

*Despite the fact that the Gulf War has been declared 'over', the war in our own island continues unabated. The reader is sure to discover in this article, many resonances with the Sri Lankan state's various 'operations' in the North-East that was recently exemplified in the headline "Forces extend control in Palaly thrust" (DN 13 December 1991, emphasis added). This essay was first published in the Economic and Political Weekly of India, of 7 September 1991.*

## The 'Manliness of War' and the Abstraction of Death: A Feminist Critique of the Gulf War

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On January 26, 1991, over 200,000 people gathered in Washington D.C. to protest against Operation Desert Storm. Speaking at this rally, Molly Yard, president of NOW (National Organisation of Women) criticised the U.S. for defending Saudi Arabia, "where women have no rights" (*Chicago Maroon*, January 29).

Yard's critique comes out of a discourse that Chandra Mohanty has described as one that "sets up its own authorial subjects as the implicit reference, ie, the yardstick by which to encode and represent cultural Others." [Mohanty, 1985]. By implying that Saudi Arabian women were more oppressed than American women, Yard was merely quantifying oppression. This is an extremely dangerous path to take because it feeds into a claim of superiority ie, American women are more superior because they are less oppressed. This type of reductive analysis also defines women only in terms of their object status. Patriarchal oppression must be theorised and interpreted within specific societies and by taking into account the historical, socio-cultural and political processes that contribute to its hegemony and counter-hegemonies. Sisterhood cannot be merely assumed on the basis of gender. Instead of criticising the Saudi patriarchy in an essentialised and impressionistic way, the major focus of a feminist critique of Operation Desert Storm, should be to deconstruct its explication of a dominant

ing, capitalist, masculine, American hegemony.

As feminist critics of political theory have pointed out, political and economic power has always been co-extensive with military prowess, notions of citizenship and masculinity [Hartsock, 1982, Lloyd, 1986]. The western philosophical tradition is premised on the fact that women - as symbols of attachment to individual bodies, private interests and 'natural' feelings, represent all that the masculinist machinery of war, the state and capital must contain and transcend. Thus is born that noble notion of 'duty' that drives men to forsake their homes and families, to transcend petty needs and desires in the search of a higher and purer selfhood that even death cannot sully. It was also the valourising of such 'sacred' ideals that led to feminist lobbyists for the Equal Rights Amendment in the state legislatures being jeered with the constant refrain: "When you ladies are ready to fight in a war, we will be ready to discuss equal rights." [Spretnak, 1989].

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However, to insert women into the public arena or battlefield is to court disorder and chaos. We have it from the horse's mouth:

War is a man's work. Biological convergence on the battlefield would not only be dissatisfying in terms of what women could do, but it would be an enormous psychological distraction for the male, who wants to think he is fighting for that woman somewhere behind, not up there in the same foxhole with him. It tramples the male ego. When you get right down to it, you have to protect the manliness of war. - General Robert H Barrow, commander of the US Marines, 1982 [Quoted in Hartsock, 1982].

This statement is very illuminating for a variety of reasons. To begin with, Barrow once again invokes the public/private, outer/inner, rationality/irrationality dichotomies in order to rigidly fix and idealise gender stereotypes. War is man's work out there in the foxhole while incompetent woman is contained within the home eagerly awaiting her 'protector's' return. Ironically, these rigid lines have been broken in recent wars waged by the U.S. as more and more women soldiers have been deployed at the front. Even though they may not be engaged in combat, they still can be taken prisoner or killed in missile attacks. In February 1991, many Americans expressed concern over the news of the first female POW. With the American populace convinced that the male POWs had been tortured, the unvoiced fear in this instance

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was that the female POW could be sexually violated. The irony here, however, is that though a woman is raped every three minutes in the U.S. the rape of a single female soldier by the 'enemy' can suddenly whip up a lot of emotion for she has now been transformed into a symbol of American honour.

