Complicating "female suicide bombers" : violence, agency and gender in the rhetoric of shahida

Chelsea Rock
Honors Thesis

University of Richmond

Dept. of Rhetoric & Communication Studies

Complicating “female suicide bombers:”
violence, agency and gender in the rhetoric of shahida

Chelsea Rock

Oral Defense Completed: April 24, 2006

APPROVED (May, 2006):
Dr. Kevin Kuswa, RHCS
Dr. Paul Achter, RHCS
Dr. Ladelle McWhorter, Philosophy/WGSS
Complicating female suicide bombers: 
violence, agency and gender in the rhetoric of shahida

ABSTRACT

Since 2002, popular Western news media has become fixated with the “advent” of the Palestinian female suicide bomber when a woman named Wafa Idris detonated herself on a busy Jaffa Road in Israel. Questions about gender, domesticity, violence, subjectivity, and technology arise as researchers, journalists and others confront culturally conceived notions about women and their roles in both Islamic and Western societies. Proposing a broader concept of violence that is cognizant of women’s violent histories and struggles over agency, this essay suggests that analyses of women and violence are incomplete without critically thinking about the “female suicide bomber” – or shahida – within their contemporary cultural and social context. Yasser Arafat’s “Army of Roses” speech in 2002 serves as a representative anecdote useful for constructing and deconstructing the shahida rhetoric as it is disseminated through global news media outlets. Thus, this essay’s focus on “female suicide bombers” contends that understanding subjectivity and technology as inextricably linked is crucial to the development of a more inclusive theory of violence and gender. Shahidas are excellent and perhaps indispensable figures for understanding how rhetoric effects our perceptions of gendered roles in society, while providing a broader spectrum for furthering theories about women and violence.
Complicating female suicide bombers:
violence, agency and gender in the rhetoric of *shahida*

Index

Introduction – p. 4
I. Inventing *shahida* – p. 7
II. Labeling Female Suicide Bombers – p. 12
III. Re-viewing *Shahida* Literature – p. 15
IV. Women, gender and the media – p. 20
V. Conceptions of women and warfare – p. 24
VI. Ideology, spiritualism, and technology – p. 33
VII. Cyborg theory: *Shahidas* close the gap between technophobia and technophilia – p. 36
VIII. Theories of feminine violence, liberation, and agency: ways “out” for women – p. 40
   A. Nancy Fraser and Habermas’ “subaltern publics” – p. 41
   B. Jeffner Allen and a “lesbian” violence – p. 45
   C. Helene Cixous and “writing out” as a means of liberation – p. 49
Conclusion – p. 53
References – p. 58
Complicating female suicide bombers: 
vioence, agency and gender in the rhetoric of shahida

Introduction

"I have to tell the world that if they do not defend us, then we have to defend ourselves with the only thing we have, our bodies. Our bodies are the only fighting means at our disposal."

Hiba, 28, mother of five and shahida trainee

Female terrorists are all over the news these days. The news media tells us we are witnessing a new insurgence of warriors internationally that undermine our perceptions and our policies regarding potential threats we face daily (Barr, 2002; Dickey, 2005A; Ross, 2005; Solomon; 2003). The new danger is not technological growth, deadlier weapons, or more lethal biological warfare: it is the women who sneak in to attack under the ironclad guise of pregnancy and innocence who undermine our senses of security. In 2002, the father of 18-year-old Palestinian woman Ayat Akhras mourned the death of his daughter for her participation in a suicide bombing (Applebaum, 2002) while the mother of Wafa Idris, the first female Palestinian suicide bomber, described her daughter as a martyr and hoped other women would follow in her path ("Female bomber's mother speaks out," 2002). And follow her path they do; the militant Israeli-Arab group allied

1 Zedalis, 1.
with Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement that armed Akhras, the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, has set up a special unit to train female suicide bombers. Young girls readily discuss the idea of becoming martyrs themselves. One young neighbor of Akhras reports, “If I had the means, I would have done it yesterday” (Cameron, 2002). Beyond the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, women are committing terrorist acts in Italy (Weinberg, 1987), the U.S. (Morgan, 2001), Chechnya (Dougherty, 2003), and numerous other places.

Given the surge in the reporting of this phenomenon, whether it is inherent in human behavior or an advent of low intensity conflict in the modern era, the rhetorical world of the “female suicide bomber” must be tackled. Toward that end, this thesis will move through eight sections that will discuss and analyze the implications, assumptions and perceptions of suicide bombers. Strong links between history, technology and rhetoric will demonstrate some of the ways in which women living in oppression can seek “violent” liberation without subscribing to masculine structures of violence. The first section will bring to light a significant rhetorical event that served as the Palestinian debut of the “shahida,” or female suicide bomber, and has radically changed the rhetorical landscape of women and warfare. The second section will discuss the many labels used for “female suicide bombers” and determine the term that is most appropriate for the purposes of this paper. Next, a review of both popular and scholarly works will aid in building upon current analysis and theory regarding Palestinian women who become suicide bombers.

Sections Four and Five build upon one another in taking a comprehensive look at how images and perceptions of shahida women are formed and regenerated through news media activity, and also highlight the fact that a lack of historical review significantly
affects the ways in which these women are viewed in contemporary society. The sixth section begins to incorporate history into the analysis of shahida rhetoric, concluding that although women who choose to become suicide bombers may be a comparatively new category to Palestine and to the world as a whole, violent women have always existed and taken part in warfare in various ways. Section Six draws a parallel between the John Durham Peters' (2000) work on the spiritualist movement in the United States during the 18th and 19th centuries. Spiritualism is a movement that was sparked after the advent of the telegraph that increased popular belief in communication with an alternative, spiritual world. This movement is closely linked to the beginnings of the suffrage movement because it opened doors for expression and agency for women, who were believed to be naturally more sensitive to spiritual mediums, particularly in the public sphere. Similarly, the decision by male-headed Islamist groups like Hamas "use" women as a tactical advantage could provide women a similar avenue for agency and expression in the public sphere, their messages more easily disseminated with the use of technology like television and the Internet. Section Seven links notions of technology and history to the work of feminist theorist Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" (1991), in which she works to deconstruct binaries between "technophilia" and "technophobia," arguing that "cyborgs" are political actors that defy traditional binary thinking and are important for social change. Thus, shahida women can be conceptualized as cyborgs that hold important implications for the future of Palestinian women. The Eighth and final section writes through three different theorists to offer a reconceptualization of shahida women. It starts with Nancy Fraser's work on "subaltern publics" (1992); moves to a distinction
between feminist and non-feminist violence according to Jeffner Allen’s theoretical writing on “lesbian” violence (1991); and then seeks “ways out” of oppressive societies through writing as a method of “doing violence” to masculine structures (Helene Cixous, 1975). In societies that lack democratic structures, perhaps shahidas can be considered as doing violence with “bodily writing.”

In the final section of the paper, a number of conclusions emerge in regards to the topic of shahida warfare as a rhetorical subject of interest as well as a means of liberation. First, although shahida women are seen as tools in the task of Palestinian liberation, there is room for expressions of agency and political within this structure. Warfare of this nature on its own, however, is a masculine structure and controlled by men, so the violence that is incurred could be classified as purely patriarchal. Regardless, violence of this kind does open new avenues for agency to be expressed in the public sphere. Rhetorical events like Arafat’s “army of roses” speech may be sending Palestinian society on a trajectory towards a feminist movement that is building upon the notion that women are accepted within the institution of warfare. It is crucial that women across the world living in societies that lack democratic structures have ownership over actions and can structure their own movements for liberation. This cannot be seen in the situation of shahida women. Through the works of Fraser (1992), Allen (1991), and Cixous (1975), the essay will offer ways in which women might engage technology, faith and warfare to claim a liberation of their own.

2 Sherine Hafez’s (2001) ethnography provides an example of Islamic women who, nonviolently, use their faith and the Qu’ran to spearhead a feminist movement. While Allen (1991) might argue that they are ascribing to masculine conceptions of women as docile and nonviolent, Cixous (1975) would contend that they are performing violence by rupturing the notion of Islamic faith as oppressive to women by using it as a method for liberation.
I. Inventing shahida

On January 27, 2002, Yasser Arafat delivered a speech to one thousand women from his compound in Ramallah, shifting dramatically the rhetoric surrounding the Palestinian holy war. He called upon his audience, his “army of roses,” to join the fight against Israel and join in Islamic jihad. In his remarks, Arafat single-handedly reinvented the word shahide, Arabic for “martyr” by using it in the feminine, as “shahida.” His speech marked the beginning of a dramatic shift in tactics and ideology in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Arafat proclaimed:

Women and men are equal. You are my army of roses that will crush Israeli tanks... You are the hope of Palestine. You will liberate your husbands, fathers, and sons from oppression. You will sacrifice the way you, women, have always sacrificed for your family (Victor, 2003, p.19-20).

Arafat played on women’s traditional roles as wives, protectors of the “home,” and as domestic victims to broaden the scope of their gender interests to a national level. The news media wondered: “Do women see themselves as empowered political actors? Are their interests are rooted in a desire to become equal partners to men? Or, are they choosing to end their lives for more personal reasons, as women living in a society saddled with strict gender roles?” It is impossible to know what complexities drive women into suicide bombing. We are left with what the news media present through images, interviews, and analysis. A female supervisor at a terror camp says, “Suicide bombing has pulled women out of the boxes created by society – the box of a weeping,

---

3 Islamic doctrine calls upon its worshippers to combat enemies of their faith. This duty, called jihad, can be completed either by tongue, hand, heart, or sword. Jihad by sword means directly engaging in war in order to defend Islam (Encarta Encyclopedia, 2005).
wailing creature always crying for help...Can anyone say that men are greater patriots than women?” (Regular in Beyler, 2004) Are these women a new wave of feminists in their own right?

