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BOOK ESSAY – *Radicalizing Her: Why Women Choose Violence,* by Nimmi Gowrinathan

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Nimmi Gowrinathan's book *Radicalizing Her: Why Women Choose Violence* explores the root causes that motivate female combatants to join violent movements, using data from interviews with female fighters with "the Tiger" (the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, or LTTE), a militant separatist group in Sri Lanka, and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), a guerilla armed force in Colombia. The book provides nuanced ways of understanding gender norms in violent movements and the struggles of female ex-combatants in post-war environments. This essay analyzes the invisibility of women as political actors and combatants, as well as the myths that surround their choice to mobilize. It also examines the commodification of the trauma of women in post-conflict environments, and the struggles female ex-combatants face during reintegration into society.

Gowrinathan (2021) writes that "the portrait of a female fighter is difficult to paint with soft strokes. She is used to being seen through hardened eyes, and she will show a hardened soul" (p. 21). The concept that women are docile beings in need of protection transcends cultures and shapes the way women are characterized worldwide. One of the most important points Gowrinathan (2021) highlights is that women are not born pacifists. Literature on women's roles and experiences has been limited in the field of security studies, which allows this work to fill in significant gaps pertaining to female combatants.[1] Gowrinathan (2021) examines the breach in gender norms that occurs when women deviate from the traditional role of pacifist and engage in direct combat, specifically exploring the causes of this break.

[1] Scholars define "female combatants" by drawing on the definition used in disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programs. "Female combatants" are female group members who are armed, on behalf of a rebel organization, and participate in organized combat activities (Wood & Thomas, 2017).

Throughout her book, Gowrinathan (2021) postulates that women are political beings whose existence is threatened by the violence of state soldiers, policymakers, cultural restraints, and unsafe communities. They grow up in the same violent environments as men and are therefore motivated to take up arms in the same way. She explores rage, a previously overlooked factor, resulting from years of state-perpetuated trauma and the implications of that rage in the choice to raise arms. Previous literature has claimed that it is only once women join movements that they become a target of repression and harm; some even claim that traditional gender roles are dismantled by women becoming more involved in the economy and nonviolent organizations, which in turn causes them to become a target of the state (Tezcür, 2020, p. 723). Gowrinathan (2021), however, argues that the mere existence of women renders them vulnerable.

The Choice of Violence

If women exist as targets of state and non-state violence, as Gowrinathan (2021) explains, then it is not unfounded that women would feel compelled to take up arms. Before delving further into why women become involved in violence, it is important to situate women within the context of violence, as little research has been done on the ways violence has intersected with women's lives. This book explains violence as a "political reality" that is an inescapable part of life. The author explains how other scholars claim violence is the desire of men to dominate women and that violence is the tool used to control not only women, but anyone deemed the "other". This contextualization of violence supports the claim that women are less likely to choose violence in locations where groups embrace ideologies that seek to protect or establish traditional hierarchies (Wood & Thomas, 2017). However, this begs the question of whether women in those contexts have different motivations for joining violent movements than those discussed by Gowrinathan (2021).

The motivation behind women joining violent movements is fraught with myths. Gowrinathan (2021) mentions four oppressive myths about female combatants: they are more peaceful than men by nature, they are brainwashed into joining militant movements, they join movements because of men in their lives, and finally that empowerment programming can save the female fighter. The argument that women are naturally more peaceful than men is evident in much of the early literature in the field of security studies. The second myth questions the agency of female fighters. Through direct interviews with female combatants, Gowrinathan (2021) finds that the women she spoke with describe their time as "a deliberate participation in a process" (p. 10). In contrast, other scholarship has looked at the frequency at which women and girls are forcibly recruited into armed groups and implies that their

participation is often involuntary and without agency. This claim is called into question by not only Gowrinathan's (2021) research, but also by rebellions in Sierra Leone and Liberia, where women actively lobbied for positions in the armed forces (Thomas & Wood, 2018). On the ground, Tamil women who were members of the Tigers also claimed to have joined movements to chase armies out of their villages, which does not indicate forced requirement and was instead an exercise of agency.

Scholars such as Miranda Alison (2004) further explore the issue of motivation, looking at how the breakdown of the separation of the home front and the war front boundary has significantly increased the number of female combatants. Using evidence from the Tigers, she claims the motivation of the Tamil women originates from the death of a loved one, oppression from the state, education disruption, poverty, sexual violence, and ideas of emancipation (Alison, 2004). The deviation of her explanation of motivation from Gowrinathan's (2021) is that Alison (2004) appears to leave out the claim that women are always political actors, independent of factors that come later in life.

