

“Some of the Best Soldiers Wear Lipstick”: Liberal Feminism on Women Wielding Force

Pooja Satyogi

School of Law, Governance and Citizenship, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar University Delhi, Delhi

ABSTRACT: This article is an attempt to delineate the figure and the place of the female soldier in the Abu Ghraib photographs of 2004 to understand the relationship between violence and masculinity. The article takes women’s recruitment in the armed forces as a point to think how their integration provokes anxieties about the protection of the motherland that is supposed to be the quintessential work performed by the male soldier. The article discusses how following Abu Ghraib and the dissemination of photographs of torture provide an opportunity to observe the critical slippages that occur between thinking about gender and how images, identities, and subjectivities regularly make its limits porous. The article works with early responses to Abu Ghraib from within largely liberal feminist positions to explicate the connections made by scholars between violence and female subjectivity.

KEYWORDS: Prisons, violence, photographs and media, gender and feminism, UN Convention against Torture

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I. INTRODUCTION

In this essay, I attempt to understand how the figure of the female soldier disrupts the symbiotic relationship between violence and masculinity through a discussion centered on the Abu Ghraib prison torture, in which women soldiers were accused of participating in the perpetration of torture on Iraqi prisoners. The integration of women in the armed forces, and to some extent in the police services, has provoked anxieties about the representation of masculinity and femininity as also about what it means for women to wield force in a context that is almost always hypermasculine, pivotal to which is the notion of building strong homosocial bonds among soldiers. The debate following Abu Ghraib and the dissemination of photographs of torture is illuminating in the way it allows us to observe the critical slippages that occur between thinking about gender and how images, identities, and subjectivities regularly make its limits porous.

My interest in tracking the debate on Abu Ghraib stems from trying to understand how feminism has attempted to theorize the connections between violence and female subjectivity when it is not easily assimilated within the framework of trauma and abjection, of which Battered Women Syndrome is an example, or when the violence actually protects a woman’s symbolic position, as in cases where women might resort to violence to protect their children/family, and thereby preserving their status as the maternal figures. By contrast, if women soldiers participate in torture practices, which I hold to be an unexceptional practice in warfare, although not uncondemnable, then, their representation takes on affective forms of which Barbara Ehrenreich (2004), an American writer and political activist’s horrified reaction is an example. Shortly after the photographs were in the public domain, she wrote in the *Los Angeles Times*,

It was [Lynndie] England we saw with a naked Iraqi man on a leash. If you were doing PR for Al Qaeda, you couldn’t have staged a better picture to galvanize misogynist Islamic fundamentalists around the world. Here, in these photos from Abu Ghraib, you have everything that the Islamic fundamentalists believe characterizes Western culture, all nicely arranged in one hideous image—imperial arrogance, sexual depravity, and gender equality (Ehrenreich, 2004, subsequently published in 2007 in the *South Central Review*).

I argue that although this is not the only way in feminist scholars responded to Abu Ghraib, or that contemporary feminist thought does not acknowledge that women are capable of perpetrating violence; rather a large part of the western liberal feminist scholarship relied on a limited range of subject positions to encompass the varying figures of women wielding violence, of which a woman soldier is just one example.

By feminism, I seek to convey the diversity of theoretical positions that not only seek to understand women’s experience, but also the political wielding of the feminine and masculine genders. In this scholarship, I particularly include the post-structuralist and queer theory scholars like Judith Butler, who have consistently argued that when we deploy universalizing terms, it is necessary to learn a double movement: to invoke the category and, hence, provisionally to institute an identity and at the same time to open the category as a site of permanent political contest. That the term is questionable does not mean that we ought not to use it, but neither does the necessity to use it mean that we ought not perpetually to interrogate the exclusions by which it proceeds,

and to do this precisely in order to learn how to live the contingency of the political signifier in a culture of democratic contestation (Butler 1990, p. 222).

Such an understanding clearly orients us towards feminisms that allows for a dispersal of the study of gender and sexuality across epistemic terrains. It is in this sense that Marilyn Strathern (2005) had recently argued that Looking back over the recent history of feminist scholarship, it is possible to claim it as much for postmodernism as to see it as postmodernism's most trenchant critic...feminist scholarship appears as both precursor to and an enactment of some of the positions that we would now assemble under that latter (postmodernism's) name (Strathern 2005, p. 33).