The very same afternoon that Arafat delivered his speech, he found his first shahida. Wafa Idris, 28, strapped with explosives, detonated herself in the bustling shops of Jaffa Road in Israel, killing one man and wounding ninety people. Exactly one month later, 21-year-old Dareen Abu Aysheh did the same at the Israeli Maccabim roadblock in West Ramallah (West Bank), wounding four Israelis. On March 29, 2002, Ayat Akhras, an 18-year-old girl, killed herself and two Israelis in a suicide attack at Jerusalem supermarket in Kyriat Hayovel (Beyler, 2003). Following in their stead are young girls who dream of one day becoming martyrs themselves; they attend summer camps dedicated to Idris and Akhras, vowing to become Palestinian heroines in their own right (Applebaum, 2002; Barr, 2002). There is no shortage of opportunity. Beyond the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, women are becoming involved in subnational groups all over the world, committing terrorist acts in the U.S. (Morgan, 2001), Chechnya (Dougherty, 2003; Zakaria, 2003), Turkey (Zakaria, 2003) and elsewhere.

All the while, news media search for sociological, psychological, and cultural answers for the recent rise of the female terrorist. Spawned from attention drawn to Middle East during the current U.S. War on Terror, journalists ask, “What went wrong?” As audiences, we are accustomed to images of oppressed Muslim women, beaten, veiled, and pitiful. Female terrorists are portrayed as deviant from the subjective norm of passivity, victims of social or personal turmoil, signs of a society gone awry. Discourse over female terrorists as a new or modern “problem” shifts these women into passivity,
constructed as victims of their situation and not the revolutionaries or “martyrs” their male counterparts are proclaimed to be. The “advent” of women suicide bombers has created an ahistorical category that has systematically clouded over centuries of women enacting violence. Rarely is the possibility of an empowered and female-oriented violence considered in feminist theory. Female bombers today are discussed as a recent social phenomenon, a strange and frightening turn of events that signals a gradual moral decay for Palestinians, Muslims, and the world.

A rhetorical analysis of shahida culture reveals a number of observations that are crucial to understanding women, gender, and violence. This essay will work to complicate shahida rhetoric in order to give light to its varied and layered meanings and implications, deconstructing labels and ideas that oversimplify women’s individual motivations, whether they are personal, cultural, national, etc. No analysis of women and gender is complete without including that of the shahida; histories of violent women are systematically occluded when the topic of women bombers are introduced, and often the media does not account for the fact that some women have always been violent and participated in violent acts. Without recognizing the historicity of violent women and the ways in which their agency is exerted through these acts, harmful dichotomies of masculine violence and feminine docility will continue to oppress and subject. News media and academics alike continue to make harmful assumptions about women and violence without providing historical context. A brief review of history reveals violent women pirates (Stanley 1995), female leaders responsible for genocide (Morgan, 2001), and infamous female assassins have always figured in warfare (Pearson, 1997).
While the violent capabilities of women are no surprise to anyone, somehow news media stories about the rise of the female suicide bomber express shock and fear over Palestinian women's increasing participation in religious jihad. Questions over their motivations as being different than those of males ensue: have they been brainwashed? Are they attempting to redeem themselves to their families after divorce or rape? Are they truly devoted Islamists like their male counterparts? Certainly new conceptions of this component of humanity that are not strictly masculine should be created so as to understand violence as inherently feminine and masculine. Western feminist theory that does incorporate violence as a means for liberation should be recognized and discussed, as it gives light to the ways in which women's actions can be figured as acceptable or at least explainable. The link between spirituality, warfare, and technology is also significant here. As shahidas learn to become equipped with heavy explosives strapped to their bodies (Zedalis, 2004), they confront an expansion of their own abilities as weapons of war, heroines of battle. These technologies of war – as rudimentary as many explosives are – can be linked to women's entry into the public sphere in the late 17th century. As spirituality has often fallen along the feminine side of a gendered binary across many cultures, women in Islamic countries are finding that there are avenues for agency through spirituality. For some, this might mean the use of their body for bombing as a way to escape a life of oppression or to express religious devotion. For others, as Sherine Hafez (2001) finds in her ethnography, piety is an avenue for a nonviolent, feminist liberation. Could shahida women become the beginning of a new wave of feminism in Palestine? If not, they are at least catalysts for discussion and analyses of women, violence and warfare.
This section has briefly introduced the rhetorical debut of the *shahida*, an event that marked a shift in not only ideology, but popular conceptions about women and violence in Palestine. Arafat’s speech makes way for a more contoured discussion of the label “female” preceding suicide bomber and the phraseology surrounding these acts.

**II. Labeling Female Suicide Bombers**

This section will review the terms often used to describe those who detonate explosives strapped to their own bodies, simultaneously killing themselves, killing and maiming others, and destroying property around them. Determining the most appropriate term for these actors is crucial to capturing the multi-faceted nature of their purposes, motivations, and actions.

The labels that are applied to women who become suicide bombers are not adequate to describe the complexity of their actions or the diversity of their motivations, while still remaining conscious of difference. Careful attention must be paid to value-laden phraseology. The term “female suicide bomber” in English has become entrenched in assumptions and does not capture the sense of ideology or nationalism that is important to becoming a “martyr.” The term “suicide bomber” alone is also assumed to be male without a gendered qualifier to denote otherwise. In popular media, the term “male suicide bomber” is never heard, nor is “suicide bomber” alone considered ambiguous. The qualifier exists only for women. Furthermore, “suicide bomber” capitalizes on the introspectiveness of the violence but does nothing to address the destruction caused to the other victims of the event. There is difficulty capturing the simultaneity of killing oneself
along with a number of others. "Homicide bomber," a phraseology Fox News has used, does address outward violence but does not capture the introspective component of bombing. With heavier use in Western news media, it too would likely require a gendered qualifier because it is so similar in construction to suicide bomber. "Homicide bomber" also immediately categorizes the actor as a murderer. The connotations of this term have the potential to overshadow the myriad of other factors involved in bombing, particularly the notion that bombers are not just killing for the sake of doing so, but also sacrificing themselves for a cause. Furthermore, if these women are labeled primarily as murderers, what then of rhetorically rich words like "soldier" and "freedom fighter"? Certainly one of a soldier's primary activities is to engage in violence against other humans, yet its connotation is a fairly positive one in Western culture. Both "soldiers" and "bombers" engage in acts that hold ideological and personal weight, and their phraseology should reflect this. Reuter (2004) uses the phrase "suicide assassins" often in his book, which does well capturing the simultaneity of the act, but captures little of the ideological element.

The European and Arab news media's use of the word "human bomb" does help to capture the simultaneity of a suicide/homicide, but does little to incorporate the ideological and political nature of this violence. "Human" bomb is almost too rhetorically neutral to fully engage an audience in the ideological gravity and weight of the act, as distinguished from typical Western thought about warfare. The human label also objectifies the person involved, as it is the word "human" that modifies "bomb," rather than the type of bomb being contingent on the agent that detonates it. One of this term's

---
^4 Aljazeera.net uses this term almost exclusively. See McGreal (2005); Dozens killed, wounded in Bali blasts (2005); Soldiers wounded in Gaza blast (2004).
main advantages, however, is its lack of gendered assumptions—adding a gender qualifier to the term would be somewhat awkward to an audience, and therefore it is up to the speaker to explicitly state the gender of the bomber.

While language falls short of appropriately capturing the reflexive and outwardly destructive simultaneity of bombing, the term “shahida” is best used for the purposes of this essay. Perhaps shahida capitulates on the ideology of bombing too closely and does not appropriately address the violence and destruction that ensues with bombing of this sort. But, because it came into use in a direct call to women to become suicide/homicide bombers, its use is linked directly to this type of violence. It is also automatically gendered, and therefore the speaker cannot help but use the correct word when referring to men or women. While none of these labels are sufficiently descriptive, the term shahida is most appropriate for the purposes of this paper. Shahide or shahida will be used to refer to “female suicide bombers” in an effort to address a number of rhetorical conflicts. Shahida remains true to its Arabic origins and contemporary context, and is most appropriate for the current academic inquiry because of its very recent origin, Arafat’s 2002 speech. Because shahida has no verb form, the term “bombing”/“bombers” will simply be used in order to convey action. Having reviewed common phraseology for “suicide bombing,” and having determined the most appropriate label, shahide/a, a review of the work – both academic and popular – completed on shahida women allows us to consider varying perspectives on the topic.
III. Re-viewing shahida literature

A review of popular media pieces is crucial to understanding how social discourse is shaped around female suicide bombers. Evidence of cultural conceptions of gender and violence is found in news headlines and popular media. The rhetoric of violence often falls along the same gendered binary that separates the masculine and the feminine, the mind and the body. It is socially characterized worldwide as a masculine trait, a natural tendency of maleness, while women are the frail, the weak, and the naturally nonviolent. When women do commit acts of violence, they are deemed to be social anomalies or powerless victims of their situation. Often, women bombers’ motives for their actions are

---

5 A sampling of headlines from Western news media provide insight into the discourse surrounding shahidatas.
more heavily scrutinized than those of men, whose videotaped testimonials are often
taken at face value (Toles-Patkin, 2004). Researchers often look for emotional reasons
behind these acts when women commit them, whereas males’ actions are considered to
be more wholly political (Ramachandran, 2003). The “female” qualifier in front of
“suicide bomber” can skew popular perceptions of these women in order to fit negative
gender stereotypes about violence, while discourse surrounding male bombers has
become accepted as a norm. The gendered qualifier highlights some abnormality in the
act, while “suicide bomber” alone is always male and never neutral.

