

# The bomber behind the veil and the ferocious fighter

A study of media representations of male and female suicide  
bombers

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# Abstract

Suicide bombings have become a widely used lethal weapon in violent conflicts around the world. These attacks have been committed by both men and women for almost three decades. Still, violent women are commonly perceived as the exception of the rule. This can be understood with the help of feminist post-structural theory, which identifies an inherent power relationship in producing and maintaining a discourse. This thesis aims to deconstruct what appears to be a gendered media discourse on male and female suicide bombers. This is done through a discourse analysis guided by the gender dichotomy of the Just Warrior and Beautiful Soul theory. By analyzing a selection of articles within the two English speaking Western Magazines NEWSWEEK and TIME Magazine, I have found several stereotype-based differences between the portrayals of male and female perpetrators. It is important to expose and deconstruct this established discourse in order to avoid gendered knowledge and policy production standing in the way of permanent peace.

*Key words:* male, female, suicide bomber, discourse analysis, Just Warrior and Beautiful Soul theory, post-structural theory

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# 1 Introduction

Females who perpetrate, support [...] and harbor those who commit political violence have been viewed largely as an aberration at best and demonic at worst (Whaley-Eager 2008:1).

Throughout history, numerous women around the world have made use of violent action in order to express their opinions and call for change. Although in the minority, many of these women have not only been followers and active members, but also leaders of different insurgent groups and terrorist organizations. Suicide bombing is a very common and complex component to some of these organizations, in which women have been participating for decades.

However, the role of women within these activities has consistently been overlooked and political violence is still considered to be ‘a man’s work’ by the public.

As the acts and consequences of suicide attacks are widespread, this issue is considered to be a worldwide concern, having major political prominence in the international arena. As a result, suicide bombing is also a much debated issue within the media. Additionally, increased media attention has been directed at violent women in recent years.

The media is an important tool for diffusing information, attitudes and opinions. By giving the impression of being an impartial source of information – and despite the growing skepticism on the part of the consumer towards it – the media has the power to spread an image of reality filled with implicit values. These values and attitudes are taken for granted because they are presented as neutral information. As a result, the media is a central figure in matters of knowledge production and diffusion, and thus also an important instrument in constructing and maintaining stereotypes and gender roles. Therefore it is a very interesting research subject in this context.

In the same manner, terrorism, suicide bombings and their perpetrators have been in the research spotlight for a long time, especially within the fields of International Relations and Conflict Studies. Today we are able to find a wide

range of articles, books and theses dealing with different groups and their members as well as the causes and consequences of their actions.

Still, in spite of the great amount of research studies analyzing terrorists and suicide bombers, there is a clear absence of ones that utilize a gender perspective. Female involvement in suicide terrorism has so far been a relatively unproblematized phenomenon within scientific research. To this day even feminist research appears to be unable to study female suicide bombers from a perspective that does not treat nor talk about them as victims.

At this point of history, violent international and interstate conflicts continue to be a common feature of global politics, leading to terrible consequences for many people around the world. As terrorism and its different manifestations such as suicide attacks often form part of these conflicts, it is important to gain knowledge about the different actors involved – including female perpetrators – in order to put a stop to these conflicts.

Therefore, I have chosen to look at the representations of suicide bombers through a gender lens, with the intention of emphasizing the role of female suicide bombers as an important, still quite unproblematized, aspect of this phenomenon. I aim to generate new knowledge within the fields of Gender and Conflict Studies so as to take a step forward towards peace.

## 1.1 Purpose and Presentation of the Problem

The main subject of this study is the portrayal of suicide bombers within the media. In correspondence with the shortcomings of scientific research, I believe these depictions to be characterized by gendered values.

By using representations alluding to established feminine and masculine traits, a general image is formed of the protecting man and the protected woman. These depictions are very challenging as they are based on unproblematized gender norms. Also, their consequences might be very negative, leading to the creation of a consensus within our society excluding women from politics.

In this way, a negative cycle begins, where unrealistic representations lead to tangible thoughts and actions. These in turn, reproduce representations which

become self-fulfilling prophecies. As a result, public consensus leads to gendered knowledge and policy production complicating the process towards permanent peace.

Thus, there is an important value in analyzing the discourse on suicide bombers, contributing to existing research with an account of the constructed differences between male and female suicide bombers in media representations.

Deconstructing what might appear to be a commonsensical discourse is an important first step in questioning the power relationship between discourse and gender order. By acknowledging such power we can come to understand its implications for both men and women, and thus react against it. Additionally, seeing the actions of these women for what they are - not what they are made to be through the power of gender – will also mean a positive development towards conflict resolution.

Finally, my ambition of this study is not to find any generalizing conclusions. Instead, I aim to deconstruct a limited discourse in order to find traces of gendered representations. These traces will only be considered valid for the actual discourse. However, they might work as an interesting foundation to build upon with the help of further research, so as to increase the knowledge within a deficient research field.

## 1.2 Research Question

My research question rests on a general assumption of gendered representations of men and women, particularly suicide bombers.

*What differences can be discerned in the representations of male and female suicide bombing perpetrators within the international media discourse?*

## 1.3 Disposition

An answer to this question will be pursued through six different steps. To begin with, the research issue will be put into a context. Next, an account of the theoretical framework comprised in this thesis will be given. This will include

feminist post-structural theory as a complement to discourse theory, the gender dichotomy and the Just Warrior and Beautiful Soul theory. Later, an account of the methodological implications of discourse analysis will be presented. This will be followed by a limitation of the discourse and the actual analysis on written media. Finally, the thesis will conclude with a section highlighting the most important conclusions of the study.

## 1.4 Context

According to discourse analyst Iver B. Neumann, a good discourse analysis requires so-called *cultural competence*; that is, it requires extensive knowledge on the subject you aim to analyze (Neumann 2003:47). Therefore, I will use this section to present previous research on both male and female involvement in insurgency groups and suicide bombings, as well as some background on the media portrayals of these actors.

At this stage it is important to mention that even though I sometimes may refer to male and female actors within my study as ‘terrorists’ it is not my purpose to evaluate neither the motives nor the political status of the presented organizations. Instead the choice of such a politically biased term is based on the language used within both the media and previous research when describing these agents and movements. Nevertheless, in order to avoid these assessments I will be working - when possible - with the terms suicide bomber, insurgent group, non state militia etc.

It is also important to note how limited the writing on female terrorists really is, as argued by political scientist Brigitte L. Nacos (2005:438). Even less has been written on female suicide bombers, as I discovered during the course of this writing. Nonetheless, according to Political Science professor Jessica Auchter, increased media and research attention has been directed at violent women in recent years. Even so, these accounts are repeatedly based on the reproducing of gender stereotypes (Auchter 2012:121).