What I seek to do is to extend the dialogue on the mechanisms through which women come to wield power in coercive state institutions. Abu Ghraib, in my opinion, is the first example of a sustained discussion problematizing the idea of a good/bad woman soldier/reserve officer and this article focusses on some of the earliest responses to Abu Ghraib torture from within liberal feminism in the West.

II. "SOME OF THE BEST SOLDIERS WEAR LIPSTICK"

In April 2004, a collection of prison photographs of American soldiers abusing and torturing Iraqi prisoners began appearing on news channels and newspapers across the world. What was perceived to be extremely shocking was the deliberate infliction of violence that took the form of systematic humiliation and torturing of Iraqi prisoners by American male and female soldiers serving as reserve prison guards at a prison called Abu Ghraib in Iraq. The photographs of smiling American soldiers suggested that rather than being staged, there was enjoyment in perpetrating sexualized humiliation upon their detainees. After the shock had registered itself, the ensuing discussion and debate focused on the contradiction and hypocrisy of the US Bush administration's claims that its military invasion and overthrow of Saddam Hussein would bring a 'civilizing freedom' to the Iraqi people and admonished the degradation of Iraqis, who has in any case been held in captivity without trial. These discussions also highlighted that the torture of the prisoners was carried out in blatant violation of the international Geneva Conventions against wartime combatants and the UN Convention Against Torture, both of which the United States is a signatory to, apart from having its own anti-torture laws. The third disquieting issue that became the focus of debates was the participation of women soldiers in the abuse of Iraqi prisoners. Of the seven American soldiers, who were Army Reserves military police guards of lower ranks, three were women. Lynndie England, Sabrina Harman and Megan Ambuhl were accused of sodomizing prisoners, forcing them to masturbate and to perform homosexual acts on each other (Smith and White, 2005). Twenty-year-old army reservist Lynndie England now infamously called 'Lynndie the Leasher', became the launch pad for many discussions on 'imperial arrogance, sexual depravity and gender equality' (Ehrenreich, 2004).

The debate on women and militarism is, however, not new in at least the United States. From the early 1980s, the period of break in détente efforts between the US and the ex-Soviet Union, there has been a sustained dialogue between scholars on thinking about position of women in 'masculine wars'. Interestingly, in these considerations the symbolic images of Moral Mother and Woman Warrior were rhetorically deployed to make connections between feminism and militarism (Elshtain, 1982; McAllister, 1982; Ruddick, 2009; Stiehm 1982, 1983, 2009; Thompson, 1983). The Moral Mother came to represent the vision of women as innately pacifist, and men as innately warmongering, while the debate over Women Warrior concerned itself with the increasing enlisting of women in Western military institutions (Leonardo, 1985). These two figures converged in the (contested) space where the image of the mother as the primary protector in the *home* sat next to that of 'women warriors' best exemplified by the US Army's recruiting call in the slogan 'Some of the best Soldiers Wear Lipstick' (Enloe, 2018) through which efforts were made to mobilize women to take on the responsibility of protecting and defending their *homeland* as well.

Collective works like *Reweaving the Web of Life: Feminism and Nonviolence* (McAllister, 1982) and *Over our Dead Bodies: Women against the Bomb* (Dorothy, 1983) articulated antimilitarist positions against the nuclear weapons of mass destruction and the increasing nuclearization of the world. In *Reweaving the Web of Life* particularly, McAllister took a radical feminist position of emphasizing the pivotal role of women as spiritual preservers of the earth and of all living beings. However, it was Cynthia Enloe's *Does Khaki Become You? The Militarisation of Women's Lives* (1983) that first forcefully argued that there had always been a historical connection between gender and militarism, that is, women had always been essential to military endeavours. She uses the category of the European woman camp follower whose position was important for the army, whose life was always in danger, but whose position was not defined by being at the *front*. Enloe documents six specific roles that women continue to perform directly or indirectly within the military: sex-workers, military wife, military nurse, official soldier, guerrilla soldiers, and defense industry worker. Focusing particularly on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), she emphasized that the rise in the number of women soldiers had to be understood in the context of military conscription becoming less universal and falling birth rates. She further argued that army services tended to recruit from 'ethnic and racial' communities who faced the fewest alternative opportunities. Black women, for instance, comprised over 40% of all enlisted women in the U.S. army. Over the