Barrow's idealisation of the 'manliness of war' is not only premised on 'that woman somewhere behind' (and of course, the repression of gay identity), but also on the woman who services the soldier during his off hours so that he does not forget the erotic make-up of his manliness and dominance. The 'seamier' side of the idealised woman - the prostitute, is most often consciously cultivated by the defence department - usually through the bodies of 'foreign' women. Unlike during the Vietnam war when Saigon flourished as a massive brothel for American GIs, the strict Islamic laws of Saudi Arabia made a similar conversion of Daharan, impossible. As one army colonel was reported saying: "Not only are there no girlie joints in Saudi Arabia, there are no girlies." (*Chicago Tribune*, August 30, 1990). This was circumvented somewhat by organising R and R ships for the male and female soldiers, the logic probably being that the two sexes would pair off. There was also talk of an offer that had been made by the Romanian government, regarding the use of the resorts in the Transylvanian Alps and their beaches by the Black Sea. Of course, the writing between the lines was "we offer you our women as well." For after all as the *Chicago Tribune* (September 30, 1990) pointed out: "Romanian women are noted for their charm." Another interesting twist to the phenomenon of prostitution was the thousands of letters that were sent to 'any single soldier' or 'any young single soldier'. Aboard the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier *Theodore Roosevelt*, the soldiers knew that letters from 'nice girls' could be picked up at the chaplain's office while letters from "girls who don't mind sending pinup pictures [were] distributed from the 'special services' office, where a line sometimes form[ed]" (*New York Times*, February 1, 1991). Many of these 'photos of scantily clad women' which the soldiers

were reported to keep under their helmets, were in turn traded with french soldiers for their meals (*Chicago Tribune*, February 6, 1991). The *Village Voice* reported recently that a news report by a female journalist about the clandestine screening of pornographic films before bombing missions over Iraq had been quickly censored by the military. Unfortunately, the censors were probably trying to avoid incurring the wrath of the Saudi Arabian government rather than that of the feminists in America!

### *During the war in the Persian Gulf, the Iraqi 'other' was constantly dehumanised, feminised and emasculated*

In the context of the above examples, Penny Strange's [1989] observation that, "violence to women is not a symptom of a violent society, [but] the prototype for men's assault on the world," is especially apt. She points out that during basic training, military recruits are often humiliated by being called 'faggot' or 'girl'. The recruit thus becomes conditioned to prove himself in opposition to these identities. In a situation of war, this opposition is extended to include the 'enemy'. Along a genealogy of Indian 'savages' and Vietnamese 'gooks', the American soldier's latest 'other' was the Iraqi 'sand nigger' and 'camel jockey' (these labels were especially ironic in the context of a large percentage of American soldiers being African-American and many of the 'allied' troops being from various other Arab nations). During the war in the Persian Gulf, the Iraqi 'other' was constantly (1) dehumanised (2) feminised and (3) emasculated.

(1) Holly Sklar reported in the *March Z Magazine* how a US pilot described bombing Iraqi tanks along the Kuwaiti border: "It's almost like you flipped on the light of the kitchen late at night and cockroaches started scurrying, and we're killing them." David Levine's cartoon in the *New York*

*Times* titled the 'Descent of Man' depicted, in descending order, Clark Gable, a gorilla, a chimpanzee, a snake and a pint sized Saddam Hussein with flies buzzing around his head.

- (2) After Saddam Hussein vowed to fight the "mother of all battles", *US News and World Report* published a rebuttal from chief warrant officer Jim Keesee of the 82nd Airborne: "Tell him Dad's coming to kick Mom's butt." (Quoted in *MS*, March/April 11, 1991). The Doug Marlette and Creators Syndicate ran a cartoon that depicted a pregnant Hussein with a nuclear warhead in his belly (Reprinted in *The Nation*). US bullets fashioned from depleted uranium "penetrated" the "armoured plates" of Iraqi tanks, detonated "on contact", "squirted a jet of molten metal through the armour." (*TIME*, February 25, 1991).
- (3) Michael Bronski had a very interesting reading of Bush's mispronunciation of Saddam Hussein's name during his address to the nation on January 16th 1991. He notes that by pronouncing Saddam as 'Sodom', Bush was playing with the biblical imagery of the 'evil and decadent city' of Sodom, as well as with sodomy - the 'unnatural' sexual activity that epitomised 'eastern' sexuality to the Crusaders [Bronski, 1991]. This notion of 'eastern boy buggerers' and 'child molesters' was especially reinforced by the media in August 1990 when Saddam Hussein appeared on Baghdad TV with a little British boy and ruffled his head. While 'penetrating' Baghdad with American missiles was normal and manly, Iraqi missiles 'molested' Israel' and Iraqi troops 'sodomised' Kuwait through 'rape'.

