IN DEPTH

Gendering war and war bodies

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We continue to live in a world where war is the larger reality. It remains the single most studied activity in almost every scholarly discipline, in literary works and in popular culture. We are inundated with media reporting and journalistic analysis about wars, often at the cost of other kinds of violence and suffering. Very often we debate whether art reimagines and mimics actual wars or wars eerily enact what films and other creative mediums have already depicted about human hostilities and armed exchanges. The peace that was promised to humankind since the end of the Second World War and other anti-colonial wars, is aspirational but elusive. Some of us 'experience' war through distance and discourses as we study its various aspects. For many, it offers opportunities of various kinds. Also brings untold suffering as 'living inside wars' becomes a reality.[1] [2] At the time of writing this paper, wars rage in several parts of the world including Yemen, Syria, Mali, Central African Republic, Israel, Somalia, Burkina Faso etc. Some are more reported than others are, but war stories continue to dominate public debates.

Christine Sylvester suggests that "war is a politics of injury: everything about war aims to injure people and/or their social surroundings as a way of resolving disagreement or, in some cases, encouraging disagreement if it is possible to do so".[3] War as 'politics of injury' is a deeply gendered activity in how it is imagined, strategized, performed and also in its impact, representation, language and storytelling. Femininity and masculinity are invoked in specific ways, and men and women perform a variety of roles in wars, which entrench gender hierarchy and uphold gender subordination, as well as transform gender relations significantly. Gendering war shifts the focus from war

strategies and actor motivations to exploring how war privileges gender roles and hierarchies. Feminine values are frowned upon or projected as those that need to be protected and cherished, while the bulk of the war labour is supposed to be undertaken by men. A gendered reading of war disrupts these narratives, busts war myths and prevents the perpetuation of the idea of war as the natural outcome of conflicts in society.

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In the last three decades or so, feminists have written extensively about the need to democratise war studies and centre people in its analyses.[4] These feminist accounts draw attention to how war impacts women, their experiences as victims, survivors, anti-war activists and as cultural/national symbols on whose bodies wars are waged. Consider the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan –what was projected as a war between enemies (the US against Taliban/Al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein)–, soon reflected the violent contestations over different gendered orders. Both sides claimed to be waging the war to liberate women from either the constraints of decadent western modernity or fundamentalist, authoritarian Islamist regimes. Moreover, both sides also projected a certain masculinity to their preferred audiences. For example, the gun wielding Taliban militants ensured that women were erased out of public life and were reinstated in the perfect ‘Islamic’ household in full *purdah* and performing chores suitable to their religiously sanctioned gender identity. They not only wielded full control and right over women’s lives and bodies, but also governed public morality and private spaces. Their masculinity was defined through a very narrow interpretation of Islam that gave them privileges and power through militarism. On the other hand, American masculinity was severely threatened by the 9/11 attacks; a sense of emasculation resulted. The recovery of masculinity became a political project in which the Bush administration played a key role. Only a spectacular military response to the 9/11 attacks, witnessed through the

invasion of Afghanistan, would suffice and rid the world of the evil Taliban terrorists. The good American soldiers would not only serve their country and people, but also the women of Afghanistan, liberating them from Taliban control. That is what civilized white men do anyways, 'save the brown women from brown men'! In this dominant narrative, there was no space to listen to women or their aspirations, until feminists began to write about issues that affected them.

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Thanks to feminist research, we have known about the magnitude of sexual violence in wars.[5] Emasculating 'the enemy' and impregnating 'enemy women' is now an established war strategy. In the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh, it is estimated that 300,000 women were subjected to sexual violence by the Pakistan army, as documented war strategy developed at the highest levels of decision-making. Bina D'Costa argues that women "were raped by members of the Pakistan Army in a strategic attempt to target Bengali ethnic identity".[6] Feminists' works in different disciplines have made the stories of the raped Bengali women accessible by documenting the experiences of these women and pointing out the challenges they faced after the war, including during the hearings of the International Crimes Tribunal.[7]

From cases during the World Wars to former Yugoslavia, from Sudan to the Democratic Republic of Congo, from the Rohingya Genocide to the Civil Wars in Nepal and Sri Lanka, from the Islamic State wars in Syria and Iraq to localised conflicts in Kashmir and Chechnya, sexual violence has been deployed by all sides. Comparatively less written about, but equally important, are cases of sexual violence against men and boys that feminists have started to highlight. These experiences are underreported, precisely because of the gendered order that thrives on preserving militarised masculinity, and not on narratives of emasculation.[8] [9] Another area of neglected research that has been undertaken by feminists studying wars, is the involvement of and impact on children.

The reality of thousands of children being inducted into armed militias and as sex slaves got some public attention with the release of the documentary on the *Lord's Resistance Army*, led by warlord Joseph Kony in Northern Uganda in 2012. However, this is a much wider phenomenon, that highlights not just the abuse of vulnerable children, but ways in which children navigate violent wars and their aftermath.[10]

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Although deeply invested in uncovering the stories of before, within and beyond war that bring untold suffering to women and children, feminist analyses move beyond the narratives of victimhood. Those narratives have been questioned and nuanced in several feminist works, which have highlighted the role of women in wars as planners and perpetrators. There have always been women fighters at the frontline, senior women military strategists and women Heads of State who have taken decisions about going to war. The inclusion of women in armed combat in different roles is either scripted through an appeal to women's empowerment or to a call for traditional feminine notions of sacrifice, nation and motherhood.[11] Women's participation in and support for combat roles, in states and non-state militaries, is a growing phenomenon and yet is dependent on gender norms that vary from culture to culture. The reasons why Tamil women fought in the war in Sri Lanka were very different from women who contributed to the anti-colonial war in Algeria, to the militant resistance in Kashmir, or to the Maoist resistance in Nepal. A number of women continue to participate in war mongering and violent activities of right wing vigilante groups, even advocating the use of extreme violence and rape against women perceived as the 'enemy'.