### 1.4.1 Female Involvement in Insurgent Groups

Women have had a long history of direct involvement in political violence such as insurgency and revolution argues Women's Studies professor Mia Bloom (2007:94). As a matter of fact, Political Science and Terrorism professors Leonard Weinberg and William Eubank argue that women have been involved in terrorist movements since their initial establishment, not only as participants but also as leaders of "*the first modern terrorist organization*" the People's Will - Narodnaya Volya - in Russia (Weinberg & Eubank 2011:23).

In the same manner, Sjoberg and Gentry state that, although in the minority, many women have been followers, active members and leaders of different so called insurgent groups and terrorist organizations (Sjoberg & Gentry 2007:2;Nacos 2005:435).

Furthermore, the differences between male and female tasks within these organizations have so far been more dependent on the ideology of the groups than on gender differences. Left wing organizations have been characterized by rather large female terrorist activity and leadership, whereas right wing and religious factions have typically relied on the child-bearing and mothering role of women (Weinberg & Eubank 2011:39).

Concerning the specific type and resulting outcome of actual terrorist activity, historical evidence does not point out any significant differences in the terrorist attacks perpetrated by men and women (ibid).

### 1.4.2 Female Involvement in Suicide Bombing Attacks

As a result of the extensive female involvement in violent movements, women taking part in suicide bombings is a logical – although much questioned – development.

The first documented female suicide attack took place in 1985 (Weinberg & Eubank 2011:34). This occurred only a few years after the establishment of 'modern day suicide attacks' in 1983, according to terrorism expert Anne Speckhard (Speckhard 2008:1023). Since then, statistics show that women have taken part in around 257 suicide bombings between 1985 and 2010, accounting for approximately 25 percent of the total attacks (Bloom 2011:2).

The main increase in female suicide bombings has taken place within secular movements, although it is slowly spreading to religious ones as well (Bloom 2007:97). Throughout history women have committed suicide attacks in the name of many insurgent groups such as Al Qaeda–related networks, Chechen rebel groups, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and Palestinian insurgent groups, to name a few (Speckhard 2008:1024f).

Concerning the underlying reasons to commit suicide attacks, male and female suicide bombers are driven by similar motives (Speckhard 2008:1030-1031,1040-1041), although women are thought to be more vulnerable to previous traumas leading to their radicalization (Speckhard 2008:1045). Nonetheless, regarding terrorists in general, few differences are to be found in the types of “*recruitment, motivation, ideological fervor, and brutality*” between men and women (Nacos 2005:436). According to Page Whaley Eager, the motives of terrorists in general are constituted by a combination of ideological and personal reasons (Whaley-Eager 2008:4).

Connecting this to the concept of female agency - defined by professors Sandra Cheldelin and Maneshka Eliatamby as the ability to make conscious choices (Cheldelin & Eliatamby 2011:3) – it is possible to perceive *both* male and female suicide bombers as conscious agents.

### 1.4.3 Media Representations

*“Consensus is formed mainly by the amplification of existing societal expectations and attitudes. Media reporters and commentators serve as a control mechanism that reinforces the existing structure and social status of genders within a society”* (Sela-Shayovitz 2007:201). Criminologist Revital Sela-Shayovitz’s argument is exemplified by Nacos recent research in which she states that descriptions of violent female actors based on gendered stereotypes are both common and enduring in the media (Nacos 2005:436).

As a result, many studies argue that political violence is still considered to be ‘a man’s work’ by the public. This is based on a stereotypical image of women as unnatural violent actors and thereby unwelcome trespassers in this male domain (Auchter 2012:125; Nacos 2005:435; Sjoberg & Gentry 2007:1).

According to Spike V. Peterson and Anne Sisson Runyan, this perception has given men the opportunity to position themselves as the armed protectors, while giving women the role of victims to be protected (2001:153,155). Thus, public reaction towards violent acts is often much stronger when these are committed by women (Nacos 2005:436). All together, this development makes it impossible for our society to understand female terrorists (Auchter 2012:125).

Even though there is no space within this study to analyze the consequences of the analyzed discourse, it is worth noting some of the implications of a gendered discourse mentioned in previous research.

In the words of terrorism expert Dr. Swati Parashar, *“to suggest that women are incapable of thinking, internalizing and acting out politics, especially of a violent nature, and to question the motivations of those who do is a disempowering ... discursive strategy* (Parashar 2012:176). As the experiences of violent women are considered strange, out of place or even censored, a gendered discourse has further implications excluding women from peace processes and the political arena in general Parashar (2012:172,177).

In addition, according to Lene Hansen, *“[[f]oreign policies rely upon representations of identity...”* while reproducing these identities at the same time (Hansen 2006:1). She states that politicians often choose to anchor certain policies to established public opinion, which is, in turn, partly constructed by media identity representations (Hansen 2006:1,7,30). As a result, media portrayals might be indirectly used to legitimize certain discriminating policies (Hansen 2006:45).

Regarding counterterrorism strategies the consequences can be fatal. Because the violent female role is underestimated, women are less scrutinized when passing through security controls, contributing to the element of surprise (Bloom 2011:1;Nacos 2005:446;Weinberg & Eubank 2011:35).

## 2 Theory and method

I will use this section to present the theoretical and methodological frameworks I will be employing in my analysis of what I believe to be stereotypical representations of male and female identities.

The nature of discourse analysis implicates a certain mode of procedure which makes a distinction between method and theory impossible. Instead discourse analysis might be best understood as being an analytical method as well as a theory of science. This implicates certain ontological and epistemological principles (Bergström & Boréus 2005:306), as well as methodological preconditions (Neumann 2003:13). These will be clarified below.

In order to attain some structure, the presentation of my theoretical and methodological frameworks will be divided in abstractly descending sections. This account will begin with the abstract macro workings of discourse, presented by a personally composed discourse theory complemented with feminist post-structural theory. The next section will comprise an introduction of the gender dichotomy, which will be followed by the more concrete Just Warrior and Beautiful Soul theory. This will help to illustrate and concretize my theoretical framework in the context of violent women. Thereby it will also work as a concrete analytical tool on which my discourse analysis will be based. As a final point, my adaptation of discourse analysis as a method will be explicitly described at the end of the chapter.

### 2.1 Discourse Theory complemented by Feminist Post-structural Theory

Discourse analysis is a broad methodological concept, which comprises a wide range of different methods for systematic studies of discourse (Bergström & Boréus 2005:306f). These diverse methods are united by their common view on language as a central aspect of our existence (Bergström & Boréus 2005:306f).

