

Foreword

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This splendid book that you are about to read is going to press as Britons from the ethnically diverse cities of London, Leeds and Birmingham are trying to understand the dynamics of alienated anger, police use of guns, and the consequences of their government tying itself to the US government's war in Iraq. The latter junior partner position has been called 'riding pillion' on the American government's metaphorical motorcycle. It is a slightly less feminized image than the iconic cartoon pose of Margaret Thatcher in the arms of Ronald Reagan during the 1980s' unequal British-US cold war alliance. In fact, in the waves of reporting, commentary, and informal speculation following the July 7, 2005 London transport bombings, there has been surprisingly little overt gendering of the stories of the men so far tentatively identified as suspected of taking part either in the initial four bus and subway bombings or, in four failed London transport bombings that took place two weeks later. This is the good news. It is also the worrisome news.

The good news is that media reporting in the summer of 2005 starkly contrasts with the way so many media editors, journalists, government officials, and ordinary citizens constructed their post-tragedy narratives of the 2001 World Trade Center attack. Neither the local or international media, nor US and British government officials, have been inclined to wring extra sympathy or outrage out of the public by manipulating images of innocent women killed, distraught mothers and wives grieving, or by celebrating the manly heroism of brave fire fighters and police officers. Nor, in contrast to the construction of causal narratives developed to explain other celebrated crimes in contemporary Britain, have journalists, editors, and public officials appeared to point blaming fingers at 'bad mothering' as lying at the root of the problem. All of the British men (each British man apparently Muslim-identified, though several only quite recently so) thus far suspected (none yet put on trial) and named in the press have mothers and several have wives. Those women thus far have attracted relatively little public attention. They are not being shoved onto center stage in the quickly evolving, still-fragmented narrative of the July 2005 London bombings and failed bombings. This could change, of course.

There is bad news, though, to go along with this seemingly good news in the wake of the 2005 London bombings. The bad news is that, as yet (at this writing, we are still in the early stages of the post-London bombings' narrative creation), there has been a stunning lack of curiosity about masculinities. This glaring absence was a notable feature of the explanatory narratives constructed after the World Trade

Center attacks and after the 2004 Madrid train bombings. Men are just naturally those who wield violence, whether that violence is organized by the state or by non- or anti-state actors. The ‘naturally’ in any narrative serves to make what it is attached to unremarkable, uninteresting and not worthy of a storyteller’s further imagining. ‘Naturally’ is a powerful and dangerous notion. It informs a lot of political narrative building when men are the actors. Unpacking what other storytellers portray as ‘natural’ is one of the chief goals of feminist observers such as this book’s creators, Krista Hunt and Kim Rygiel. Is it possible to shoehorn a curiosity about the politics of masculinities into the 9/11 narrative? Into the Madrid train bombings narrative? Into the London transport bombings? Whose masculinities will become the objects of memorable storytelling? If masculinities become a prominent thread in these narratives (and of the larger story that is told to tie these three narratives together), what will be the political consequences for popular understandings of myriad forms of state and non-state violence? Of men’s relationships to men? To women?

As the contributors to Hunt and Rygiel’s thought-provoking volume demonstrate here so persuasively, all of us have to stay attentive as the narratives used to make sense of politically-motivated acts of violence aimed at civilians continue to evolve. Watch the contributors here follow a narrative over time, staying attentive when others have become distracted. Narratives indeed can be crystallized quickly, especially in this era of globalized reporting, imagery, and instant official response. But if we prematurely turn away from the on-going narrative creation process, imagining that the first wave of narrative creation will be forever carved into stone, we risk missing a subtle, sometimes even sharp turn in the popular narrative, even if state officials stubbornly stick to their preferred earlier story.

For instance, the officials of the Bush administration remained apparently satisfied, even over a year after the initial revelations of US military abuse in its Iraqi Abu Ghraib prison, with the ‘Lynndie England story’, that is, the ‘bad apple’ narrative. However, the general public in the US, as well as increasing numbers of journalists and members of Congress (including some members of the Bush administration’s own party), became less and less satisfied during that year with that simple tale. What seemed to have drained the potency out of the ‘Lynndie England’/‘bad apple’ narrative was a series of government reports on Abu Ghraib commissioned by the US Department of Defense. These reports revealed that a) what happened in Cell Block A in the Abu Ghraib jail was just a small scene of a much larger drama, whose principal actors were in Washington and in the US military base in Guantánamo, Cuba, and b) nonetheless, the US Department of Defense consistently refused to hold accountable any senior military commanders (except one woman reservist general) or their civilian superiors. Gradually, as a result of the drip-drip-drip of these sequentially released reports, an alternative narrative began to find purchase in the minds of many Americans: ‘The low level military police reservists in Abu Ghraib were jerks, but they are just the fall guys for the big shots at the top’. If we ourselves are so taken with the narrative power of the initial ‘Lynndie England’ story (even if for quite different intellectual and political reasons) that we parallel US government officials in stubbornly holding onto that initial story’s primacy, we might miss a significant narrative sea change occurring in large sectors of the American public.

Among the most fraught narratives that Hunt and Rygiel and their contributors help us to untangle are those imperially constructed to not just describe but to explain ‘the Muslim woman’. They wisely note that despite scores of ethnographies, histories, novels and memoirs by women (women writers from Iran, Lebanon, Indonesia, Malaysia, France, Canada, Bosnia, Iraq, the US, Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Turkey, Palestine, Egypt, Morocco, the Netherlands, Bangladesh), demonstrating the mind-boggling diversity of experiences, ideas, political actions, and creative expressions of women identifying at least, in part, as Muslim, this simplistic narrative has been disseminated with militarizing effect. As these thoughtful commentators remind us, of course, this narrative of ‘the Muslim woman’ is not a new narrative. It recently has been taken off the nineteenth century imperial shelf, dusted, polished and put to new use, especially by officials of the US administration of President George W. Bush and their international allies in order to wrap its ‘war against terror’ in the justifying banner of ‘women’s liberation’.

Such a gendered narrative manipulation is posing for women in many countries today a dilemma confronted by many women thinkers and activists a century ago. At the opening of the twentieth century, for example, women in Egypt, India and Turkey had to figure out ways to devise effective critical movements to challenge local patriarchies, while not falling into collusion with European and American colonialists and Orientalists. This challenge was made all the more daunting because anti-colonial nationalist men (their brothers, husbands, fathers, and mentors) were too often eager to wield their own versions of patriarchal nationalism for the sake of dismissing these reformist women, thus preserving their own masculine privilege. Afghan and Iraqi women in the early twenty-first century are teaching all the rest of us how it is possible to overcome that challenge as they craft their own complex, realistic narratives to explain their own evolving conditions and to legitimate their own aspirations.

Reading each of the following essays slowly and carefully, while at the same time keeping our eyes on the actual words and actions of diverse, Muslim-identified women, wherever they are, is a combination that will make us better able to make sense of this world.