There are few examples of academic scholarship about shahida women, and even
fewer written earlier than 2001 (Brooks, 2002; Dworkin, n.d.; Morgan, 2001; Toles-
Patkin, 2004; Zedalis, 2004). While popular works have begun to crop up, academia is
just beginning to consider Palestinian shahidas. In popular literature, Barbara Victor, a
freelance journalist, wrote one of the first books on the topic, Army of Roses (2003). This
research details her interviews with those affected by shahidas, imprisoned “failed”
bombers, psychologists, and various Israeli and Palestinian government officials. She too
asks questions about the motivations behind the bombings: What leads someone to
martyrdom? What drives that person to kill? Victor also discusses political events that
have lead to the use of suicide bombers in Palestine, discussing the ideological shifts that
occurred in the 1970s and 1980s. Victor (2003) describes the diverse lives of the women
she studied, finding that many viewed “martyrdom” as a welcome release to a lifetime of
border conflict and a lack of opportunity (Victor, 2003). Zedalis (2004) had similar
findings, stating that there is no way to generalize motivations. She found that the only
thing these women had in common was that they were young, generally between the ages of 21-23, though often even younger children are recruits (Zedalis, 2004).

Journalists have continued to ask questions about the motivations of shahidas, assuming that their motives are different than those of males (Toolis, 2003; Zoroya, 2002). In fact, many of the women’s videotaped “wills” or testimonials that are recorded shortly before detonation (generally laden with scripture and pre-planned statements as directed by trainers) are more heavily scrutinized than those of males’, whose messages are generally considered at face value (Toles-Patkin, 2004). Other sources analyze these women as part of a new tactic adopted by Islamist groups in order to more easily pass through security checkpoints (Ross, 2005; Arun, 2005, Fighel, 2003). Perhaps the most popular endeavor of Western journalists is to seek out reasons why women were “driven” into the act—either by way of failed marriages, abuse, vengeance, or other painful experiences (Zedalis, 2004, Zakaria, 2003; Toolis, 2003). Finally, many media explorations ask if suicide bombing is the vehicle through which women are finally gaining equality in Arab society (Davis, 2004; Applebaum, 2002; Zakaria, 2003; Dworkin).

Reuter (2004), a German writer, asks questions similar to Victor (2003), but studies both men and women who become suicide bombers. He, too, argues that popular media conceptions of bombers as crazed or brainwashed individuals fall short of understanding the complexities behind the decision to become a bomber. Reuter (2004), as well as Toles-Patkin (2004), both emphasize that the women and men that participate in martyrdom operations are often highly educated and well-adjusted individuals with a distinct passion to make a difference, no matter the cost. Like Victor (2003), Reuter
(2004) also conducts interviews with would-be martyrs, their trainers, friends, and relatives.

Wiktorowicz (2004) edited a collection of essays that discuss the notion of Islamic activism under the application of social movement theory. While bombing is not discussed in the book, his opening discusses the use of violence by some Muslim activist groups:

In contradistinction to popular perceptions of radical Islamic groups as irrational, “crazy,” or deviant, these groups frequently follow a particular dynamic that mirrors the rational calculus of other non-Islamic social movement actors who have used violence as part of their repertoire of contention (p. 20).

Wiktorowicz not only reinforces the notion that those who commit violence within fundamentalist groups can deploy reason to guide their decisions, but also identifies the activist structures themselves as no different than many other Western concepts of social movements. Violence, he suggests, is simply another means to an end. Brooks (2002), however, takes this notion further and contends that Palestinian leaders recognize that a “culture of martyrdom” is their most potent weapon. An unlikely political and ideological shift must occur in order for this tactic to die out (Brooks, 2002). But Western media outlets continue to report that there is no lack of volunteers, male and female, to become martyrs, and even children are idolizing those martyrs pictured in heroic posters and on television (Applebaum, 2002; Barr, 2002; Davis, 2004; Toolis, 2003). Interestingly, Toles-Patkin (2004) reports that parents of shahides and shahidas may present themselves differently to the media, depending on whether the outlet is of an Islamic of Western origin. Victor (2003) also considers the reactions of shahida parents as integral
to the creation of imagery, symbolism and rhetoric surrounding the immortalization of their children after martyrdom operations.

The image is of parents so wronged and humiliated by the Israelis that they would rather sacrifice their children than continue to endure....While some parents assure the Western media that they would have stopped their child from committing suicide if they had known of the child’s plan, they simultaneously express pride in the child’s final act (Copeland, 2002). However, there is some evidence that parents, especially mothers, recognize this dissonance and experience a delayed grief reaction that must of necessity be masked from the Palestinian media (2003, p. 82).

Exploring the ways in which “audiences” – from friends and family to the immediate community and the Arabic society at large – are affected by a particular event should reveal some of the ways in which ideology regarding warfare and violence are regarded. In the U.S. during the late 20th century, the idea of maximum distance began to dominate how wars were conducted, as the safety of combatants became a priority. Now, Westerners cannot identify as strongly with the notion of sacrificing oneself for a cause because military technology has all but eliminated the need to do so. Palestinians now have one of the most powerful weapons at their disposal with the most rudimentary of technologies by simply eliminating distance and invoking strong religion-based ideology in the equation of warfare.

While few in academia have strongly considered histories of violent women in their analyses of shahidas, still fewer have discussed the roles women have held in warfare through cultures and ages. When analyzed against a contextual backdrop, shahidas suddenly appear not as a socio-cultural abnormality or phenomenon, but as yet another development in the close-knit history of women and warfare. The review of the works of various scholars and journalists in this section has provided a backdrop for the
development of a more analytically comprehensive theory surrounding *shahida* rhetoric, violence, and gender. News media is instrumental in shaping and reproducing the rhetoric that, in turn, widely shapes social perception and cultural norms. This cycle only furthers normative stereotypes about women and gender.

**IV. Women, gender and the media**

This section aims to analyze the effects and implications that news media outlets have on creating and shaping *shahida* rhetoric and perceptions about women, violence, and their social roles. As many news media pieces suggest,\(^6\) it is doubtful that *shahidas'* male trainers, or "handlers," see them as anything more than a new tactical advantage. They can feign pregnancies, they are economically advantageous (*shahida* families are usually compensated at a lifetime stipend of about $200 a month, whereas *shahides'* families are paid about $400; Victor, 2003), they require less persuasion, they need less training than their male counterparts (Toles-Patkin, 2004), and are less likely to be suspected and searched by Israeli officials (Zedalis, 2004). It is often the men that are charged with victimizing women by using them as tools to promote Islamic *jihad* (Dworkin, 2002; Toles-Patkin, 2004). *Shahidas,* however, also suffer from victimization at the hands of an omnipotent source – the media. *Shahide/a* operations are well-suited for – and arguably dependent upon – television and images in order to generate publicity and, therefore, more recruits. This dependency puts in the hands of thousands of journalists the power to shape the rhetoric behind *shahida* operations. Through pre-operation video testimonials, the words of families and friends, and images on posters,

there is much left open to interpretation. Unfortunately, this power of dissemination has
done no justice to women and gender in Muslim societies. Women are once again
victimized and rendered powerless in favor of gendered stereotypes at the hands of media
outlets, both Islamic and Western.

Trends regarding the dissemination of information, images, technology, news
media, distance, spirituality and gender reveal how Westerners and Islamic nations alike
negotiate the role of the female suicide bomber and the justifications for violence of this
nature. While violent women are not new to the world, the recent increase in numbers of
shahidas since Wafa Idris detonated herself in 2002 has generated a significant amount of
media attention towards them as categorically distinct from male bombers. Western
journalists are also fascinated with the female bomber, struggling to make a connection
between the gentler sex and violence of this nature. Is there “equality in terror,” as Davis
(2004) put it? Or, are women simply another tool in the male-dominated Palestinian holy
war? Images of women martyrs are all too common in Palestine and other Muslim
societies today; young children learn to value death over life, exchanging “martyr
medallions,” much like Western children do with trading cards, and hanging posters of
these heroes and heroines on their bedroom walls (Toles-Patkin, 2004; Brooks, 2002).

While Victor’s (2003) work offers an unparalleled look into the lives of shahida
 operatives, she also searches into the private lives of these women, looking for clues of
estrangement or turmoil. “When an adolescent boy is humiliated at an Israeli checkpoint,
from that moment, a suicide bomber is created. At the same time, if a woman becomes a
shahida, one has to look for deeper, more underlying reasons” (Dickey in Victor, 2003, p.7

---

7 See Applebaum, 2002; Arun, 2005; Barr, 2002; Davis, 2004; Dickey, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c; “Female
suicide bomber’s mother speaks out,” 2004; “Female suicide bomber wanted to die a martyr,” 2002;
Mercer, 2005; Ross, 2005; Zakaria, 2003; Zoroya (n.d.).
No doubt that male handlers treat female trainees differently, but it is not uncommon for the media to search for its own explanations. Ayat Akhras, who detonated in 2002, was known for her strong interest in politics and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Yet, Victor’s (2003) speculations root her decision in the humiliation her family experienced within their community when her father refused to quit his job working for Israelis (Toles-Patkin, 2004). Hanadi Tayseer Jaradat, 29, who detonated in 2003, was considered to have been motivated by the deaths of her brother and cousin at the hands of Israeli forces (Palestinian Women Martyrs Against the Israeli Occupation, 2004). In her video, she extols nationalism and vows to fight against Zionism. She does not mention her brother in the video, although it is common for those who are seeking vengeance for a relative to do so. As in this case and many others, it is common for the emotional possibilities of revenge, depression, grief, etc. to be foregrounded over other reasons, as Toles-Patkin (2004) explains:

Media coverage, particularly in the West, appears to actively search for alternate explanations behind women’s participation in terror in a way that does not seem paralleled in the coverage of male suicide bombers, whose official ideological statements appear to be taken at face value. In the case of the relatively few female terrorists, media coverage profoundly emphasizes the emotional over the ideological in an effort to provide comprehensible explanations (n.p.).

Victor (2003) offers little speculation as to Jaradat’s political motivations, which may or may not have played a part in her decision to become a shahida. Either way, nationalistic ideals are all but disregarded as possible explanations for Akhras’ actions.