What divides the varying forms of understanding as well as applying discourse analysis is their definition of *discourse*, where different definitions place focus on different aspects of discourse (Neumann 2003:15ff;Howard 2000:3). Discourse analyst Iver B. Neumann presents in his book *Mening Materialitet och Makt* a definition of discourse written by social anthropologist Fredrik Barth; “*a process which reflects the mediation of knowledge, power and social relations – a system which can produce statements about those who comprise it*” (Neumann 2003:17 my translation).

This definition situates *language, identity, power and social relations* as *actions* at the center of discourse, making them its most important analytical units. Since the aim of my discourse analysis is to expose the power relationship between identity-building discourse and the gender order within media representations of suicide bombers, I consider this definition to be a suitable starting point.

However, discourse theory only describes the underlying power embedded in discourse, but it does not in itself identify nor give any reference to the type of power we could be dealing with. Therefore, in order to analyze the above mentioned relationship I consider it necessary to pair up discourse theory with a gender sensitive theoretical framework.

According to Susanne Gannon and Bronwyn Davies in the book *Handbook of Feminist Research*, feminist post-structural theory emphasizes the role played by language and discourse. Therefore, it encourages researchers to apply a “*...close textual analysis as a central strategy*” (Hesse-Biber 2007:81). Thus, I believe it to be a very suitable theory to complement discourse theory with.

Post-structural theorists – similarly to certain discourse theorists – identify an intrinsic power relationship in producing, reproducing and upholding a certain discourse. Moreover, feminist post-structural theory takes post-structural thoughts one step further by applying a gender perspective. This approach argues that a gender hierarchy is rendered possible by the inherent power relations of discourse (Hesse-Biber 2007:72ff,75,80f).

In the following paragraphs I will give an overview of the discourse theory I will be employing in my analysis. This will be pursued through an explicit description of each of the highlighted components of discourse within my chosen definition; *language, identity, power and actions*.

At this stage it is important to point out the fact that *discourse theory* might be a misleading term as there is no widely accepted discourse method or theory. This term relates to Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's theory of discourse - as presented in David Howard's book *Discourse* (2000:8,101) – since both the theoretical and methodological frameworks will draw on many of their arguments. This theory is central for the aim of this study as it stresses the importance of exposing power relations within discourse (Bergström & Boréus 2005:321). It also understands discourse as something unstable, seeing social change as something possible (Howard 2000:108,114,121) very much like feminist post structuralists.

Furthermore, inspiration will also be drawn from post-structural thinker Lene Hansen's exposition on identity presented in the book *Security as Practice: Discourse analysis and the Bosnian War*. Lastly, certain ideas will also be borrowed from additional discourse analysts and their respective approaches.

### 2.1.1 Language

According to the subjectivist epistemology of discourse analysis, our perception of reality is formed by and through our language, as no account of our observations is made through neutral language. Reality, meaning, speech and action all come together through language. Thus, language can be used as the unit of analysis as well as the analytic tool (Bergström & Boréus 2005:22,25,305,326). Therefore, theory and method cannot be separated (Neumann 2003:15).

### 2.1.2 Social Relations as Actions

According to Laclau and Mouffe, discourse comprises all *social phenomena* including linguistic and non-linguistic components (Bergström & Boréus 2005:315).

The discursive process of turning thought into action is set in motion by language forming a certain perception of reality and identity. This generates a certain understanding – “*a framework of meaning which enable[s] social life to be conducted*” (Howard 2000:104) – thus making action possible (Howard

2000:102ff). Therefore, discourse is not only constituted by speech and texts, but also actions.

### 2.1.3 Identity

According to Lene Hansen “... *identities do not exist as objective accounts of what people and places ‘really’ are, but as continuously restated, renegotiated, and reshaped subjects and objects*” (Hansen 2006:xvi). Her view on identity is partially built upon Laclau and Mouffes discourse theory (Hansen:2006:xvii), which argues that the meaning of objects and actions is dependent on discourse forming their identity. They state further that discourse creates *subject positions* subjectifying individuals into certain roles (Howard 2000:102,108).

Lene Hansen argues that there are three dimensions to identity. First of all, identity is *discursive*; that is, it is constructed through discourse. Second of all, it is also *relational* as identity is constructed around conceptions of what it is *not*, creating a dichotomy of the *Self* and the *Other* (Hansen 2006:6,37). This line of thinking can be compared to Laclau and Mouffe’s discursive outside (Howard 200:103). Third, identity is considered to be social as it is made through and within established collective norms (Hansen 2006:6).

Most importantly, discourse also comprises a political aspect as identity constructions are including and excluding mechanisms (Hansen 2006:18).

### 2.1.4 Power

Language not only produces, reproduces or questions thoughts and ideas; it also expresses power in doing so. Discourse is neither produced nor perceived in a vacuum. It is in fact a central instrument for the transmitter to share opinions in order to influence the receiver (Bergström & Boréus 2005:13,15f).

Michel Foucault, Hansen as well as Laclau and Mouffe, argue that the production of a certain discourse leads to the control of individuals by implying limitations to some and possibilities to others (Bergström & Boréus 2005:311f;Howard 2000:104f). Knowledge is central to this context as the power lies in establishing certain knowledge as the truth in order to either maintain or eliminate a discourse (Bergström & Boréus 2005:327;Hansen 2006:8,66;Howard

2000:74,77f,113). This power could be compared to Steven Luke's third dimension of power; the power over thought (Bergström & Boréus 2005:13ff,306).

However, in accordance to discourse analyst Michael Foucault (Bergström & Boréus 2005:312), feminist post structuralists argue that the power of discourse is unstable. As a consequence, the gender hierarchy is also believed to be something unfixed (Hesse-Biber 2007:82). Instead they argue that this hierarchy – in accordance with other constructed identities - might be disrupted through the agency of subjects deconstructing and reconstructing identity discourses. Change is possible, although it is conditioned by and situated within the actual discourse (Hesse-Biber 2007:73,78,82;Hansen 2006:21,30,48).

## 2.2 The Gender(ed) Dichotomy

According to feminist post-structural theory, the gender hierarchy is built through discursive identity construction. Such identity constructing practices are not mere descriptions of how certain identities *are*, but normative statements of how they *should* and are *perceived* to be (Hesse-Biber 2007:72ff).

Peterson and Runyan (2010) develop the thoughts around gendered identity constructions in their work and refer to the above mentioned gender hierarchy as the *power of gender*. They see the power of gender as a set of gendering practices through which a hierarchical order between men and women is set up. These practices involve perception, thought, speech and act – all of which are part of discourse. Identity building and gendering mechanisms such as the use of *stereotypes* and *dichotomies* are particularly interesting to this study, as they enable essentializing descriptions of men and women (Peterson & Runyan 2010:37-38).