Another important issue to dismantle is the assertion that female fighters are not a result of inequality, but are instead a rarity and a deviant. Other scholars have explored this claim; for example, a study of 72 groups involved in armed conflict across various regions between 1990 and 2008 found that 31.9% of women held combat roles among rebel groups (Asal & Jadoon, 2020). The same study argues that the "majority of militant groups employ women out of necessity rather than for egalitarian reasons" (Asal & Jadoon, 2020, p. 260-261). Although the statistics show that a fair percentage of women choose combat roles within movements, the article then goes on to discredit the role of female combatants. Other scholars claim that women will be mobilized when there is a lack of economic opportunities, leading to grievances (Asal & Jadoon, 2020). These claims, however, ignore a key argument of Gowrinathan's (2021) that the trauma of violence experienced by women and the constant attack on the female identity motivates women to fight.

"The battlefield as a forced gender equalizer"

Gowrinathan (2021) states that "in society, women are positioned without their consent. On the battlefield, they carefully calculate their own positioning" (p. 75). Not only does the battlefield act as a "forced gender equalizer" where both men and women must fight together, but it also gives women access to education and political positions that were previously unavailable to them. The political possibilities that become available to women when they join a violent movement act as a motivator for female combatants. Gowrinathan (2021) explains that through mobilization, women can achieve access to political education and overall, a greater knowledge of state action. Combatants that she interviewed

during her research claimed that they were able to escape traditional roles and the requirement of marriage that is often expected of women in society (Gowrinathan, 2021).

Other scholars have discussed the impact of gender equality on the presence of female combatants in rebel groups, stating that it should not be overlooked (Thomas & Wood, 2018). One example is the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) and its development of discourse regarding gender emancipation. Kurdish female fighters provide an interesting look into how the promise of gender equality can motivate women to join violent movements. In the PKK specifically, the idea that greater gender equality would be available to women within the movement attracted women who lacked decision-making power. The result was an opening of leadership positions in both the movement and the non-violent sphere for women. Although more positions became available, the equality aspect was still lacking, as access did not promise equal treatment (Tezcür, 2020). In the context of Gowrinathan's (2021) work, the idea that the promise of gender equality can act as a motivator for disenfranchised women is valuable, but it does not go far enough to explain why women feel disenfranchised. She picks up where these scholars leave off and digs deeper into the explanation of the underlying feelings that are the true motivators behind the choice to raise arms.

The promise of prestige is another motivator scholars cite in terms of why women are eager and willing to join armed groups and other combat activities. Combat roles are typically viewed as the most prestigious positions to hold within the movements (Wood & Thomas, 2017). Gowrinathan (2021) does not greatly explore this idea through her work; instead, she focuses on the fact that women equate taking on the role of combatant with safety and the ability to exercise agency. Through her interviews, she found that violence for many of the women was more about survival rather than empowerment.

Although the role of combatant offers women access to previously restricted territory, gender inequalities remain the same. Gowrinathan (2021) provides evidence of this through the story of one female ex-combatant's experience of being raped while a member of the Tigers. This indicates that even when women hold such roles, their gender does not become invisible to other fighters. Female combatants enjoy greater equality in some regards, but they still must contend with the vulnerabilities that result from their gender. Other scholarship has confronted the issue of gender inequality within violent and rebel movements, but Gowrinathan's (2021) research regarding the gendered vulnerabilities that persist within the ranks of said movements provides a new angle of analysis.

The Commodification of Trauma

A sense of equality may exist between women and men within certain contexts of violent movements, but women have very different experiences with victimhood than men in the post-war environment. For women in areas that have experienced conflict and violence, their identity often becomes synonymous with their trauma (Gowrinathan, 2021). Gowrinathan (2021) states that when women become war victims, everything else about their identity becomes invisible. Yet at the same time, their deaths and traumas become entertainment and a commodity to be used by people in positions of power. Women who were fighters muddy the water because they are not fully a victim nor an agent to be supported. Other scholars have explored the idea of female agency intersecting with victimhood, as well. Alexis Leanna Henshaw (2020) claims that agency and victimhood can coexist, but it impacts how the woman is perceived by society. Güneş Murat (2020) claims that the "presence of women in armed groups complicates the conventional association between womanhood and victimhood in violent conflicts and indicates a complicated relationship between violent mobilization and female agency" (p. 722). Gowrinathan's (2021) studies support this claim and explore how it harms women in the post-conflict environment.