Others choose to ignore social and political tensions that can help explain how the Arab world’s justifications of suicide bombing came to be. In her blog, Ilana Mercer, a
Jewish freelance journalist and former resident of Israel, cites Rothbard when positing the “real” source of *shahide/a* operations:

Driven or exploited? Depending on which story you hear, failed Iraqi suicide bomber Sajida Rishawi is either a pawn of a patriarchal society or a criminal who coned herself into a corner as tight as the corset of explosives she failed to detonate. Books that belabor the “Three P’s”—patriarchy, poverty, and powerlessness—to varying degrees abound. There’s Christoph Reuter’s *My Life Is a Weapon: A Modern History of Suicide Bombing*, Barbara Victor’s *Army of Roses: Inside the World of Palestinian Women Suicide Bombers*... It’s a growth industry. [Writer] Murray N. Rothbard got it right...: “In dealing with crime,” he wrote, “liberals are concentrating on the wrong root causes. That is, on ‘poverty’ or ‘child abuse’ instead of a rotten immoral character” (Mercer, 2005).

Mercer argues that all humans are agents of free will, despite their so-called social circumstances. She imposes her privileged position as a woman with means and greater freedoms upon those living within a “culture of martyrdom.” Mercer’s blog, readily available for popular consumption on the Internet, profligates precisely what writers like Cixous critique; ignorance of the multiple layers of social, cultural, and gendered vulnerabilities that disproportionately effect women in Islamist societies. Without an understanding of these forces, one cannot fully comprehend the development of the concept of martyrdom and *shahida* violence.

It is, of course, very difficult to try and understand what *shahidas* are “really” thinking when they decide to train for a bombing. What little is known about these women can be pieced together from the edited video recordings, the prepared statements that they leave behind with their trainers, and the testimonials that their families provide the media. There is an awkward gap, however, between the rhetoric of the *shahidas* and the comments left by family and friends that cannot be accounted for in the absence of
the women who lived their own experiences (Toles-Patkin, 2004; Brooks, 2003). With only these artifacts, it is impossible to fully understand the agency behind the action. Capitalizing on that opportunity, Islamists do not delay in creating sanitizing imagery and language that serve as recruitment tools for future generations of shahidas. These young girls are attending summer camps for future shahidas, collecting posters, and watching repeatedly broadcast concerts honoring the “first” Palestinian shahida, Wafa Idris (Marcus, 2003). Imagery separates responsibility and consequence to the extent that even terrorism can be portrayed in a positive light, morally justifying these disastrous actions.

This section has attempted to shed light upon a litany of issues that have brought forth gender as a defining category in the issue of bombing. In spite of such strong indoctrination, women’s participation in such violence continues to be a topic of great concern and shock to many, particularly in Western culture. While shahida women are certainly worth trepidation, fear and sorrow, it is important to understand that they imply no more damage than their male counterparts and the issue should not be treated as one of gender, but one of power, intimidation and ethnic war. Certainly, the participation of women in violent extremism should be of no surprise. Indeed, with a closer look at how history tells the story of centuries of violent women, we should be able to better analyze the so-called “advent” of shahidas.

V. Conceptions of women and warfare

This section will contend that, by ignoring history, those who write about shahidas shape their rhetorical worlds in a way that belies the nature of their existence.
Furthermore, efforts to “get inside” the minds of these women have little value without considering historical, cultural and social factors that could privilege one’s writing. Most news media pieces offer emotionally engaging accounts of women wronged by society, “brainwashed,” or desperate for freedom from oppressive lives. Written with sorrow, regret, and ethnocentricity, these pieces figure women as poster children for the failure of the Muslim world. Yet we cannot forget the striking parallels between the rhetoric of *shahida* and that of American military forces; the term “freedom fighter” is heard both in Islamic *jihad* and by the U.S. military in the War on Terror. As this section will demonstrate, the imagery regenerated by the news media makes harmful assumptions about *shahidas’* place in time and space.

The common assumption that the female terrorist is a recent social development, a point of arrival in history, is to suggest that women have *progressed* as a sex, perhaps to a culmination in which they have begun to enter a masculine landscape. *Shahidas* blur the line between the normative gender binaries of life-giving nurturer and violent destroyer, the latter reserved for only the most masculine and deviant of women. It is certainly confusing for Westerners, who often perceive Islamic cultures as more oppressive to women, to see Islamist groups allow and even encourage women to join their ranks. The idea of women in the military is a controversial topic even in the West, where we often consider ourselves more progressive in terms of women’s rights than Muslim societies. It is difficult to stomach the “right to fight” as a privilege of empowerment, even if the disassociation of women from violence is one of the myths shattered by *shahidas*.

Islamist terrorists are training women for “martyrdom operations,” the very same group

---

8 Sir Iqbal Sacranie, the secretary general of the Muslim Council of Britain, is said to have described the Palestinian terrorist organization Hamas as “freedom fighters.” *See* Palmer, 2005.
relegated to the home and said to have no role in the public sphere. Nonviolence and nurturance are considered characteristics of the feminine, and only women in the most desperate of situations would resort to violence. When they do, they are not analyzed as murderers of citizens or criminals, but as symbols of total desolation. The focus is not on their crime, but what made them do it. Do male counterparts force them into submission? Are they seeking empowerment or equality with men? Do the men see them as equal, or just part of some “perfect demographic” that easily defeats the failure of imagination of their selected targets? Modern exemplars include Leila Khaled, a Palestinian activist who hijacked her first plane at age twenty-five in 1969. Women have few examples to follow should they decide to step out of the private sphere and become a “martyr”, not a “producer of martyrs”.

Even though shahidas tend to headline newspapers, violent women are nothing new to humankind. Female cruelty is not confined, as the news media might suggest, to Islamists who kill themselves and others. We see it in the case of Lynndie England, new mother and U.S. Army private, who was charged with nineteen counts of abuse of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison. We also see it in the case of Pauline Nyiramasuhuko, who stood trial for a 1994 massacre in Rwanda that included the use of rape and genocide as a weapon against humanity (Devine, 2004). We also tend to forget about American terrorist groups like the Symbionese Liberation Party and the Weather Underground that both had a number of female leaders. It wasn’t until reports of female bombers after the

---

10 History certainly belies the gender binary of the “naturally” nonviolent female. Traversing cultural and social context, there have always been women who have broken through the gender norms of their time period. Jo Stanley’s (1995) work reviews a critical history of – and retrospectively claims the existence of – women pirates throughout time and space, discussing the many different roles they occupied that are forgotten from collective histories.
attacks of September 11, 2001, however, that the U.S. government and the Department of Homeland Security finally snapped to attention, instructing officials in airport security to profile both males and females as security threats.

So why use one's own body as a weapon to kill? What is so effective about detonating oneself when a person has much more potential for a particular cause while still alive? Given proper conditioning for the event, anyone can carry out a successful detonation because the body and a few pounds of explosives are all that is required. Each attempt costs only about $150 to prepare (Hoffman, 2003), and the bomber has ultimate control over the attack (time, location, and circumstances). Mass casualties are almost always guaranteed. Explosives strapped to a person can kill and maim and are much more difficult to defend against. Last-second changes in the plan can be made: should a bomber become wary of police presence, she can simply slip onto a bus and have the added effect of a fuel tank magnify her attack. Hoffman (2003) says shahide/as are the “ultimate smart bomb” (40): they can decide where and when to detonate depending on how they can inflict the most carnage. Hoffman (2003) defines the goal of terrorism as an attempt to “…undermine public confidence in the ability of the authorities to protect and defend citizens, thereby creating a climate of fear and intimidation amenable to terrorist exploitation” (43). Suicide bombers have the capacity to create a large effect with minimal investment of material resources. The news media thrives on the sensationalism of a dramatic demise. Suicide terrorism has an international audience, and the immediate community is afflicted with such anxiety and fear that physical space seems to shrink. Evidence of this type of xenophobia as a result of suicide bombing can be found in Israel, where heavy attacks from Palestinians have made citizens afraid to go to restaurants,
markets, ride buses, or leave their homes. As Zedalis (2004) argues, "[The body] is the ultimate asymmetric weapon. You can assimilate among the people and then attack with an element of surprise that has an incredible and devastating shock value" (Ranstorp in Zedalis, 2004, p. 7). It is no surprise, then, that the female body has become a desirable commodity for terrorist organizations.

The shift from the use of male shahides between the ages of 17 and 24 can be attributed to the need for a new demographic. Israeli and U.S. government officials were accustomed to male bombers, which provided women with a new avenue of opportunity. Indoctrination took hold. Women who had been raped or divorced — and consequently dishonored — could seek mercy from Allah by sacrificing their bodies. Despite scripture and thousands of years during which women did not step into the public sphere (much less the political arena), they are now encouraged to do so. While the Qu’ran states that God punishes those who commit suicide, it rewards martyrs. "Think not of those who are slain in the cause of God as dead. Nay, they are alive in the presence of the Lord and are granted gifts from him" (Zedalis, 2004, p. 11). Bombers are promised a glorious Heaven of sorts after their death, as well as financial and social rewards for their families once the mission is complete. Due to its greater propensity for media coverage and sensationalism, the female body has been "discovered" as an ultimately more powerful system of weaponry and deemed worthy of martyrdom. Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, the spiritual leader of Hamas, a Palestinian terrorist organization, denounced the use of women in January 2002 for reasons of modesty. Just two years later, however, Wafa Idris carried out her attack under Hamas training. Yassin defended this contradiction by citing it as a "...significant evolution in our fight. The male fighters face many obstacles..."
like the reserve army—when there is a necessity, we use them” (Zedalis, 2004, p. 7). In
the words of a training commander, “The body has become our most potent weapon.
When we searched for new ways to resist the security complications facing us, we
discovered that our women could be an advantage” (Zedalis, 2004). Who is the collective
“we” that the trainer refers to here? He credits himself and his colleagues with a
discovery of women’s potential usefulness for their operative. His rhetoric forces
passivity upon the women he “uses”, placing himself and his organization as central and
ultimately dominant over women’s arrival on the scene. He takes control in shaping
them, deciding when and where they will perform their attack. In training, women and
girls are made to spend hours practicing walking and moving “naturally” with heavy
ammunition strapped to their bodies.