Stereotyping is an essentializing and misleading practice, as it homogenizes entire groups by ascribing them generally applicable characteristics. Dichotomies draw on these stereotypes to build an oversimplified “either-or-model” which divides characteristics into two categories, in this case masculine and feminine. These categories are relational, inherently discriminating and hierarchical in that they depend on, as well as exclude each other.

As a result, by usefully ordering and simplifying the complexity of the world these categories become widely accepted and unquestioned. That way, socially constructed gender divisions are perceived as common sense and give way to discriminating practices based on them (Peterson & Runyan 2010:38f,47-49,51).

### 2.2.1 From the Public Man and the Private Women to the Just Warrior and the Beautiful soul

Political philosopher Jean Bethke Elshtain's theory about the *Just Warrior and the Beautiful Soul* might at this point make an interesting contribution to my theoretical framework. I will use this theory with the intention of exemplifying at the same time as concretizing the gender(ed) dichotomy in the context of violent women.

In order to gain better understanding on the Just Warrior and the Beautiful Soul, I will begin by presenting Elshtain's previous thoughts on *the Public Man and the Private Woman*. According to her research, in this historical divide men are thought to belong in the public world, which is comprised by the political. Women on the other hand are perceived to be suitable for the private sphere which is concerned with the household and family (Elshtain 1981:4f,14ff).

Conversely, this argument can be put in contrast with the feminist maxim "*the private is political*" (Parashar 2012:167), which will work as a guiding light when looking at the different representations of men and women throughout my analysis.

The public/private divide can be further contextualized and more concrete within the context of violent women. I will therefore make use of Elshtain's Just Warrior and Beautiful Soul theory in order to accomplish this.

The above mentioned divide generally implies boundaries of agency and activity, these are even clearer when in the context of war and conflict. Within these historically and culturally constructed identities men are assumed to be the *Just Warriors*; the violent beings, the righteous fighters, the life takers and more importantly –although somewhat paradoxically - the protectors. Conversely, women are understood as being the oppositional "Other", *the Beautiful Souls*. This is the role of the life givers, the peaceful beings, the home keepers and most importantly, the protected (Elshtain 1995:3-6).

Elshtain's dichotomy is further supported by recent research. The gender dichotomy exemplified by Peterson and Runyan ascribes men agency, autonomy and control, while describing women as passive, dependent and controlled (2010:52). Professor Mia Bloom goes a step further stating that when it comes to conflict women are perceived as moderate, tolerant, and compromising (2007:95). According to peace building researcher Maneshka Eliatamby, women are therefore more prone to engage in nonviolent acts such as peacekeeping. Men, on the other hand, are seen as violent and therefore also as the given agents of violent deeds (Cheldelin & Eliatamby et. al. 2011:38).

In the same way as discourse theory, Elshtain does not believe these perceptions of our political identities to be mere descriptions of reality, but also decisive for our expectations and actions. As a result, identities and actions running counter to these images are overlooked or accused of being strange exceptions of the rule (Elshtain 1995:4,6).

In order to facilitate my analysis I have put together the following table. This is based on a combination of Elshtain's theoretical classification as well as the gender dichotomy presented by Peterson & Runyan (2010:52). These categories will later work as my analytical tools in the actual discourse analysis.

<b>Male characteristics (Self)</b>	<b>Female characteristics (Other)</b>
Agency, autonomy	Passivity, dependence
Control over	Subject to control
Public, politics	Private, family
Violent, life-taker	Peaceful, life-giver
Protector, perpetrator	Protected, victim
Rational, hard	Emotional, soft
Mind, Just	Body, Beautiful

*Table 1.1* The gender dichotomy.

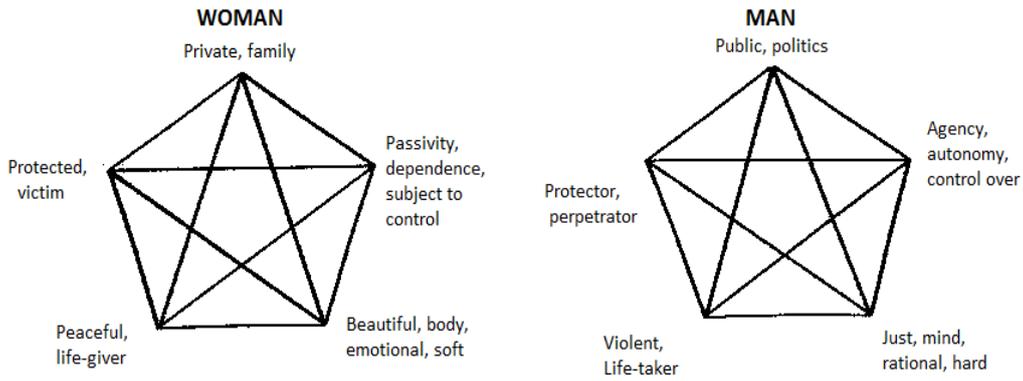
## 2.3 Discourse Analysis as Method

Analytical tools will be outlined in the next section with the purpose of making possible the transformation from an abstract theoretical framework to a concrete discourse analysis. These tools will be inspired by chosen parts of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's previously mentioned discourse theory, exemplified by Lene Hansen's forthcoming identity-construction model and the above presented gender dichotomy.

Discourse theory is based on a 'logic of signs' with the purpose of deconstructing the structure of discourse (Bergström & Boréus 2005:314). According to Laclau and Mouffe a *sign* is composed of a term and its content. To exemplify, the sign woman is comprised of the term woman as well as the meaning we choose to ascribe a woman. Alternatively, a *moment* is a discursified sign; a sign with a fixed meaning within a discourse (Bergström & Boréus 2005:316f).