years, Enloe has also maintained her initial argument that women's recruitment into the army does not mean that they occupy positions of power in combat, rather 'Women *as women* must be denied access to "the front", to "combat" so that men can claim a uniqueness and superiority that will justify their dominant position in the social order (Enloe 1983, p.15). And yet because women are in practice often exposed to frontline combat the military must constantly redefine "the front" and "combat" as wherever "women" are not. Women may serve the military, deduces Enloe, but they can never be permitted to *be* the military. They must remain "camp followers." (Enloe 1983, p. 15). Further, Enloe has also consistently exercised caution in applauding a martial, maternal consciousness with respect of increasing militarization lest women's activism to mothering make "motherhood the sole legitimate spaces in which women take political action" (Enloe 2000, p.299). In so arguing, she has articulated her differences with Sara Ruddick's contention that women's inclination towards peace must be understood less from within the framework of biological maternity and more as emanating from the societal responsibilities they have of raising children (Ruddick, 2009). Enloe was also positioning herself against Jean Bethke Elshtain's general argument that "just warriors" fight the die for the greater good, while the female "beautiful soul" becomes symbolic markers of the feminine figure who needs to be masculine protection (Elshtain, 1982).

Although the debate remained polarized, other scholarly work, particularly on war crimes in recent times, has fore grounded that both inside and outside the military, women also become victims of distinctly institutionalized types of war violence and rape, which has been variously described as "terrorism" (Card 1996, p. 6), "aggression" (Goldstein 2001, p. 364), "strategy" (Hansen 2001, p. 59), and "torture" (Schott 1996, p. 23). Through their respective projects, these scholars have also shown that rape remains historically the least prosecuted war crime. Absent from all these works have been the questions of the possibility of sexual abuse of men and participation of women soldiers in the perpetration of abuse and torture in similar contexts. Abu Ghraib, then, stands out somewhat as an unprecedented event with three women soldiers accused of sodomizing prisoners.

III. WOMEN SOLDIERS AS MONSTERS OR WARRIORS

Interestingly, the mainstream media's horrified representation of women soldiers as 'monsters' sits in contrast to the conception of women as warriors, best exemplified in Greek legends in which each Amazon (woman warrior) seared off her right breast so it would not interfere with the use of bow (Blundell 1995, p. 62). Represented as a nation of warriors in Greek myths, the Amazons came to be seen as warriors who fought using military equipment and tactics but lived without men. They govern themselves and require heterosexual sex only periodically for the purposes only of procreation. Enloe argues that 'male warriors have imagined Amazon women as a military challenge and a sexual challenge. Amazons have been portrayed simultaneously as sexless and promiscuous. In myth, victory over the Amazons therefore entailed their defeat in battle followed either by rape or seduction' (Enloe 1994, pp. 598-599). Blundell argues that in Greek myths, Amazons provided an example of 'defeated barbarian type', but their being women was also central to the myths function of providing a negative role model. She argues,

The message of the myth for both males and females alike was that in a civilized society women are passive, chaste and married. The alternative---behaving like an Amazon--- was a mark of barbarism, its consequences were disastrous both for the women themselves and for the state over which they ruled (Blundell 1995, p. 62).

I place this myth in conversation with our present discussion not with the intention of positing a timeless connection between Amazon warriors and women soldiers of contemporary period; rather, to think how sexualization of women warriors/soldiers becomes an essential trope through which their soldiering and violence is interpreted. In the specific context of Abu Ghraib what becomes immediately apparent is the inversion in roles-- from warriors to abusive torturers--- that cast women soldiers as 'monsters' as opposed to valiant soldiers in the discussions on the issue. Interestingly, the crown of the valiant soldier (but also a victim of enemy brutality) was bestowed on Jessica Lynch, the rescued prisoner of war in 2003, who was part of the 507 Maintenance Company responsible for the repair and maintenance of equipment and vehicles of the 5 Battalion, 52d Air Defense Artillery, contends Deepa Kumar in her work on propaganda in war and the many abuses that women are subjected to in those contexts (Kumar 2004, p. 299). Lynch was hailed as an example of an ideal 'woman soldier', who fought for her country, was injured in the battle, and was tortured in captivity. These explanations did not correlate with the facts that she was a supply clerk in the US army and was rescued through a US military mission. Interestingly, she was glorified as both a war hero and an innocent woman victim (Sjoberg 2007). She was portrayed as an icon of the American war, and the story of her capture and rescue by the US forces became one of the great patriotic moments of the conflict at a time when the US led coalition forces had been unable to find the weapons of mass destruction that Iraq was supposed to have possessed and the overall tenor of the public opinion was beginning to question the entire preemptive war endeavour. In other words, the sensationalized story of courageous US troops rescuing Lynch from her barbaric Iraqi captives retroactively explained why the US had invaded Iraq in the first place. Using Alison Landsberg ideas from *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of*