. . . Women were handling explosives and familiarizing themselves with
Kalashnikov sub-machine guns. Girls are taught to assemble and dismantle their
AK-47 assault rifles, and target practice follows—as do hours of theory about the
“enemy and its tactics.” The details and outcome of each attack are dissected,
revised, debated, and discussed. The women spend as much as 6 hours a day
familiarizing themselves with explosives. They are introduced to the bomb belts
that will rip their flesh, while killing and maiming those around them. Finally, the
girls have to practice moving around with the weight of the explosive belts strapped
to their bodies. Sometimes the explosives are distributed around the body; some
strapped to their legs, others to their backs or abdomens. “It all depends on the build
and shape of the woman and how best to strap her without over-bulging parts of her
body,” a male handler explained (Hala in Zedalis, 2004).

The very shape of a woman’s body has the potential to limit her when performing an
attack. Any slightly abnormal bulge protruding from underneath her clothing or misstep
from the weight of the explosives can give her away. A faked pregnancy is no longer a
safe option, as the police are wary of these women, too (Zedalis, 2004; Toles-Patkin,
2004). A woman’s body, even while immortalized as life-giving, can be destructive and
dangerous. She occupies, like the cross-dressing female pirate, male and female space. She creates and destroys life, and no one knows whom, why, or when. When it comes to terrorizing, she is a strong weapon.

The "use" of the female body as an agent for mass murder suggests that agency isn't entirely in the hands of the women who are trained for such an act. Islamic fundamentalism's recent surge through the 1980s and 1990s is influencing a number of different countries in the Middle East, Africa, and the Mediterranean, such as Jordan, Turkey, Egypt, Algeria and Lebanon. In many cases, these movements exist in opposition to the government. Islamism introduced a mix of empowerment as well as restraint for young female professionals and students of the lower and middle classes. It appeals to women because, despite its limitations, it provides a new public space for them to enter either as bombers, activists, or simply declared members of the movement without their motives being questioned. The fundamentalist movement calls for more traditional roles for women including the adoption of hijab, the Islamic dress code that includes veiling. For many unveiled women, using public transportation, working side-by-side with men, and staying out after certain hours, even for elderly women, were large obstacles in daily life; their bodies were constantly under the gaze of men.

Women who choose to veil, however, report finding a form of freedom in removing their bodies from the public sphere. They face less sexual harassment, may be granted the right by their families to attend high school or college, socialize with larger groups of peers while promoting Islamist ideology, and may even choose their own husband. Those who join militant groups gain respect, authority, and power as guardians of morality on the streets of their cities, policing the bodies of the upper-class, secular
women for not upholding proper hijab, or for deviant behavior, such as bicycling (Afary, 1997). Islam’s militant factions have created an outlet for women to increase their opportunities, be it through fundamentalist activism, education, employment, or training as a bomber/martyr. Islamism relies on bodily control to produce and maintain its stronghold over women and further the movement, yet there are liberatory opportunities within the movement that are useful for women seeking life outside the private sphere. These opportunities are generated by a movement dominated by masculine ideology, one that exploits the female body as weaponry in its “reserve army” while at the same time protecting men from its dangers by enforcing hijab. Still, women turn to fundamentalism as one of few avenues through which their minds, if not their bodies, can enter the public, social and political spheres.

On the contrary, while this fundamentalist uprising lays claim over women’s bodies simultaneously as commodities for militant use as well as dangerous physical entities to be contained. Islamic feminists look for woman-focused agency that they can claim as their own. The rise of Islamic feminist movements is opening public spaces like coffee houses and mosques for women to share their ideas and experiences or worship together (Afary, 1997). In an ethnographical study of two Islamic women’s religious groups in Cairo, Sherine Hafez (2001) finds that the Western idea of secularism as essential for liberation is contrary to many the livelihoods of many Muslim non-fundamentalist women who find that becoming closer to God through worship and community service is empowering for them. In studying and engaging in community activities together, these women work to bring themselves closer to God.
While shirking patriarchal ideology is not necessarily their first priority, the refusal to be obedient to anyone but Allah can do much to disempower normative oppression. In their devoutness they actively and consciously challenge their status as second class and are obedient only to God. According to Qu’ranic scripture, men cannot claim superiority over women as both sexes are made from the same nafs [soul] (Al-Hibri, 2003). Unlike Judeo-Christian traditions, there is no creationism story in which male is created before, and therefore considered superior, to female. The only form of superiority lies in those who are closest to God by way of their piety (Al-Hibri, 2003).

These groups of women, all from different backgrounds and with different purpose, are finding that one key to empowerment is through worship and service to their community (Hafez, 2001). Impossible to ignore, however, is the disconnect between the feminisms of the women in Hafez’s ethnography and the motivations behind shahida violence. While one can hardly say they are like-minded in their endeavors, there is much to be said about the social and cultural change they effect. Through shahidas, we can theorize about the deconstruction of masculine conceptions of violence and begin to see the shaping of the notion of a feminine violence.

While notions of women and violence cannot be generalized simply from an analysis of shahidas (and all shahidas cannot be categorically generalized), patterns of contemporary and historical relevance can be derived from the participation of shahidas. It is not so important to figure out why shahidas do what they do, but how they came to be, how they have changed the world around them – rhetorically and otherwise – and what implications they hold cross-culturally for women’s participation in certain forms of violence. This section has examined notions of women, violence and warfare through
news media outlets in the Western and Arab worlds, and has determined that these outlets create and regenerate harmful rhetoric that continually distort perceptions of women and violence, furthering notions of the docile and nonviolent woman. Next, considerations of both history and technology will allow a reconception of violent women and the future of *shahidas*.

**VI. Ideology, spirituality, and technology**

The connections between religion, spirituality, technology, and the ideology of holy war are key components to the “success” of suicide bombing, and this section will highlight these inextricable links as they help to clarify the ease with which *shahide/as* are indoctrinated. The rise of suicide bombing as a tactic marks a shift in not only militaristic but political and personal ideologies of Islamists as well. Bombing as a tactic became more common in the mid 1980s with Hezbollah, a Lebanese political and military group established in opposition to Israel. After Hezbollah’s attacks on U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut, party members began to discuss turning to bombing as a new tactic. Given its success in driving U.S. and Israelis forces out of Lebanon, Iranian Muslim leaders later decided to allow the *shahides* to continue bombing. Although the Qu’ran forbids suicide (Brooks, 2002), the other major fundamentalist groups caught onto *shahide* training within the following decade, including Hamas (the Islamic Resistance Movement), Islamic Jihad, Umar al-Mukhtar Forces, the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. In 2000, when Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat walked out of a peace conference in Camp David after the Israeli prime minister offered
social discourse and spirituality. This movement parallels that of the martyrdom movements’ success due to its adaptability to modern media. Similarly, the technologies of the 21st century may have worked to shift Islamists’ religious ideology from strict adherence to one of secular pragmatism, where television and the camera work to reproduce more and more shahidas. In the United States, the advent of the telegraph opened up new possibilities for communication with other universes; namely, the dead. Shortly after the telegraph came into mainstream use in 1948, Spiritualism as a movement took off (Peters, 1999).

That the telegraph opened access to the spirit world is not a fanciful metaphor I am imposing retroactively; the spiritualist haunting of the new medium decisively shaped the popular reception of the technology. Spiritualism, the art of communication with the dead, explicitly modeled itself on the telegraph’s ability to receive remote messages (p. 94).

Peters’ (1999) historical-critical observation here leaves room to posit about how fundamentalism has taken shape in light of the technologies that have come into play during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Because women were regarded as more sensitive to mediumship and all things spiritual, they were allowed opportunities to express agency and to act and speak in public from within this “cultural prestige.” The beginnings of the struggle for suffrage and women’s rights are strongly tied to Spiritualism as a sort of “gateway” into the public sphere (Peters, 1999). Spiritualism provided nineteenth century women in the U.S. the wherewithal to enter the public as participants within at least one sphere of influence, leading to their eventual demand to be heard within the political realm. Doubtful, too, that the patriarchs of nineteenth century society saw women’s increased agency within the Spiritualist movement as an opening for the beginning of a women’s rights movement. Regardless of whether these patriarchs
or even the Spiritualist women themselves saw this step on the horizon, Peters (1999) shows that these technological advances provided an "out" for them to begin their advancement into the public. The countless avenues of information and image exchange provide a new outlet for shahidas to step into the public sphere as well and into the world’s public eye. Images of violent political acts by Muslim women are by no means a foreign concept anymore.

While the future may hold frightening concepts for many, feminist theorist Donna Haraway writes on the ways in which technology can help to deconstruct harmful binaries and perhaps more fully understand the amalgamation that is the shahida woman. As this section has highlighted the ways in which news media and other technologies have enhanced the effects of suicide bombing as well as created the potential for new feminist thought and activism within Palestine, Haraway offers ways to use the powers of technology for feminist explorations.

**VII. Cyborg theory: Shahidas close the gap between technophobia and technophilia**

This section will expound upon Donna Haraway's (1991) work, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, which examines the problematic relationship that feminists have had historically with technology, claiming that envisioning humans as entirely separate from technology leads to damaging binaries. Haraway's work is particularly adaptable to the topic of shahida women. She argues that theorists often question whether or not technological advances are "good" or "bad" for humanity and feminism, creating two opposing ideologies that other theorists, writing upon Haraway, describe as
“technophobia” and “technophilia,” fear or love of technology, respectively (Gray, n.d.). Radical feminists, she says, have fallen into a technophobia trap, and Haraway contends that this oppositional binary must be resisted in order to use and negotiate a conflation of humanity and technology. Technology, she claims, is not necessarily unnatural, and humans can be organic even when we are using computers, machines, mobile phones, automobiles, timepieces, etc. (Haraway, 1991).