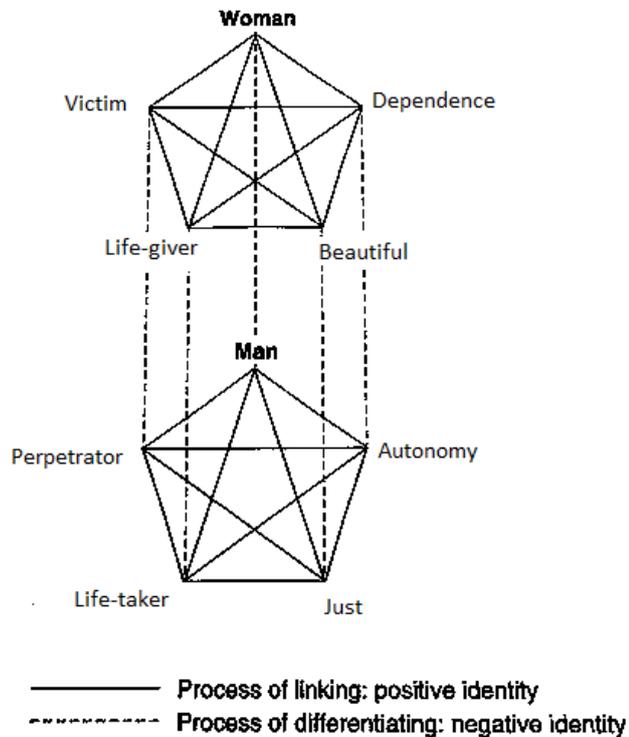
A *nodal point* is a key moment; a central concept within the discourse which binds together its different components (Bergström & Boréus 2005:318; Howard 2000:110). This is done with the help of what Laclau and Mouffe call *chains of equivalence*. These chains bring a discourse together through relational association, where association chains connect different signs and nodal points to each other. This relational connection is made by linking positive signs together, while differentiating them from negative opposites in order to construct their identity (Bergström & Boréus 2005:317/Hansen 2006:19,24f).

Altogether, this discursive process ends up creating an identity dichotomy as for instance the one presented in the table above. This identity constructing process of linking and differentiating is illustrated by the following models by Lene Hansen (2006:20). The original models have been slightly altered in order to combine them with the gender dichotomy presented in table 1.1. so as to use them as my analytical tools.



— Process of linking: positive identity

Model 1.1 Process of linking



Model 1.2 Processes of linking and differentiation

My discourse analysis will be based on this model, which will work as the main analytical tool. The “Self” and the “Other” in this model will be made up by male suicide bombers as the Self and female suicide bombers as the Other. These two classifications will represent the nodal points within the discourse of suicide bombing attacks, which relate to each other as well as to different characteristics through linking and differentiating processes.

The mode of procedure will be then to examine whether the media representations of male and female suicide bombers in any way are characterized by the processes presented in the model.

Nevertheless, it is important to leave this model open to modifications, as interesting aspects situated outside this model might be found within the discourse (Hansen 2006:41,52).

## 2.4 Criticism

To begin with, discourse analysis - as well as Post-structural theory - is often criticized for its relativistic position (Howard 2000:13). I am aware of the role played by my own preunderstanding in shaping this thesis. I can never be an objective observer standing outside the discourse. My choice of problem, theory and method is therefore not independent of neither me, my place in the discourse nor my preunderstanding. This means that there is always a purpose with the account I choose to give (Hesse-Biber 2007:72). Therefore, it is of outmost importance for me to make an analysis characterized by transparency and explicit motivations (Bergström & Boréus 2005:36).

Furthermore, this thesis will look at representations of suicide bombers through a gender lens in order to expose a key component of the gender order; identity constructions. Even so, as identity building includes many aspects such as age, ethnicity, gender, religion etc. (Peterson & Runyan 2010:24ff), a gender-lens reading could be hold responsible for downplaying or even missing other intersectional perspectives.

Still, as Lene Hansen argues, many different readings of one discourse are possible, which means that a certain analysis cannot be considered to be exhaustive. Instead it is only considered to be valuable in regard to the studied aspect of it (Hansen 2006:45).

## 3 Limitation of the Discourse

Following an extensive study of the general discourse around suicide attacks so as to gain cultural competence, a second important step in carrying out a discourse analysis is to define the discourse (Neumann 2003:47). This limitation of the discourse involves choices concerning the Self and the Other to be studied, the type of discourse and the temporal perspective of it (Hansen 2006:75,81ff).

### 3.1 The Self and the Other

The Self and the Other in my chosen discourse are comprised by male and female suicide bombers. I have chosen to analyze articles about both male and female perpetrators so as to make the analysis of the differences within their respective portrayals as clear as possible.

Regarding the organizations to which the suicide bombers were members of, adjustments had to be made to the original plan as a consequence of the scarcity of articles available. Therefore, in consideration to this I have chosen to include a selection of articles comprehending different groups. These originate mainly from the Middle East – Iraq, Palestine, Afghanistan - and to a lesser extent Chechnya and Sri Lanka.

One might find such a broad selection problematic from a methodological point of view, as a deep cultural competence of each group is not possible within the reduced space of this study. However, I believe having extensive background knowledge on terrorists and suicide bombers in general to be enough.

### 3.2 Type of Discourse

Hansen lists three different criteria in order to choose empirical texts for the discourse analysis; clear articulation of identity, widespread diffusion and authority to define discourse (Hansen 2006:85). Whereas the authority criterion is

not applicable to media in her account, I believe widespread diffusion to imply certain authority in defining discourse.

While investigating the articles within different newspapers and magazines I found an irremediable absence of articles on female attackers. In addition to this, most often the articles on suicide bombers were not very profound, putting most of the focus on the actual incident and the victims.

Therefore, in relation to the first criteria, explicit articulations of identities were hard to find. The choice of news magazines is therefore based on their extended articles containing deeper analysis, as opposed to shorter newspaper articles. As a result, the selected magazines are NEWSWEEK and TIME Magazine.

Regarding the second – and indirectly also the third – criterion, these two magazines are two of the most circulated weekly news periodicals, published in both the US and the UK with numerous international editions. Their non-recognized political affiliation is irrelevant to this analysis.

Nevertheless, I do not believe the content of these weekly magazines to be representative for all media coverage. Even so, I perceive them to be indicators of western perceptions of violent women within the media.

In relation to the selection of articles, an extensive study of articles within these magazines was made using the key words female suicide bomber, female suicide attacker, women bomber, male suicide bomber and suicide bomber.

Finally, a smaller selection of articles on male respective female perpetrators within each magazine was made, choosing to present in my analysis the most explicit identity portrayals. I understand that this process of selection might seem arbitrary. Even so, my intention is to find out whether gendered representations can be found and how these are manifested. Therefore it is only natural for me to present these articles since I do not aim to generalize, but show indications of this kind of thinking within western media.

### 3.3 Temporal Perspective

In the same manner, the shortage of articles dealing with female suicide bombers made it very hard to delimitate the temporal perspective of the discourse. The original plan was to analyze articles within two different periods of time in order

to get a broader view of the discourse. Instead, I have had to adjust the time span of the discourse according to the articles available. As a result, my analysis will comprise articles written in the first decade of the 2000's, which is when articles on female suicide bombers emerged in these magazines.