Rather than dismiss these as cases of women performing militarised masculinity, feminist works highlight the prevalence of militarised femininities, which may perform tasks that are seemingly patriarchal, but with different motivations and objectives. In

many such cases of women demonstrating militarised femininity, the gendered order is subverted, sometimes causing uneasy ruptures and paradigm shifts: the culture of the military changes, traditional gender norms are set aside and women find themselves in decision making positions, not just as victims. This does not mean that militarised masculinity disappears, but militarised femininity challenges gender stereotypes (men are violent, women are peaceful) and reclaims some ground for nuance and for the complex and multi layered identities of women.

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A number of liberal state militaries today are making the case for women to serve in the armed forces. This may or may not change the culture of war, but will definitely mean that militaries reliant on patriarchal cohesion and male bonding will be subjected to new gender norms and greater representation of women.[12] It is impossible to not think about the consequences of these changes on issues of sexual violence and LGBTQ rights in the military, and on societies that restrict the participation of women in some arenas.

While mainstream analysis continues to focus on actors, decision-making, methods and outcomes of wars, feminists have consistently focussed on the category of gender and its relationship to the ‘everyday’ of wars. The most important contribution in the gendered rereading of war by feminists has been the focus on militarism and masculinity.[13] While this link is obvious and perhaps most overstated, recent feminist and postcolonial works have unpacked the relationship between the state, citizens and militarism. Discourses about security and development in postcolonial contexts have led to ‘excessive militarism’ that thrives on the shared consensus between the state and citizens that security is a collective enterprise in which the material and affective labour of militarism must be performed by both sides.[14] Masculinity plays a critical role

in such expressions of excessive militarism, and both states and citizens adopt masculinist vocabularies, waging wars against those they see as the 'enemy' or the 'other'. States filled with 'postcolonial anxiety', at the slightest questioning of their sovereignty and territorial integrity, demonstrate excessive militarism in order to police non-conforming citizens, who are yet to be mainstreamed. Citizens, on the other hand, embrace military logics and military ethos, both to contest the state's violence and to confer legitimacy on the state and secure development benefits. The case of the Maoist/Naxal conflict in India is a suitable example, where the state treats Maoist insurgents as wayward citizens, who need to be –militarily– brought to the 'mainstream'. The state's masculinity is in direct contestation with the militarised masculinity of a section of the people who feel marginalised. Women have participated in the guerrilla warfare, not perhaps in the hope of complete emancipation from patriarchal constraints, but to alleviate their material and living conditions that make them vulnerable to state violence.

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A focus on masculinity (embodied by the state and its institutions, by vigilante/guerrilla groups, by resistance fighters and by ordinary citizens) enables an emphasis on the fact that most wars are man-made, and militarisation and masculinity are co-constitutive. Recent works in the field have challenged the idea of hegemonic masculinity, arguing for more alternative masculinities that can challenge the efficacy of wars and the violence that they necessitate. However, militarised masculinity does not fully capture the discourses around wars that deal with complex colonial histories and inequalities. In some sense as we focus on the gendered narrative of wars, we must not lose sight of the fact that in our studies are hidden erasures and marginalizations.

It is important to take into account that feminists have over emphasised certain kinds of war violence (rape, direct combat, disappearances) at the cost of those others that are perhaps not 'masculine', 'exceptional' or 'mainstream' enough. I am thinking of famines and hunger deaths associated with wars and conflicts, a slow kind of violence that is hardly ever reported, except as a humanitarian crisis, not as war inflicted on certain populations. A careful study will suggest that more people globally are threatened by food insecurity and famines, than by death in direct combat or civilian attacks. Feminists, first appropriately suggested that wars are understudied compared to peace, then they themselves overstudied certain wars and war bodies, at the cost of others. This selective focus in critical war studies, contributes to the hierarchical gendered world, where certain deaths hold more political purchase than others. In this context, the most recent Nobel Peace Prize to the World Food Programme[15], is a timely and astute reminder to all of us, who study war and peace from a gender lens, that certain kinds of war deaths and suffering, such as those afflicted by hunger and famines are yet to find a place in our debates and writings.

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In conclusion, the gendered stories of wars point to varying roles that men and women perform, the embeddedness and subversion of gender hierarchies and the preservation of the gendered social order where wars appear to be inevitable, and perhaps even natural. As discussed in the preceding paragraphs, feminist knowledges have been critical in highlighting the various forms of violence and injuries that war inflicts, those that are hidden, erased, 'slow' and less spectacular. Can we then reimagine a world without the relevance and spectacle of wars? Yes. Feminists have ably demonstrated through their research and activism that wars are 'normalised' through gendered discourses and practices. However, this reimagination would also require us to

acknowledge differences in feminist approaches, epistemologies and methods, enabling us to bust every possible myth that normalises war in human history or privileges one kind of suffering over another.

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