Haraway (1991) writes about cyborg theory in her “Cyborg Manifesto,” claiming that there is no such thing as an essential, biological femininity, but a forced consciousness stemming from histories of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism (Haraway, 1991). A cyborg is a being that has lost all sense of essentialist identity as a mixture of animal and machine, in which biology and technology have intertwined so tightly that they are the same. Cyborgs are a result of a society that “…marks out a self-consciously constructed space that cannot affirm the capacity to act on the basis of natural identification, but only on the basis of conscious coalition, of affinity, of political kinship” (Haraway, 1991, p. 156). With this understanding of gender, class and race, Haraway writes that her cyborg theory “… is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities which [can be explored] as one part of needed political work” (Haraway, 1991, p.154). She continues to say that many American feminists and socialists think in dualisms of mind and body, animal and machine, idealism and materialism in social practices, and that her theory calls for unity between those who want to resist domination (Haraway, 1991). 11

Haraway’s cyborg theory can be applied to shahidas by examining their current social, spiritual, historical, and political context. Radical Islamist restrictions on bodies –

11 See also Cixous, 1975.
women's bodies, in particular - derive from the belief that the feminine form is unclean and a distraction to those of men who must perform important duties within the public sphere, including worship (Ehlstain. 2003), representing a clear mind/body binary. 

*Shahidas* are also encouraged to conceptualize Heaven and Hell, leaving the earthly ways they know behind and taking the shortest path to paradise, the suicide mission. They must endure the *pain* of the explosion to experience the *pleasure* of martyrdom. Haraway's premises for a cyborg world do not yet apply for Islamists, but her contention that high-technology cultures can break down dualisms creates opportunity for *shahida* women.

It would be an ethical wrongdoing to advocate the violence and destruction that comes from *shahid/a* operations. There is no way to rationalize bombing as a method of gaining peace or progress in any manner. There is, however, the possibility to conceptualize *shahidas* as cyborgs who are using technology as a way to communicate with the rest of the world with few other means at their disposal. According to Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" (1999):

> The cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity. It is oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence. No longer structured by the polarity of public and private, the cyborg defines a technological polis based partly on the revolution of social relations in the *oikos*, the household. (p. 151).

While Westerners might not consider the Arab world a high-technology culture, there are few others that assume a cyborg reality by physically enveloping themselves with explosives. A *shahida* cannot be considered binaried; her actions are anything but innocent, and they defy normalized conventions of femininity in Islamic culture. It was Arafat himself that renegotiated women's domesticity, drawing them out of the home
when he paralleled their traditional protective duties with that of the prestige of becoming a shahida in his “army of roses” speech.

In a culture of gender domination, it is easy to see women’s participation in these attacks as a step towards equality; in fact, it might be so. But there are many other nuanced levels to their activism. While shahidas’ violence may seem cruel and evil to us, war and bombing from a distance is legitimized through sanitizing language such “War on Terrorism” and “freedom fighting.” Perhaps we can ask of Western definitions of warfare where accountability for violence comes into play when all efforts are directed at attacking an enemy from a distance? Perhaps it is the shahida’s lack of concern over death that is the “perversity” that Haraway calls for in the “Cyborg Manifesto” (1999).

This section discusses the implications of binaried thinking about women and technology in an attempt to further deconstruct harmful social norms that infiltrate the rhetoric of shahida. Next, deconstructing masculine notions of violence and reconstructing conceptions of violence as feminine becomes crucial to breaking down gendered binaries that bind women to nonviolence. Through three very different theorists, the next section will attempt to articulate multiple ways for women to escape oppression when the use of nonviolence is not available at all times. Lacking any social, cultural, or political structure that allows opportunity for expression and participation for women, other means may be necessary for emancipation; or, if not necessary, still a very real possibility.
VIII. Theories of feminine violence, liberation, and agency: ways "out"

Theorists Nancy Fraser, Jeffer Allen, and Helene Cixous each offer differing notions about violence, the public sphere, and oppression, respectively. Their works can help to provide more comprehensive answers to the question of liberation for women living in the absence of democratic structure. Nancy Fraser extends Habermas' notion of the "bourgeois" public sphere and argues that there are multiple, "subaltern" public spheres. By understanding shahidas as part of a constant subaltern public of violent women rather than a "new" social phenomenon, we can link our analysis even more closely to history. Allen's work, Lesbian Philosophy: Explorations, argues that "heterosexual virtue" prevents women from seeking liberation through violent means when necessary. Allen's work is useful for distinguishing between feminist and masculine structures of violence, creating opportunity for theory that can offer women living in oppression a way to claim a feminist violence. Finally, Helene Cixous offers ways in which we can "do violence" to masculine structures, creating an "out" for oppressed women. Cohesively, these sections argue that, although shahida women clearly exhibit agency in their decisions to participate in martyrdom operations, the structure of suicide bombing is a masculine construction in which women are seen as tools. Women's latest debut into the public sphere as shahidas alone cannot liberate them. Not only must individual agency come into play, but agency over a movement or liberatory effort as a whole must be exhibited as well for women to claim a space of their

---

12 Rhetoric that supports this claim can be seen in various popular media articles as well as in more scholarly work. Victor (2003) and Zedalis (2004) provide excellent examples of this. See also section V of this work.
own. With the aid of Fraser, Allen, and Cixous, this section will work to offer a few ways in which liberation might be achieved.

**A. Nancy Fraser, Habermas, and “subaltern publics”**

The idea of competing public and private spheres can be particularly damaging when working through rhetorical processes from a feminist perspective. A better understanding of what is often known as the “private” sphere is necessary, bringing to light the importance of its operations as well as the problems that this binary presents to those who are “othered” by this rhetoric. Furthermore, crucial to their liberation from oppressive Islamist systems, women must be understood to have their own sense of violence that ruptures the masculine systems that are oppressive to expressions of femininity. Seeking other ways for women to take on responsibility as actors, to claim themselves, their actions, and their words as significant contributors to society, promoting a freer exchange of sexuality, of culture, and of ideas is crucial to understanding the idea of an entirely female-based public. Through the work of Nancy Fraser, this section will argue for a reconceptualization of *shahidas* as a subaltern public, rather than as renegade members of a troubled private sphere of domesticity and passivity. Violent women are always already present, and should be analyzed and written about as such. News media often figures them as a crazed or dangers to society, regenerating the notion of the docile feminine binary. The concept of competing public spheres links analyses of *shahida* more closely with histories of violent women, bringing to light the fact that these women are not simply products of modernity. What does that help us with? Counterpublics reconnect us with history.
Fraser’s work “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy” expounds Habermas’ notion of the public sphere as situated among European bourgeois societies, based upon the traditional *agora*.

Habermas makes a number of assumptions that lead to construct a public that is *the* public, or one that is based on dominant classed, raced, and gendered ideology. It consists of private bodies entering *the* public sphere to discuss items of common interest, before retreating into the private sphere, and assumes that a true democratic society requires a sharp split between private interest and civil discourse. Despite Habermas’ claim that open access to the public sphere is crucial to its function, Fraser draws on other scholars to contend that Habermas’ sphere depends on exclusion of the irrational and those not considered fit for public, namely women and the lower class. Rather than default to the trappings of the public versus private binary, Fraser claims that the notion of multiple competing publics better captures the complexities of societal structures. For those denied access to the dominant, masculine and bourgeois public sphere, subaltern publics take shape. Women in these European cities transfigured their categorically “private” identities of motherhood and domesticity into a platform for public action (Fraser, 1992, p. 115). Despite the lack of a democratic outlet for women before being granted suffrage, they still maintained their own publics and continued to alter public space.

“Thus the view that women were excluded from the public sphere turns out to be ideological; it rests on a class- and gender-biased notion of publicity, one which accepts at face value the bourgeois public’s claim to be *the* public…On the contrary, virtually contemporaneous with the bourgeois public there arose a host of competing counterpublics, including nationalist publics, popular peasant publics, elite women’s publics, and working-class publics” (Fraser, 1992, p. 115-116).
Thinking through this frame, women living in Islamist societies also have their own public, despite the oppression that works to restrict not only their activism, but, quite literally, their physical bodies as well. Women cannot lead prayer, work, or reveal little more than their faces, if that, outside of the home. Certainly, much of the masculine ideology at work here centers on keeping women and femininity out of sight. Yet, drawing from Fraser, the insurgence of *shahidas* is not simply an act of women traversing upwards from the depths of domesticity into a masculine civil society. It is the mark of a comparatively new type of subaltern public, one that is characterized by violence originating from women accompanied by more advanced technology and weaponry. It competes with the dominant public sphere, altering public discourse about the role of women in society as well as the nature of warfare. For a culture that is unaccustomed to the idea of women participating in society in traditionally masculine ways, how does interpublic discourse regarding women and gender change when competing publics are confronted with the subalternity of the female suicide bomber? How does she affect her cultural surroundings?  

Turning again to Fraser to continue this line of questioning, understanding her initial introduction of the term “subaltern counterpublics” (Fraser, 1992) is key to applying her principles to the case of the female suicide bomber. Discourse is precisely what co-defines publics from one another, signaling that they are parallel arenas operating within a stratified society or based upon unequal social groups structurally.

---

13 Technology is not only put to violent use in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, but is used in the Muslim world for expression and writing as well. In Iraq, blogger “Riverbend,” a 26-year-old female computer specialist, has received numerous awards for her “girl blog,” “Baghdad Burning” (Riverbend), as well as the UK’s Samuel Johnson Prize for non-fiction for a print version of her online journal. The Internet is quickly becoming yet another technological “out” for women in the public sphere, even as it continues to perpetuate patriarchal structures of information and capitalism.
related by dominance and subordination. Within these stratified societies, those living in subordination find it advantageous and liberatory to constitute these counterpublics.

