmina Khadra's *The Attack*. Sihem is a Palestinian woman living in Israel with her surgeon-husband, Amin. In one of the novel's opening scenes, Sihem kills herself – along with a café full of people, many of whom are children – in a suicide bombing near the hospital in which her husband works. Until her death, Amin has no knowledge of her fundamentalist political beliefs; thus the novel follows his attempts at understanding the baffling action his wife takes. The violence Sihem perpetrates is especially complex because of her liminality as a Palestinian living in Israel, her economic privilege as a surgeon's wife, and her status as a non-practicing Muslim. In *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, Saba Mahmood questions "normative liberal assumptions about human nature…such as the belief that all human beings have an innate desire for freedom, that we all somehow seek to assert our autonomy when allowed to do so, [and] that human agency primarily consists of acts that challenge social norms and not those that uphold them" (5). Mahmood critiques these beliefs, as well as "the assumption that there is something intrinsic to women that *should* predispose them to oppose the practices, values, and injunctions that the Islamist movement embodies" (2). Mahmood's analysis is helpful here because Sihem's husband seems locked into such "normative liberal assumptions." Amin wonders throughout the novel how it is that the "freedom" and the "autonomy" he provided his wife weren't enough.

In "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," Fredric Jameson provides a framework by which we might understand the difference between Amin's perceptions and Sihem's. Jameson asserts that literature produced by capitalist societies reflects a barrier between the public and the private, while "third world texts…necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory" (69). Though Amin embraces the boundaries he encounters in Israel (the barriers between the public and the private), Sihem finds that she cannot do so, and, in the ultimate

blurring of those boundaries, she offers her life to her state of origin. What's especially interesting about Sihem's choice is that – as we saw with Erica – such willingness is itself feminized. As Amin searches for answers, he is told: "Sihem was a woman, not just your woman. She died for others" (226). Thus the act of sacrifice is offered up as a thing "women" do. Though Khadra could easily have given readers a male suicide bomber, these gendered notions of sacrifice become strikingly apparent via a character like Sihem Jaafari, who intelligently, consciously, and deliberately offers her life (and forces others to offer theirs) to the cause of a nation-state she deems more worthy than individual existence. She understands her own, gendered role to be one of surrender, and she adheres to that role above the "desire for freedom" she is expected – according to the tenets of western feminism – to value most.

This narrative of female sacrifice can be found in a number of terror novels – not merely those I've sketched out for you today – which suggests that these texts further media-driven assumptions of female helplessness. I contend, however, that by using tools like Halberstam's "shadow feminism," we are able to see in self-abnegation not just fragility, but personal and political power, as well. Though this runs counter to the logic of liberal feminism, the work of attempting such a paradigm shift seems worthwhile, as it stands to reveal representations of strength that exist outside of imperialistic mandates of dominance. With this kind of work, we are positioned to view vulnerability not as weakness, but as a means of disrupting the illusion of sovereignty that underpins the relentless cycle of nationalistic, retaliatory violence.

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