## 4 Analysis

The first thing that struck me while searching for articles in the databases was the difference in number of search results for articles on female respective male suicide bombers. To give an example, NEWSWEEK found a total of 19 articles answering to all of my key words for women. This can be compared to one single hit on the key words male suicide bomber and a staggering 359 for suicide bomber (NEWSWEEK 2012-12-20).

As was stated before, women have participated in suicide bombings for over three decades now. During this time female suicide bombers have committed approximately 25 percent of the total attacks. Although being a minority of perpetrators, such a disparity in media attention cannot be justified by their lesser participation. Thus, it must be something else. In the words of terrorism expert Dr. Swati Parashar, *"silence can be among several things, a gendered response within a patriarchal project that marginalizes women from politics and from public discourses"* (Parashar 2012:170).

What is more, the key words male suicide bomber only got one hit in the above mentioned search. This indicates a certain disposition within these magazines to take for granted the role of suicide bombers as men. In relation to this, there is a clear willingness on the journalists' part to enhance the womanliness of female suicide bombers, purposely describing the perpetrator as *female* suicide bombers right from the beginning. In contrast, when writing about male attackers, there is no apparent need to explicitly point out that the person behind the action was a man. Take for instance the headings of the two articles in TIME Magazine written by Bobby Ghosh; *"Inside the Mind of an Iraqi Suicide Bomber"* (Ghosh 2005) and *"The Mind of a Female Suicide Bomber"* (Ghosh 2008).

Moreover, this division of terms signifies a differentiation between the minds of men and women, while also showing certain intersectional limitations. These headings give the reader the impression that all female suicide bombers think - and therefore are - the same, while male suicide bombers' minds vary depending on their nationality and situation.

Also interesting is the fact that no articles on female suicide bombers dating prior to the 2000s were found in my selection of magazines. This is noteworthy as the first female suicide attack was executed in 1983, followed as we have seen by several other bombings. The media discourse around female suicide bombers could therefore be argued to be relatively new, displaying a certain change of attitudes towards these actors. Even so, although a step forward has been taken by recognizing the acts of these women, silence has been replaced by gendered representations.

In the following sections I will present the different representations found in the articles by dividing them into diverse categories. This divide will be based on the model 1.2. However, due to the similarity of some of the categories, the division of characteristics will be slightly altered so as to attain some structure in the analysis.

Before I begin, I would like to stress that my intention is not to evaluate whether the information given in the articles is true or not. Instead, my purpose is to make visible the differences within the media in describing the circumstances of male and female perpetrators.

## 4.1 Agency, Autonomy and Control Over in opposition to Passivity, Dependence and Subject to Control

Like many other Khansaa women, she relied on the men in her life for guidance. Most Khansaa members joined because their fathers, husbands or brothers suggested it. Some were married off to foreign jihadists who ordered them to sign up (Ramirez 2009).

When analyzing the lives of these women in order to come to terms with their motives, many accounts arrive to the conclusion that it was not in fact their own decision. Instead, this was attributable to their “*reliance*” and dependence on the autonomous and controlling men.

At that time, many observers were shocked by the sight of the Black Widows, products of conservative, male-dominated Chechen society, announcing their intention to blow up the theater in a videotaped message (Satter 2010).

By negative association we are made to believe that it is only women who get controlled into these actions as opposed to men, who apparently make their own choices.

Insurgents approached disaffected Fallujis like Marwan and urged them to join the resistance against the Americans. Many signed up, including one of Marwan's older brothers (Ghosh 2005).

In the case of Marwan, a potential Iraqi suicide bomber, there is no explicit connection made between the brother's membership in a resistance group and Marwan's choice to join a similar organization. This is remarkable when put in contrast to the above mentioned associations between the ideas of male family members and the acts of women attackers.

Thus, it is very interesting to see how these same representations are angled in different ways when it comes to male and female perpetrators. I argue in accordance with Brigitte L. Nacos that in terms of recruitment "*both males and females are typically inspired and enlisted by relatives, friends, and acquaintances*" (Nacos 2005:442) However, it appears to be differently according to media reporting.

These colliding perceptions are decisive in evaluating the agency of women involved in political violence. This in its turn will maintain the continued exclusion of women from politics.

## 4.2 Public Space and Politics in opposition to Private Space and Family

Regarding the public versus private dichotomy, a common feature in the portrayals of suicide bombers has been found. These articles tend to make an explicit search for the underlying causes behind the choices of these women to commit suicide attacks. A rather big difference between accounts on men and women has been found in this aspect when analyzing my selection of articles.

Riyashi is hailed as a courageous resistance fighter among Palestinians throughout Gaza and the West Bank, but the truth about what drove her to such

a terrible act is much more complex. Palestinians in Gaza and Israeli internal-security experts who studied the background of her case say Riyashi's husband had discovered that she was having an affair with a senior Hamas commander. Among conservative Palestinians, as in other parts of the Islamic world, an adulterous woman is often punished with death (Mcgirk 2007).

This is merely one example of what I consider to be a frequent strategy in describing the actions of these women within these articles. A detailed account of the life of the women bombers is often presented so as to get to the 'real reasons'.

And yet it remains difficult to pinpoint why certain women turn to martyrdom. Behind the motives of religion and rage at Israeli occupation, Palestinian women, far more than men, tend to choose self-sacrifice as an exit from personal despair, while others are pushed into it for having broken taboos in strict Palestinian society. "These women are both victimizers and victims," (Mcgirk 2007).

To judge from the accounts of these articles, the choices of these women are generally based on personal reasons. These motives are clearly differentiated from those of men who - as will be presented in the following chapter - are repeatedly assumed to take action because of more noble reasons.

For instance, the "deeply pious Marwan" is described throughout the article *Inside the Mind of an Iraqi Suicide Bomber* as a politically conscious and religiously devout man (Ghosh 2005).

...he fights first for Islam, second to become a "martyr" and win acceptance into heaven, and only third for control of his country (Ghosh 2005).

In this article on male suicide bombers, and Marwan specifically, Ghosh provides a background of this Marwan's life. Still, this description does not put focus on the same aspects as in the female accounts. Instead it focuses on the religious and political interest of the future bomber in order to explain his motives (Ghosh 2005).

Interestingly, this same journalist wrote a few years later a similar article in the same magazine, this time on female suicide bombers. In this piece he generalizes the way of thinking of female suicide bombers by analyzing the life of Iraqi bomber Hasna Maryi, a woman who decided to kill out of deep sorrow (Ghosh 2008).

Returning to male suicide bombers, they are often described in a different manner with focus being put on other aspects of their motivation. The image that emerges is sometimes that of an intelligent, politically conscious and religiously devout man (Ghosh 2005:NEWSWEEK 2010). Political and religious fanaticism is also a recurrent explanation as well as lack of education enabling brainwashing.