The eroticisation of warfare also effectively distanced it from reality. We con-

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stantly heard and read of military personnel and weapons experts (all male, not surprisingly), nonchalantly discussing 'manned penetrating aircrafts', 'mobile erector launchers', 'thrust-to-weight ratios', 'soft lay downs' etc. The most familiar phallic symbols were of course, the gun and the missile. In September 1990, the British government reported via *Reuter* that English sailors on warships in the Persian Gulf were using their government issue of condoms to protect the barrels of their machine and anti-aircraft guns from the dust (*Chicago Tribune*, September 30, 1990). And if anyone is wondering if that inspiring ditty "this is my rifle, this is my gun, this is to kill with, this is for fun," is still in usage, rest assured, I saw a demonstration of something very similar to that on TV prior to January 16: an army battalion was serenading a female reporter with their war cry which consisted of their raising their rifles with one hand while holding their crotches with the other. The words were unintelligible but the visuals were more than adequate.

However, the motif of military domination in the age of late capitalism is extremely nuanced.

To begin with, there is the 'theatre', that wonderfully clean and sanitised operating room where scientific Reason holds sway, or that equally wonderful cultivated space where we go for our entertainment. The major players in this 'theatre' were the Americans and their 'allies'. Whatever was orchestrated here was done according to a master plan unfolded in unison with American needs and on an American schedule. Along with the sanitised metaphor of the operating theatre, we kept hearing and seeing demonstrations of the 'clean', 'absolute accuracy' and 'surgical precision' of the latest laser guided 'smart bombs' and tomahawk cruise missiles that could locate and descend elevator shafts. The referents here were the weapons themselves - not the effect of their explosions nor who was at their receiving end. Therefore, this surgical imagery became extremely ironic when one realised that the surgical tool being referred to was not a delicately controlled scalpel, but a bomb, which in

Major Cole's words, "has the ability to turn the target into something that looks like a moonscape" (*New York Times*, January 22, 1991). And as Carol Cohn [1987] reminds us: "even scalpels spill blood." (And these were very shaky scalpels; military officials now admit that 40 per cent of the laser-guided bombs missed their targets, sometimes by thousands of feet [Sklar 1991: 58].)

Along the vein of entertainment, we also had the movie metaphor and the even more powerful sporting metaphor. With old war movies and 'westerns' saturating TV, the US Marines began the ground war by storming 'Indian' country at 'High Noon'. Triumphant pilots claimed 'scoring touchdowns' after bombing missions while Norman Schwartzkopf proudly noted: "Our team came to play ball." (*NYT*, March 27, 1991). Or what about this vulgar joke: "What do the Iraqis have in common with Lisa Olson (the female reporter before whom several Patriot players exposed themselves when she went to interview them in the locker room)? They've both seen Patriot Missiles up close." (New England Patriots' owner Victor Kiam quoted in *Newsweek*, February 18, 1991). A Vietnam Vet sorrowfully confided to me that during the 24-hour coverage of the war, people in his neighbourhood would switch the TV set on and off to 'check the score' and to see whether "we [the US] were still winning."

### ***The imagery that was most sickening were the invocations of holiday celebrations that are held so sacred within the American family***

The sophisticated technology that was being used also helped to sanitise and reduce the brutalities of war to a mere computer or video game. However, the equation of a blip on the video screen and a blip on a bomber plane's screen can have very chilling consequences. Kiren Chaudhry who was featured in the *Reader* (February 1, 1991) described an interview with a bomber pilot that she had heard on the radio:

A reporter asked him, "have you seen the enemy yet?" And he said, "I don't want to see the enemy. To me the enemy is a blip on the radar screen, and all I want is to make it go away. I don't want to know my enemy."