American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture (2004) where the argument is that a prosthetic memory is produced technologically through mass media that ‘challenges more traditional forms of memory that are premised on claims of authenticity’ (Landsberg 2004, p. 4), Anna Froula argues that the US media’s repetitive, ossified, incomplete and inaccurate telecast of reports released by the US Pentagon of Lynch’s rescue were designed to promote a patriotic sentiment and support for a war that it was increasingly becoming unpopular within its own citizenry (Froula 2006). Here “prosthetic memory” worked as “cultural amnesia” the effects of which may be interpreted from the fact that the media offered corrections to and apologies for Lynch coverage, which did not garner the same “24/7” attention as her rescue, failed to override and revise the audience’s first, inaccurate impressions of Lynch’s “liberation” and she continued to ‘symbolize the country’s innocent face and its exemplarity’ even though the facts of her experience did not support Lynch’s image as a hero (Anna Froula, 2006, online article). Anderson calls this form of reportage “militainment” by which he means ‘the transformation of narrative into a consumable, politicized spectacle which merges war coverage, patriotic visuals, and impressive product marketing campaigns to produce for profit propaganda’ (Anderson 2003, online article).

The photographs of Lynndie England, Sabrina Harman, and Megan Ambuhl and other US prison guards torturing Iraqi prisoners interrupt the “patriotic truths” about the Iraq War by inverting the terms of Lynch’s captivity narrative, thereby countering assertions of US innocence and moral superiority. In *Regarding the Torture of Others* (2003), Susan Sontag wrote—

photographs have laid down the tracks of how important conflicts are judged and remembered. The Western memory museum is now mostly a visual one. Photographs have an insuperable power to determine what we recall of events, and it now seems probable that the defining association of people everywhere with the war that the United States launched pre-emptively in Iraq last year will be photographs of the torture of Iraqi prisoners by Americans in the most infamous of Saddam Hussein’s prisons, Abu Ghraib (Sontag, 2003, paragraph 1, online article).

In the next section, therefore, I am going to concentrate on delineating the contours of the debates and discussions among feminist scholars that have attempted to interpret and explain the women soldiers’ participation in the infliction of sexualized racial violence and humiliation on the prisoners.

IV. WESTERN LIBERAL FEMINISM: SOME RESPONSES

One of the first responses by a feminist scholar on Abu Ghraib was Barbara Ehrenreich’s, who wrote to counter the right-wing attacks that focused on Lynndie England to mount an overarching critique of advances made by women in the military since the termination of the all-male draft in 1972. For instance, Elaine Donnelly, president of the Center for Military Readiness contended that the photographs of England with leash in her hand represented ‘exactly what feminists have dreamed of for years’ (cited in Kaufman-Obsorn 2008, p. 206), that is, England’s conduct was akin to feminists ‘who like to buy man-hating greeting cards and have this kind of attitude that all men abused all women. It’s a subculture of the feminist movement, but the driving force in it in many cases, certainly is academia’ (cited in Kaufman-Obsorn 2008, p. 206). Donnelly appealed that the US military should consider putting in abeyance its unofficial gender quotas tied to enlistment of women into the army and stay with sex segregated training (cited in Kaufman-Obsorn 2008, p. 206). It seems to me that the feminist debate post-Abu Ghraib must be situated in response also to such right-wing attacks on any gains women might have made, educational or professional, by joining the armed forces. Unfortunately, in responding to reactionary politics of this kind, feminist scholars like Ehrenreich acceded to the general argument of interpreting women soldiers’ participation in torture as a referendum on feminist thought. In her article ‘Feminism’s Assumptions Upended’ (2007), which was originally published in the *Los Angeles Times* in 2004, which became a subject of widespread discussion, Ehrenreich lamented that ---

as a feminist’, the Abu Ghraib photographs ‘broke my heart. I had no illusions about the US mission in Iraq—whatever exactly it is—but it turns out that I did have some illusions about women’ (Ehrenreich, reprinted, 2007: 1)...And I shouldn’t be surprised because I never believed that women were innately gentler and less aggressive than men. Like most feminists, I have supported full opportunity for women within the military---1) because I know women could fight, and 2) because the military is one of the few options around for low-income, young people...Secretly, I hoped that the presence of women would over time change the military, making it more respectful of other people and cultures, more capable of genuine peacekeeping...A certain kind of feminism, or perhaps I should say a certain kind of feminist naiveté, died in Abu Ghraib. It was feminism that saw men as the perpetual perpetrators, women as the perpetual victims, and male sexual violence against women as the root of all injustice (Ehrenreich 2007, pp. 170-171).