“...Members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser, 1992, p. 123). She exemplifies the late twentieth century U.S. feminist counterpublic, but *shahidas* can easily be similarly constituted within this framework. These groups emerge, some with decided consciousness and others without, in response to marginalization and exclusion from dominant publics. In effect, then, discursive exchange is immediately altered and assumptions that were previously invisible from public view are forced into discussions. “In general.” she says, “the proliferation of subaltern counterpublics means a widening of discursive contestation, and that is a good thing in stratified societies” (Fraser, 1992, p. 124).

*Shahidas* have exactly this effect on their respective cultures. Suddenly they are granted their own category within popular media, and the names of women that have completed their missions garner celebrity, in spite of many men that have done the same. There is no escaping their discursive presence. So, true to form, we have a myriad of publics examining them, probing for meaning, looking for motives, and desperately seeking an explanation for these women. They are anomalies, outcasts, empowered, oppressed, crazy, and dangerous, all simultaneously, within and between parallel discursive circles. Now the pregnant woman, once a life-giving entity, is feared and suspect in Muslim societies. The female body is to be covered and hidden from public view, considered dirty and dangerous for pious men who must remain concentrated on their faith. Now she is catapulted into public view in a very different way, and her body is
under (in) attack like never before—it is both subject and object, and it is never safe for or safe from anyone or anything. Whatever they are to whichever public is less relevant than the pervasiveness of the discourse that surrounds their actions. As a subaltern counterpublic, they actively effect change and force those around them to seek their own questions and answers.

B. Jeffner Allen and a "lesbian" violence

The shahida's violent socio-political participation is a sign of progress in a society that traditionally relegates her to the household. Just as the Islamic feminists in Hafez's (2001) ethnography are using their faith as vehicles for agency and liberation from certain patriarchal conceptions of Islam, this nonviolent method of breaking through subjectivity is not sufficient for Jeffner Allen, who contends that many feminist movements focus entirely on maintaining a nonviolent status at whatever cost as opposed to the creation of liberation. She suggests that putting a commitment to nonviolence above freedom promotes an aversion to killing stronger than a woman's own will to live, abducting her from true feminist concerns. She notes "heterosexual virtue" is the very cornerstone that binds women to male-defined nonviolence (Allen, 1991).

Adherents to the ideology of heterosexual virtue hold in common the claim that violence is brutalizing. Women are held to be better than men, either wholly or in part, precisely because women are nonviolent... The heterosexual virtue which binds women to male-defined nonviolence is preeminently self-destructive, leading to the sole form of action permitted to women: martyrdom and suicide. To accept the patriarchal construct of nonviolence vs. violence is to side with men's terrorization of women and against women, its avoiders, resisters, and fervent opponents (Allen 1991, p. 61).

Current discourse over female bombers is limiting as women are discussed as either violent victims in a patriarchal context or nonviolent in a feminist context. Nonviolence is
a patriarchal construct assigned to women, who are essentialized as naturally docile, motherly and weak; to be masculine is violent, strong, unfeeling. Allen proposes a form of “lesbian-based” violence that is defined by women, one that deconstructs, reconstructs, and reclaims a violence characterized by female strength, harmony and love. Recognizing that even though shahides (and shahidas) place their desire for freedom above their own lives as Allen says women should when challenging patriarchy, they continue to subscribe to a male-defined violence that pits them in an ethnic binary against women of other cultures that suffer similarly. This state of “anti-sisterhood,” as Dworkin (n.d.) puts it, is a guise for nationalist liberation. While women strive to prove themselves as worthy in a world of violent masculinity, they are simultaneously pitted against one another in competition for purity and holiness as martyrs. Their bodies are controlled by male handlers, who strap them with explosives, instruct them on how and when to detonate themselves, and send them off to achieve a masculine Islamist “liberation.”

A patriarchal conception of violence does not encompass that which empowers and unifies women. Instead, it is a form of Allen’s lesbian violence as it deconstructs the frail, decorative and nonviolent heterosexual female in lieu of a freeing subjectivity that rejects the passivity of the female body. This violence would reject the same subjectivity that is incurred upon female bombers in the Islamist movement. The rhetoric of distinction between male and female violent actors is nearly obligatory in our media, and the placement of “female” before “suicide bomber” as a modifier insinuates a forced subjectivity that does violence to women’s bodies and agency. It reinforces the patriarchal construct of violence that Allen describes; the very mention of the sex of the bomber insinuates she is a deviant body, an anomaly deserving concern, fear, and
management. This rhetoric does not consider or even allow for the possibility of a violent woman. She is categorically denied the opportunity to express her agency, to inscribe the genealogy, despite its patriarchal context, of her becoming an historical and cultural actor (Dworkin, n.d.). Women have always been violent, yet patriarchy defines away their actions as either outside some male conception of “true” violence or deviant in some way that masculinizes the female actor.

So what of *shahidas*? The violence they incur is part of a terrorist struggle for nationalist liberation, but its meaning for women is steeped under layers of rhetoric belying bodily self-sacrifice in the name of God and faith. The violent institution of bombing is created by men, reinforcing patriarchy by objectifying women’s bodies as available for “use” and exploitation, erasing any rhetorical means for their own agency and forcing them into passivity as a “discovery” made by terrorist organizations. These women should be reconceptualized in order to rupture the ways in which violence is constructed to reinforce patriarchy by objectifying women’s bodies as weaponry, dismissing agency, and forcing passivity. Women have for ages proven themselves capable of male-defined violence, as well as violence that challenges patriarchal hegemony. We have only to create a rhetorical space and new subject-position for women, opening new avenues for self-generated agency. Breaking the meaning of violence free from patriarchal meaning is the key to creating a potential space for an empowering violence for women.

In contrast, the Islamic feminists in Sharine Hafez’s (2001) ethnographical story work and live according to Qu’ranic scripture mandating peace and nonviolence. Simultaneously, however, they create violence against patriarchal constructs of feminine
obedience and weakness by creating their own communities, providing childcare for one another, teaching women skills they need to enter the workforce, or engaging in prayer together (Hafez, 2001). They actively create rhetorical space for themselves, placing their interests and concerns as a social priority and claiming subjective freedom through their devotion to God. They challenge masculine hegemonic rule not in an organized movement against patriarchy, but by redefining woman’s space in society and engaging in the creation of community.

Allen’s theory does not provide sufficient answers for women living in a society without some form of political structure that allows them space for public expression. How are women to act out in a way that disrupts the systems that serve to destroy them? As minority figures within oppressive political and social regimes, their movements are restricted and policed heavily, an attempt by a dominant public sphere to erase them from view. They are banished into invisibility from “civil” society. We cannot ignore that they continue to exist within the dominant public sphere, even as their physical bodies are heavily restricted. *Shahidas* are considered social anomalies, women who traverse the boundaries from the private sphere into the public, supposedly seeking death, freedom, martyrdom, or an escape from their lives. The notion of the private sphere here carries with it implications of oppression and darkness, a place from which women must escape to seek agency and liberation. Next, Helene Cixous expounds on both Fraser’s and Allen’s works by offering one method of feminine liberation; the violence of writing as a way to break free from oppression. Perhaps *shahidas* offer Cixous’ theory a new angle, one of “bodily writing.”
C. From Cixous' "writing out" to the "bodily writing" of the shahida

Although both Fraser and Cixous proffer ways to effect meaningful societal change, this cannot occur without some form of purposefulness behind the actions of those who wish to create such change. Without understanding the agency behind these actions, the violence that shahidas create is little more than a product of the dominant public. These seemingly incredible acts of defiance to an ancient moral code that denies agency to women is not without the threat of strong consequence. Crucial to women's liberation from such oppressive societies is a conception of their own sense of violence that cannot be defined as phallic. Now we must move forward from Fraser and seek other ways for women to alter public space and take on responsibility as actors. Helene Cixous offers one way of doing this which incorporates a non-traditional definition of "violence." In her work "Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays" (Cixous 1975), she claims writing as a way of escaping a dangerous and harmful "economy of the Selfsame" and promoting a feminine economy. Her writing is purposefully violent, and she uses it to rupture the oppressive binaries of her own environment, as a woman of many minorities growing up in imperialist Algeria. It is an order of discourse that divides whole societies and cultures, thereby rejecting half and assuming a systemic relationship characterized by domination and subordination. One of the ways that she uses her violent writing is to shock the reader out of complacency over cultures of domination, writing her way out of the binaries of imperialistic thought as, Fraser might argue, a member of a subaltern counterpublic. Cixous is radical and unapologetic in her writing, doing violence to the social stratification she understood as an adolescent, victimized by imperialism,
sexism, and racism. Her writing is a democratic move from within a grossly undemocratic society.

Westerners may take for granted, however, the pre-existing democratic, political and social structures that allow for writing oneself out. Considering the uniqueness of the Islamic woman's experience from that of Western, Judeo-Christian backgrounds, it is useful to introduce and employ here the rhetorical concept of Robert Craig's "caravan." He presents the caravan in an effort towards converging more wholly the fields of rhetoric and science, utilizing it in order to weaken a pervasive binary that has worked against the furthering of communicative studies. Perhaps this concept can be useful here also, to bring together the experiences of oppression of Judeo-Christian women and Muslim women. Certainly, the result of their social and political situations can each be attributed, in part, to religious extremism. In this way, they are subaltern counterpublics, both struggling against a dominant and oppressive public. Women living in societies such as Cixous' as well as those of the female bombers must create their own democratic discourse, one that can be made more powerful through this caravan of interpublic exchange. While Cixous gains this agency through physical writing, shahidas also "write," but in a very different way. They write through and write with their bodies, taking this notion of violence quite literally. Their bodies are their voice; they explode, true to Cixous. With no form of pre-existing democratic structure whatsoever, this violence must take place in order for them to create space for their bodies to speak in such a way.