It was immediately clear this kid was ignorant of the world; the boundaries of his village were his world... That raised the question what he knew about Islam. When I asked he said he'd read the Quran. I asked it him if he understood it. He shook his head (Baer 2007).

Nonetheless, according to previous research presented earlier in this study, male and female suicide bombers are often recruited in the same ways. Furthermore, it is also argued that their underlying motives are generally the same. Still, media coverage paints a completely different image of these actors. Therefore, I ask myself why there is such a difference when it comes to these explanations.

As opposed to the political and religious man presented above, many interesting allusions to the private realm of the family have been found in the portrayals of women.

In the wake of the deadly double bombing in the Moscow metro, Russia is bracing for more attacks by Black Widows—female suicide bombers who lost relatives in the war in Chechnya and seek vengeance in acts of terror (Satter 2010).

The so called “Black Widows” are constantly framed as desperate women seeking painful revenge for their dead husbands and relatives, with no other apparent motives or ambitions. Simply by referring to the group as the Black Widows - even when knowing that it just an epithet constructed by the public - we are outlining their organization as merely a grieving project. Thus, we are implicitly questioning the legitimacy of their motives and therefore their organization as a whole.

*“When we cannot understand women in roles that cultural norms and prejudices perceive as inherently male (i.e. ...women as violent political actors), there is a tendency to resort to stereotypical explanations”* (Nacos 2005:437). Thus, even when committing acts of violence, the only explanation we are able to accept is one of women doing something for - or because of - their family.

Yet it was by no means a simple act of revenge, say Speckhard and other experts, insisting it is wrong to imagine the Black Widows as loyal widows seeking justice. (Sharipova's husband is believed to still be alive.) The women are in reality the products of a sophisticated process of indoctrination with deep roots in the North Caucasus, where a less conservative form of Islam has meant insurgents have few qualms about using women in their attacks (Shushter 2010).

Fortunately, a slight change of the gendered discourse is observable in this later article, where terrorism expert Anne Speckhard challenges the family and revenge analysis. In line with her earlier research, Speckhard points instead to indoctrination and radicalization as common strategies when recruiting traumatized men and women (Speckhard 2008:1030*f*,1040*f*,1046).

### 4.3 Perpetrator and Protector in opposition to Victim and Protected

Even though this category is very similar and closely related to the other sections, I would like to present a couple of explicit accounts found in my selection of articles.

Working most often over the Internet, the recruiters play the role of a father to women left vulnerable by abuse or other trauma (Shushter 2010).

This is a clear reference to the gendered construction of the man as the natural protector of the female victim. Evidently, traumatized victims are in need of support as the one offered by recruiters. Still, this does not mean that women require a protecting male figure to leave trauma behind. Nor does it mean that men are never vulnerable or in need of support, and thus recruited in the same way.

The women of Chechnya regularly witnessed the abduction of their husbands, fathers, and brothers, whom Chechen tradition treats as their protectors (Satter 2010).

Similarly, when talking about the Chechen female bombers, alluding to their men as protectors leaves these women as the weak and protected unable to

care for themselves with the only way out being suicide bombing. Thus, removing their agency.

#### 4.4 Violent Life Taker in opposition to Peaceful Life Giver

...a Palestinian mother of two who blew herself up in a suicide attack against Israeli soldiers at a Gaza border crossing in January 2004 (Mcgirk 2007).

Closely connected to the private space of the home and the family, this category focuses on the established mothering role of all women in contrast to the men as disconnected from life giving.

This is clearly exemplified by the heading of one NEWSWEEK article on female suicide bombers. The title “*Palestinian Moms Becoming Martyrs*” (Mcgirk 2007) is a clear example of the implicit stereotypes hidden in media accounts. Except for a quick account of a Hamas supported children’s music video showing a young mother ready to commit a suicide bombing, the article mainly talks about Palestinian female suicide bombers – mothers and not mothers - as a general phenomenon. Still, this is the chosen title; a connection between women, motherhood and the inherent stereotype of peacefulness that this implicates. According to my reading, an implicit differentiation is made to the role of men as violent life takers, when stating that these mothers – and women in general due to their potential maternal role – have no place in this matter.

Female fighters are hardly new; Muslim women have proved adept and astute warriors since the birth of Islam in seventh-century Arabia. That, however, fails to answer the question about why modern women—the givers of life—are willing to commit suicide for their cause (NEWSWEEK 2008).

This dichotomy is probably the most accepted in my selection of articles, with plenty explicit and implicit references to the paradoxical life-giving and suicide bombing roles of women. Even the above presented citation in the article *Dressed to Kill*, which acknowledges the historical role played by women in violent conflicts, finishes off by once again enhancing the mothering role of women. What is not mentioned – although implicitly understood – is how the life-giving

argument does not stand in the way of male suicide attackers, an important fifty percent of the procreation process.

Months have passed since the women publicly renounced Al Qaeda, but townspeople still ostracize them... When the teenage daughter of one former Khansaa member was expelled from school, the girl wept at having to pay for her mother's sins. (Ramirez 2009)

This is a further example of how the acts of women are constantly connected to their mothering role, whereas this reference is almost never found in the articles on male bombers. The point is not whether any of the perpetrators were parents or not. The point is that women – mothers or not – are innately perceived as life givers, whereas the connection between man and father is not at all obvious in these accounts. This has direct consequences for our perceptions of violent actors, since only the mother role is viewed as something in direct opposition to killing. Conversely, there is no negative relation between father and life taker, which gives us the impression that only men are the righteous violent actors.

However, although being a clear minority, one account within my selection has followed another path:

Today's bomber no longer fits the profile... He is Daoud Abu Sway, 47, a father of eight not known to be unusually political or religious... He is even a she (Ripley 2002).

This description does not only take into consideration the role played by female actors – although in a fairly surprised manner. It also takes into account the fathering aspect of men.

Then again, you are also able to come across a recent account such as the following one, erasing any doubts on who might be the acknowledged violent actor – parent or not.

New studies of suicide bombers say that most have three important qualities in common: testosterone, a narrative fantasy, and a desire to make theater (Dickey 2009).

## 4.5 Mind and Just in opposition to Body and Beautiful

But the pained expression on her chubby, homely face conveys considerably more ambivalence about the idea of annihilating herself to kill Israelis and restore her family's "honor" (Mcgirk 2007).