Gowrinathan (2021) highlights mistreatment in her analysis of the treatment of female ex-combatants in the post-conflict environment. She discusses that women are seen as needing protection yet are routinely ignored when they request specific aid from organizations that are supposed to provide necessary services in the rebuilding efforts. For example, she tells the story of one ex-combatant's experience of inquiring about college, and the international organization response of providing her with a sewing machine in place of education. If women cannot exercise their agency to acquire necessities and recognition, then they must turn to other means. Women in South America used their identity as mothers to organize and gain more sympathy from people. Their identity as mothers provided them with a tool that they were able to use as a cultural commodity to gain access to the political space they had previously been denied. Other literature in this field appears to neglect this aspect of ingenuity. Another aspect Gowrinathan (2021) highlights that is not widely studied is women using their access to the identity of the victim when applying for asylum. The key to gaining asylum, as Gowrinathan (2021) explains, is appearing "docile, sexualized, and morally sound" (p. 116).

Feminism and Empowerment

Western feminism is a key aspect of the post-conflict environment in many situations because international organizations often operate from this perspective. Since the beginning of imperialism,

Western feminists have imagined an “other”; an “other” that was imprisoned by her culture and needed to be saved by the white woman (Choudhary, n.d.). Gowrinathan (2021) draws on this idea through her discussion of a myth about why women join violent movements. She states that Western analysts think women join violent movements because of the repressive cultures of developing countries. This explanation of motivation discredits the agency that women possess, the agency that would not be brought into question if the discussion were about women in the “West” or of so-called “developed” nations. Indeed, Westerners often offer “empowerment programming” that was originally intended to empower oppressed people through education and political involvement, but which has devolved into domestication and skills training (Gowrinathan, 2021). Women’s empowerment now hyper-focuses on sexualized conditions of women in the "developing" world, such as the issue of rape and sexual violence. This approach further erases women as political actors and overshadows the many layers of political subordination that perpetuate violence against women (Gowrinathan, 2021).

Furthermore, Gowrinathan (2021) explores the invisibility of intersectionality in feminist foreign policy, an aspect that is often not explored adequately in existing literature. One piece of scholarship stated that studies have shown women affiliated with rebel groups experience an increased likelihood of exclusion from disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) efforts. The cause of this was believed to be related to agency, gendered hierarchy, and the pressure for patriarchal reordering in the post-conflict period (Henshaw 2020). Henshaw (2020) argues that placing women, not the systems of gender, at the center of discourse fosters the view of women as a vulnerable population in need of protection and discourages contextualized understandings of the gendered experience. Gowrinathan’s (2021) findings support this narrative and call for a more intersectional approach to post-conflict reconstruction.

Female combatants may experience a semblance of equality on the battlefield, but they are again faced with the reality of structural inequality once the conflict is over or they exit it. One study describes the intentional exclusion of women in Sierra Leone from DDR benefits to aid in the erasure of female involvement in conflict as well as post-conflict reconstruction (Henshaw, 2020). Gowrinathan’s (2021) research dives deeper into this with the discussion of the separate peace talks held for the FARC in South America; one talk would address “women’s issues,” and the other would be political and pertain to militarization, economics, and Indigenous rights. The separation of women from politics shows the lack of understanding of intersectionality within the international and peacebuilding sphere. Post-war marginalization and the forced return to traditional roles have been explored by other scholars and while that is important to the field, Gowrinathan’s (2021) exploration of the loss of a sense of

self/identity that female ex-combatants experience upon reentering society is a topic that deserves further exploration. As Gowrinathan (2021) notes, the forced assimilation that occurs and is expected of women, as well as their increased level of surveillance from society, also merits further review.

Research gaps about female combatants become evident when we place Gowrinathan's (2021) *Radicalizing Her* in the context of existing security studies literature. Gowrinathan (2021) confronts the myths of why women choose violence and provides an intersectional approach to the topic that addresses the root cause of the choice to raise arms. Her emphasis on women as political actors and the trauma they experience reveals that women are targeted from birth and therefore cannot always accept the pacifistic role society so readily offers them. Her analysis of the struggles and benefits of the female combatant deepens the understanding of their position within society and underlines the importance of greater research in this field of study.

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