The assumptions of the strategy of social change that Ehrenreich believed in was premised on thinking---

that women were morally superior to men. We had a lot of debates over whether it was biology or conditioning that gave women the moral edge—or simply the experience of being a woman in a sexist culture. But the assumption of superiority, or at least a lesser inclination toward cruelty and violence, was more or less beyond debate. After all, women do most of the caring work in our culture, and in polls are consistently less inclined toward war than men’. However, ‘what we have learned from Abu Ghraib, once and for all, is that a uterus is not a substitute for a conscience’ (ibid).

In a similar vein, Zillah Eisenstein wrote

When I first saw the pictures of the torture at Abu Ghraib, I felt destroyed and heartbroken. I thought ‘we’ are the fanatics, the extremists; not them. By the next day as I continued to think about Abu Ghraib, I wondered how there could be so many females involved in the atrocities...These women should be held responsible and accountable, but they also are being used as gender decoys. They play a role of deception and lure us into a fantasy of gender equity rather than depravity. As decoys they let us pretend that this is what democracy looks like. As decoys they create confusion by participating in the very sexual humiliation that their gender is usually victim to. This supposed gender swapping and switching leaves masculinist/ racialized gender in place. Just the sex has changed; the uniform remains the same. Male or female can be masculinized commander or imperial collaborator, while white women look like masculinist empire builders and brown men look like women and homos. Females as gender decoys allow the fantasy that women are more equal, are found anywhere with no impediments to their choices and their lives....The brilliance of females being used as decoys for democracy is that the unstable relationship between sex and gender can be deployed in their confused and fluid meanings (Eisenstein 2007, pp. 37-38)

It is easy to see that in framing the argument in terms of the ‘unthinkable’, both Ehrenreich and Eisenstein inadvertently replicate their right-wing opponent’s anxiety of the ‘terror’ and ‘cruelty’ that women are capable of unleashing in positions of power. The difference between the two, which I think is minor, lies in the fact that while Eisenstein acknowledges the global hegemonic empire building exercise of the US in its war waging politics of which Abu Ghraib is but one part, even as one wonders how she would have articulated her position on the prisoners/detainees if Abu Ghraib torture had not taken place. In other words, what about the form her criticism of American military action would have taken had it not been for the prisoners’ abuse, considering that the detention itself was illegal. Meanwhile, Ehrenreich is comfortable debating merely from the point of view of a liberal feminist who, after having expressed her disillusionment with women’s participation in torture, again makes banal appeals to a different feminist desire of not just being in institutions that men have built, but to actively subvert them. In expressing my distance from this form of argumentation, I agree with Kaufman-Osborn’s contention that this way of reasoning invariably ‘plays into the hands of feminism’s detractors by inviting them to assert that the ultimate import of the quest for gender equality is revealed in the conduct of Lynndie England’ (Kaufman-Osborn 2008, p. 208).

V. CONCLUSION

Do we then discard gender in thinking about Abu Ghraib? Kaufman-Osborn answers in the negative and holds that we think of gender as something constructed through engagement in a complex set of performative practices, including the abusive techniques deployed at Abu Ghraib, and that we ask how those practices engage gender persons in ways that are not readily reducible to “women” and “men” (Kaufman-Osborn 2008, p. 208-209). Further, if we are to take the idea of women’s violence seriously, we will need to move away from explanations like ‘women are decoys’ that works by creating a split between women’s violence from their essential femininity, thereby disavowing any connections between *their* violence and *their* subjectivity. The thought I have in mind is from Slavoj Žižek’s *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (2002 [1991]) where he says that in contending “I know that it is so, but nevertheless I can’t believe it” is a statement disavowing reality in which a gap is created between knowledge and belief (Žižek 2002 [1991]: 241-242). This is obviously not to suggest that we accede to the ‘few bad apples’ explanation of the US military about the conduct of soldiers and impute agency to women soldiers in this simplistic form; rather my intention is to gesture towards taking seriously the fact that gender was fundamental to the torture and humiliation of Iraqi prisoners, but not in the way Ehrenreich and Eisenstein would have us believe; rather this was racialized, sexualized, homophobic and imperial violence over male bodies.

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