Then again the war was an aggressive business 'venture'. One used all one's 'assets' to neutralise the enemy's assets and soldier after soldier kept reminding us that there was a 'job' to be done and that they were there to do it. The war was also an especially wonderful opportunity for the weapons industries both to advertise and test their goods. As Kiren Chaudhry pointed out, the defence department was delighted because finally "all these strange and very expensive weapons systems got to be tested ... The whole question of who they [were] working *against* [was] moved off the agenda" (*Reader*, February 1, 1991). On the basis of the 'fine performance' of the patriot missile (used for the first time in this war) Bush proposed a 1.6 billion increase for the Star Wars anti-missile programme (*Chicago Tribune*, February 4, 1991).

However, the imagery that was most sickening were the invocations of holiday celebrations that are held so sacred within the American family. When describing the first air attack on Baghdad, John Holliman of CNN enthused that it was "like the fireworks finale on the Fourth of July at the base of the Washington Monument." (*NYT*, January 17, 1991). *TIME* magazine reported "cool young pilots" returning from bombing sorties noting that Baghdad was "lit up like a Christmas tree." (January 28, 1991). Right through the night of January 17, Dan Rather of CBS, triumphantly played and replayed the horrifying footage of the bombing of Iraq but not once did he stop to reflect on how many people must be dying beneath that beautiful sky. All we heard was white, male experts' chatter on the sophistication of the weapons that were raining down on Baghdad and the ineffectuality of the tracer bullets from Iraqi anti-aircraft guns.

Not only was the tragic reality of the people of Baghdad erased through Dan

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Rather's silence, but he visually manipulated all of his viewers by deleting the last frames of the footage on the bombing of Baghdad which depicted terrified Iraqi mothers running into bomb shelters clutching their children. [The only time it was shown was when Rather was viewing the raw footage together with his viewers when it was first beamed to the U.S. via satellite.] For the rest of the 17th night, Dan Rather's constant recap of the most moving moments of the war up to that time consisted of showing an Israeli mother placing gas masks on her children and 'fireworks' over Baghdad. Motherhood was moving as long as it was the 'allied' kind.

All of the imagery I have discussed above are part of the everyday discourse of Americans - football, videogames, theatre, Christmas, etc. By harnessing them in a situation of war, it helped the American populace to distance themselves from the bloody realities of it. Military discourses have especially developed these distancing mechanisms into a fine art. Take for example those wonderfully euphemising acronyms such as KIA (killed in action), WIA (wounded in action) and MIA (missing in action). In this war especially, troops had the added opportunity to succumb to 'friendly fire'. Civilian deaths were referred to as 'collateral damage' while weapons were humanised through names such as 'Patriots', 'Apaches', 'Smart' bombs etc. This kind of language conveniently allows one to skate upon the 'rational' and dehumanised surface of abstractions and euphemisms without having to face up to the reality that is hidden beneath these words. Carol Cohn's [1987] brilliant paper

on the rhetoric of defence intellectuals refers to this type of language as 'technostrategic'. As she insightfully points out, this language only articulates the perspective of the users of these weapons and not that of the victims.

However, what is most disturbing is that while the brutalities of war have been abstracted, the concrete parallel discourses have merely reduced complex issues to banalities. A prime example of this is how President Bush personalised this conflict by focusing exclusively on President Saddam Hussein. One of my male friends tried to explain it as a 'dick' thing. Bush was trying to show that he was more virile than Hussein. Colin Powell seemed to be echoing Bush when he autographed a 2,000-pound bomb destined for a nameless Iraqi target with the message: "Saddam - You didn't move it, and now you'll lose it." (NYT, February 11, 1991).

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I would like to conclude by suggesting the umbrella metaphor for this entire war. This is President Bush's most ironic euphemism the 'New World Order'. The ordering and dominating of the rest of the world in order to rejuvenate the flagging phallus of Bush's

America. Dan Rather, however, preferred to use much more flowery language to express this violence when he delightedly exclaimed on first seeing the bombing of Baghdad: "and now we see the *star spangled* sky of Baghdad." Henry Kissinger hit the nail on the head when he noted many years ago: "Power is the ultimate aphrodisiac"!

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