But the question remains; what are they writing? What kind of mark are they leaving behind for future bombers to read before recording their own voices upon
history? There is a multiplicity of possibilities—each woman’s event leaves traces of stories behind her, leaving us with questions of “why...?” The value of Fraser’s work appears again here, and while it is possible to entertain the idea of common threads among these women, it is also essential to understand that each bombing will constitute its own signature upon society, with its own contexts and meanings. They are the writings of subaltern counterpublics, working against what Cixous names the “empire of the Selfame” (Cixous, 1975, p. 70), and against the binaries of self/other. “If there is a self proper to woman, paradoxically it is her capacity to depropriate herself without self-interest: endless body, without ‘end’, without principal ‘parts’...” (Cixous, 1975, p. 87).

The notion of the “endless body” is particularly applicable to women suicide bombers; their bodies are forever catapulted among discourse, forever in memory. Here she commits to the bodily essences of writing one’s way out of categories, shattering the mind/body binary by uniting them as inseparable. This dilemma is played out quite clearly in the media’s struggle to categorize these women. The suicide bomber writes of violence through violence on all levels—violence through wars between pre-existing nation-states and through wars that occur inter- and intra-publicly, between genders, classes, and races. Their bodily explosions are the ultimate mode of feminine expression.

Through “writing” in this sense we understand female suicide bombing to be an inscription or imprint, quite literally, on society and social memory. These actions can be read through political, social, and cultural implications, thereby reinforcing the agency behind their actions and understanding each event within its own particular context. Suicide bombers, like other historically violent subaltern counterpublics, manipulate the tools they have immediately before them, regardless of what they are. As Cixous finds
“ways out” of harmful binaries by violent writing, so do bombers, who write through their bodies as their dominant publics work otherwise to suppress their voices. They bomb because they cannot write as Cixous does, but their effects on social discourse mirror one another. Through Fraser’s framework, we can understand their actions as democratic moves within a context that works to suppress democratic activity. Yet, their physical violence does violence to the pre-existing social stratification that is so pervasive and tyrannical, catapulting them into competing counterpublics, altering public space and ultimately setting social, political and cultural discourse on a trajectory that can never regress. Through these writings, shahidas can be understood not as passive products of their time, but as a rising historical category of women who alter their worlds through deliberate moves to liberate themselves from within a social structure designed for oppression and domination. Women can “write” through a variety of mediums; writing in this sense can be quite literal or figurative. Perhaps considering the shahida as a writer of her own kind can help increase understanding about how violence and the technologies of warfare mark society and even provide an “out” for women.

Through Allen, Fraser, and Cixous this section has considered a number of ways to create violence that can be defined as feminine in nature, thus deconstructing harmful binaries that associate women with passivity and nonviolence. If shahida women are truly seeking an “out” from a masculine oppression, there are ways in which this can be accomplished through ownership of a violence generated by women, rather than warfare tactics created by masculine extremists.
Conclusion

The subject that emerges from this unnameable point of division is a split subject, identifying its previous, fragmentary experience which only "exists" as affect—bare want, loss that is unrepresentable—with the mother's body. Before desire—the movement out from a self to the objects on which it is directed—there are drives that involve preoedipal semiotic functions and energy discharges that connect and orient the body to the mother. Abjection is the moment of separation, the border between the "I" and the other, before an "I" is formed; it is want itself—an unassimilable nonunity experienced by one who is neither in the symbolic order nor outside of it.

Birmingham (on Arendt), 2003

Through the eight sections of this paper, discussion over how shahida rhetoric is shaped and disseminated throughout the world by various news media outlets has lead to further analysis over the veracity behind this rhetoric and how shahidas figure differently in considering notions of women, gender and violence when history is taken into account. Using Yasser Arafat's "army of roses" speech from 2002 as a benchmark rhetorical event for analyses over the feminization of Palestinian jihad on Israel, developing popular and scholarly perceptions of shahida women were explored during a review of shahida literature. In the following two sections, the news media's effect on social knowledge of women was discussed, and the lack of historical context was critiqued as a central to understanding women and violence. A closer look at possibilities behind shahida motivations was then considered. Significantly, efforts to generalize about why women participate — be it through desperation, nationalism, or indoctrination — are avoided as both men and women have a diversity of motivations behind their actions, many of which can never be discovered. Reflecting next on how Peters (1999) closely links the U.S.'s spiritualism movement of the late 18th and early 19th centuries to the beginning of the women's movement, so too can we consider that perhaps, despite the violence of suicide
bombing, Arafat's call to arms inadvertently may have sparked new ideas about the participation of women in civic life, an entry into the public sphere upon a new avenue. This entry is also inextricably linked to the role of technology in broadcasting suicide bombing events to the world and providing an outlet for the creation and profligation of cultural norms involving women and their participation in warfare. Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" (1999) helps to allay fears of technology as a source of violence and constructs the notion that although modern technology is crucial to creation of new shahide/as, it can also be crucial to liberation as a method of expression and agency for women. Finally, the works of Fraser (1992), Allen (1991), and Cixous (1975) together help to distinguish between structures of violence that are useful for liberation and those that are harmful, as well as offer alternative ways of "doing violence."

One of the most significant ways that shahidas operate is through the media—they exploit it to continue reproducing other operatives, while simultaneously Western media exploits them to negotiate ideology about gender, warfare, and violence. Arafat's "army of roses" speech has forever changed the idea of domesticity in Islamic culture—by proclaiming that men and women are equal, what now of the role of women in the home?

Understanding discourse surrounding female martyrs reveals the ways in which both Western and Islamic societies consider gender and spirituality. Shifting ideological and religious beliefs have in part been influenced by the ability of technology and the mass media to disseminate imagery and rhetorical devices to worldwide audiences, allowing Westerners the opportunity to see first-hand the faces of those who have chosen to become martyrs and hear the stories of the aftermath of the violence. Perhaps this is
part of what makes suicide bombing so effective— the global transmissions of images, information, sound, and words that are so ugly that, thanks to pervasive media technologies, we cannot help but look.

The fascination with shahidas in particular indicates that their behavior is considered deviant and abnormal by Western standards, whereas shahides have now become passé. Male violence is normalized, while traditionalist ideas of the non-violent female alarm and shock society. Shahidas are looked upon as a sign of a crazed society gone wrong, while Westerners fail to turn the critical gaze upon themselves. Rarely are these women understood as thinking beings acting with reason, empowerment, and choice. Western culture is fearful of considering these possibilities, for if these women were acting rationally, then the possibilities of feminine violence can be recognized as normal. What, then, of state violence? If shahidas are acting rationally, then how can we characterize Western tactics of distanced warfare?

The Western news media provides a limited and blinding framework for understanding a culture of martyrdom and the ways in which the Muslim countries conceive of life and death, gender, and nation. Simultaneously, media systems reflect upon how Western culture conceives of these same issues, doing no justice to their subjects and to their audiences. Media incapacitates its audience from considering alternatives to what is presented over the Internet and on television. A participatory move must be made in order to combat harmful dualistic thinking about race, class and gender, so that shahidas can be understood outside of passive products of their time. Haraway’s (1991) Cyborg Manifesto is one way to escape dualistic thinking and understand the ways in which technology has influenced this generation’s choices in violence in the
name of liberation. Not only does rapid information exchange work to reproduce and feed *shahide/a* culture, it brought about its use during a time when spirituality has never been more closely linked to the technologies created by our species. True to Haraway, media are technologies that shape our social, historical, and political realities, just as we shape them. What do writings like those of Applebaum (2002), Barr (2002) and Davis (2004) say about Western culture? What are "mainstream" ideas of how violence and gender link? In order to understand the world around us, our media systems must be broader in scope, and discourse analysis is crucial to grasping the ideology of this social phenomenon.

The aim of this essay is to "complicate" the rhetorical world of *shahida* women. News media's greatest injustice to these women is the purposeful framing of such rhetoric as a brand new ahistorical category, which detrimentally regenerates the perception of women as nonviolent when, in fact, women have always been both violent and nonviolent. Through "complication," we consider this multi-faceted issue of violence, oppression, gender and warfare, rather than creating exercises in futility by trying to "get inside" the motivations of these women. *Shahidas'* agency can be generalized no more than their male counterparts, and they must be respected as independent, thinking actors rather than impotent, docile and brainwashed victims.

This work offers neither solutions nor answers to any of the questions posited. It is impossible to write about *shahidas* in the West without inserting values, privilege, and bias into one's work, and here, there is no aim to write out of or in spite of the Western perspective. One cannot "figure out" or understand religious *jihad* and its associated violence without lived experience. This work only offers suggestions on how to better
analyze women, gender and violence through the case study of the Palestinian *shahidas* in order to deconstruct the rhetorical assumptions Western news media has deferred onto these women. Perhaps by reconceptualizing much of the binaried thinking and writing created – by both scholars and by members of the news media – we can better theorize about cultural conflict and the use of violence for terrorizing. Doubtful, however, that finding an end to violence by *shahides* and *shahidas* will come from the West; answers to this problem can only come from those who live and know the cultural weight with which ideology, spirituality, and religion operate. Regardless, there is much the West can do to end dualistic thinking and examine its own cultural notions about violence, warfare and women. Arguments about violence, technology, agency, and spirituality would be incomplete without considering the impacts of *shahidas* on their global audience.
References


http://www.guardian.co.uk/israel/Story/0,2763,1123305,00.html


http://riverbendblog.blogspot.com/


_Soldiers wounded in Gaza blast._ (2004, May 28). Retrieved April 6, 2006, from 

FBI_warns_of_female_terror_recruits/

AR2005092801631_pf.html

Pandora.


1, 2005, from The Observer Web site: http://www.countercurrents.org/pa- toolis121003.htm
Rodale.


Zakaria, F. (2003, August 25). Suicide bombers can be stopped. *Newsweek, 142*(8), 57.