A very frequent feature of the representations of female suicide bombers is an explicit description of their bodies, looks and clothing. These depictions are exemplified by the TIME Magazine article heading *Dressed to Kill*, an allusion to the femininity of women – an image of the body of the Beautiful Soul contrary to the mind of the Just Warrior. This strategy is not commonly used in media representations of men. When it is, the image that emerges is one of the stereotypical bearded Muslim man, very much like the one that follows.

One photograph has transformed the way many Russians look at terrorism. It shows one of the two women who allegedly bombed the Moscow subway: a cherubic teenager smirking as she waves a pistol in the air. The image of the stereotypical jihadi — the masked or bearded zealot holding a Kalashnikov or wearing an explosive vest — suddenly morphed into a more ambivalent yet still terrifying menace (Shushter 2010).

In this account, the contrasts are clear; the beautiful girl as the intruder in opposition to the male warrior as the real terrorist. Surprisingly, a similar account was found on one of the articles on men.

Short, scrawny, his chin covered with wispy facial hair that makes him look younger than his age, Marwan doesn't stand out in the streets of Iraq (Ghosh 2005).

When contrasted with the stereotypical jihadi presented above, the negative illustration of this potential suicide bomber leads the reader to believe that he is not a real man; he is not the appropriate suicide bombing type. Thus, we seem to be looking at another type of suicide bombing masculinity than the discursively established one. In the same manner, surely there are many femininities within female suicide bombers. This is a very interesting issue which is not reflected within media coverage. Unfortunately is not possible to study this matter in depth because of spatial constrains.

In general, this observable focus on the unexpected physical appearance of suicide bombers, may be used to dramatize and illustrate the difference of what might be thought of them and what they actually do. Still, such gendered illustrations produce and reproduce a discourse based on stereotypes.

## 4.6 Rational and Hard in opposition to Emotional and Soft

The picture that emerges is of a once strong woman driven mad with sorrow following the death of her brother, Thamer (Ghosh 2008).

Women are often considered to be emotional and therefore soft. This emotional side might even turn to actual madness as in the citation above. Moreover, references to the emotional - almost irrational - side of women are continuously present in articles on the Chechen female insurgents. Their sorrow and anger is too much to bear so they kill for revenge.

In the words of the murdered Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya, the Black Widows “are trying to force Russians to feel the same pain that they have felt” (Satter 2010).

In the case of male bombers, they do not seem to be driven mad by sorrow according to these articles. Instead they are portrayed as either ignorant, fundamentalists, fanatics or simply desperate because of the political situation they are enduring (Baer 2007; Ghosh 2005; Ripley 2002:). Even though some of these arguments do not necessarily connote rationality, somehow they appear to be more valid when reading the descriptions in the articles.

At 20, Marwan is already a battle-hardened insurgent, a jihadi foot soldier... In his hometown, Fallujah, he is known for his ferociousness in battle and deep religiosity (Ghosh 2005).

Regarding the hard suicide bombing male, emotions are out of the question when portraying these actors. As in the citation above, he is most preferably a well prepared and battle trained warrior who has made a premeditated choice based on political and religious arguments.

## 4.7 The Resource Argument

Around the world, organizations like al-Qaeda are realizing that women can be far more effective than men at penetrating security checkpoints, making their attacks deeper and more lethal (Shushter 2010).

To conclude this analysis, I would like to briefly mention what I found to be a very common argument, which was not present in my analytical model. Women seem to be often referred to as a great resource for these organizations (Shushter 2010; NEWSWEEK 2008). Apparently, this is the only valid reason for women to participate in suicide bombings according to the articles included in my analysis.

## 5 Conclusive Thoughts

At this point I return to my main research question so as to answer it in the clearest way possible. By deconstructing the media discourse on suicide bombers present in two international magazines, I have found certain gendered differences between the representations of male and female suicide bombers. Some discrepancies were rather clear and widespread while others were implicit and not always present.

To begin with, the female suicide bomber discourse is relatively new within these media outlets. Nevertheless, the mere presence of this discourse shows a slight change of attitudes as the acts of these women are acknowledged. Still, albeit an extensive historical female participation in terrorist movements, violent women are still portrayed as the exception of the rule.

Women are very often portrayed as dependent and even controlled by the men in their lives. No such reference was found in the articles about male perpetrators. Instead, there appears to be an implicit understanding of these men as autonomous and independent actors, able to make both their own decisions as well as those of the women. This is interesting as recent research has shown that both male and female suicide bombing perpetrators are inspired and enlisted by family members and friends.

Looking at the public and private divide, the biggest differences are found when comparing the media analysis of the lives of the perpetrators so as to find the real motives behind their actions. In this matter, the underlying motives of the female attackers are usually considered as personal and connected to the private realm. Men on the other hand, are often regarded as extreme political and religious actors with a mission, or even excused by the ignorance argument. Thus, there is a clear differentiation in this matter, which collides with research results pointing to similar motives behind the violent acts of both male and female actors.

Also, within this very same divide there is an apparent need for linking the motives of these women to the family. These decisions can be related to either the vengeance of a family member, the honor of the family etc. It seems that even

when committing violent acts, the only way for the public to understand the actions of women is to relate them to the family realm.

The above mentioned differentiations are to a certain extent delegitimizing of the actions of women. In the same manner as the political motives are seen as nobler than the private reasons, the agency of women is compromised when referring to their decisions as controlled by men.

In the case of the violent life taker as opposed to the peaceful life-giver, clear stereotype-based accounts have been found in the articles. References to the childbearing role of the women are constantly given, at the same time as the connection between the man as father is rarely articulated. A clear differentiation process is exposed since women are excluded from violent matters, as a consequence of their peaceful life-giving personalities. The role of men as violent life-takers is not nearly as questioned – although being important contributors to the life-giving process - since their role as fathers is neither explicitly recognized nor in opposition to killing.

Another frequent strategy within these representations regards the allusions to the physical appearances of the women bombers. A divide between the Beautiful Soul and the Warrior is obvious in these accounts. In this matter, an interesting twist has also been found, with men too being compared to an established masculine stereotype of the Warrior.

Furthermore, according to the articles, the emotional side of women appears to be a decisive factor for their participation in suicide attacks. Men – although not necessarily perceived as rational – are frequently perceived as religiously and politically engaged warriors ready for a premeditated battle.

One last common feature is the only approving motive for the participation of female bombers; women as an invaluable resource for the organizations.

These stereotype-based representations tend to shape the thoughts and acts of readers and policymakers, maintaining the gender hierarchy and further complicating these same violent conflicts.

However, both feminist post-structural theory and discourse theory, believe in the possibility of change arguing this discourse to be unfixed. Instead, it is open to contestation, ready to be rediscursified in order to achieve a gender neutral discourse that does not differentiate between the bomber behind the veil and the ferocious warrior.

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