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Gendering the Shamima Begum case: "Jihadi brides" and the victim/perpetrator dichotomy

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Abstract

In February 2015, Shamima Begum and her two friends, all aged 15, travelled from London to Syria to join the newly established Caliphate (Islamic State). In 2021, after a claim brought by her family to bring the young back to England and have a fair trial, the UK Supreme Court decided to strip her of British citizenship. An appeal was then made to the Special Immigration Appeals Commission, which declared the Secretary of State's decision lawful. This article wants to offer a gender analysis of the case, which is missed in the Commission's discussion, by providing an alternative reading of Shamima's story. Constructed as a monster and as a victim, Shamima's case shows the perpetration of gender stereotypes as well as Orientalist and islamophobic conceptions about Muslim women. This not only obfuscates our understanding of ISIS women, but it also limits the capacity of governments to properly address the problem of radicalisation in the West.

1. Introduction

In February 2015, three girls, Shamima Begum, Amira Abase and Kadiza Sultana, all aged 15, travelled from London to Syria to join the newly established Caliphate (IS or ISIS- Islamic State). The news sparked a passionate debate in the country regarding the ability of the government to tackle extremism and save three young, bright girls. Appeals were launched to bring them home, but they seemed to have disappeared. In 2019, after the fall of ISIS in Raqqa, a journalist found one of the girls, Shamima, in Al-Hawl refugee camp in the north of Syria: a place where ISIS's women and children were temporarily detained by the Kurdish forces that had defeated ISIS. At that time, Shamima was 19 years old, and she had just delivered her third baby. Covered by her black jilbab, she was asking to return to the UK to save her toddler (who would die three weeks later of pneumonia) from the difficult conditions in the camp. Immediately after the interview, the British Home Secretary, Sajid Javid, declared that she would never be allowed to return to Britain. Shamima's family brought a case to the Immigration Tribunal, which decided to strip her of British citizenship. In 2020, the family went to the Court of Appeal, which ruled that she should be permitted to return to the UK to have a fair trial and to contest the Home Secretary's decision. However, in February 2021, the UK Supreme Court reversed the decision of the Court of Appeal, upholding the decision of the Secretary of State to strip her of British citizenship.[1] An appeal was then made to the Special Immigration Appeals Commission (the Commission)[2], which declared the Secretary of State's decision lawful. While the case has important legal considerations which will be analysed, what is lacking is an intersectional gender perspective to help understand Shamima's story. This brief contribution fills that gap, offering an alternative reading of the case. In the case, she is constructed through binary polarities: on the one hand, she is portrayed as a monster who consciously decided to join an extremely violent religious movement, while on the other she is portrayed as a passive victim of a terrorist organisation. This binary representation not only perpetrates gender stereotypes, but it also obfuscates the real roots of the problem of radicalisation in the West. In other words, by excluding issues of gender, age and social class as well as geopolitical ruptures, the Commission not only perpetrates an understanding of Muslim women at the intersection of gender, Orientalism and Islamophobia (ABU-LUGHOD), but it also obfuscates the understanding of why young girls from western democracies decide to join ISIS, limiting the capacity of governments to properly address the problem of radicalisation in the West.

[1] A sky News poll showed that 78% of British people agreed with the decision to revoke her citizenship.
[2] The Special Immigration Appeals Commission is a superior court created by the Special Immigration Appeals Commission Act 1997. It deals with cases in which the Secretary of State exercises its statutory power to deport or exclude someone from British soil. It also hears appeals against decisions to deprive someone of citizenship based on the British Nationality Act 1981.

2. *Victim or perpetrator?*

While Shamima could not be assessed by any expert because she was forbidden to enter the country, the Commission was satisfied with the decision of the Secretary of State that she still posed a risk to UK security based on classified documents. However, the Commission felt the need to discuss Shamima's agency based on selected interviews.
The first issue discussed was whether Shamima, at the time 15 years old, travelled voluntarily to Syria. While interviews presented many inconsistencies and a lack of appropriate contextual information, for the Commission she had «determination and commitment to aligning with ISIL» (para. 134) based on three elements: firstly, she was a bright student and thus understood what she was doing; secondly, prior to her trip, she actively searched the internet for information about ISIS; thirdly, she stole her older sister's passport to travel to Syria. However, the link is unclear, as the defending lawyer points out, between «academic potential on the one hand and judgment, maturity and common sense on the other» (para. 173). Furthermore, according to the Secretary of State (and upheld by the Commission), Shamima did not regret her choice to join ISIS, as she stayed in Raqqa until the fall of the Caliphate: this, for the Secretary of State, is an indication that she still supports ISIS, and so she represents a danger to UK security. Here it is supposed that because Shamima had the agency to travel to Syria, she must also have the agency to return sooner to the UK, ignoring the gendered nature of mobility and agency within ISIS (HONG). In fact, when joining ISIS, women give their passports to IS male members as a sign of their dedication: this, along with the necessity for ISIS women to travel with a male guardian, could have diminished her chances of escape. As a matter of fact, there are few cases of women trying to escape; in 2015 only two western women returned to their country, compared to 30% of their male counterparts (Cook and Vale).

The understanding that she "did not regret in time" her choice is based on the first interview with Shamima, when she had just arrived at Al-Hawl refugee camp, where she stated that she had a good time in IS controlled territory. The Commission did not take into consideration that Al-Hawl refugee camp was populated by ISIS supporters and that she was subsequently moved into another camp, Al-Roj, for her own safety, as she started to be critical of ISIS. The Commission interpreted later interviews given in Al-Roj refugee camp, in which she was critical of ISIS, as a simple strategy adopted by Shamima to return to the UK. In essence, for the Commission, Shamima is simply guilty. She is guilty of checking online information and actively planning her trip to Syria, but she is also guilty of not regretting in time her choice to join ISIS. Above all, she committed the crime of ignoring that the West is the best place for Muslim women, refusing to play the part of the 'good victim': in that case, she would have been taken back as a 'prodigal son'.

The defence, on the other hand, portrayed Shamima as a young girl, victim of trafficking and manipulation (para.148-9). In the case, a report was submitted by Dr Michael Korzinski, an expert in trauma and trafficking, stating that «the adolescent brain continues to undergo neurological development and…someone in Ms Begum's position was especially vulnerable» (para.166). The report highlights the need to take into consideration «information about her family background and history, and her interpersonal relationships» (para.167) when assessing Shamima's case. To strengthen this point, Mr Steve Harvey, a former police officer and independent consultant on trafficking, submitted that «individuals being trafficked for forced labour, especially in the early stages of the process, are often unaware that they are being trafficked, or indeed, exposed to any kind of risk or danger. The recruiter (a trafficker) ensures through preparation of the individual, that they feel safe and confident with the proposal or offer they have accepted. It is my professional experience that victims of trafficking have little or no concept of what they will actually be engaged in» (para.171).

Here, two opposing images of Shamima emerge: on the one hand, for the Commission the fact that she might have been victim of trafficking or manipulation does not change the fact that she still poses a risk to the security of the country. While for the defence, the fact that she might have been trafficked as a minor shows Shamima's lack of agency and responsibility. So, on the one hand, Shamima is seen as a dangerous religious extremist, while on the other as a passive victim.

However, both portrayals are misleading. The understanding of Shamima as a monster from which UK society must be protected reiterates gender stereotypes, disguising the complex roots of radicalisation. Sjoberg analyses the gendered representation of women within ISIS which characterizes them as «women terrorists rather than as terrorists who happen to be women – placing their gender at the forefront of accounts of their motivation» (SJOBERG, p.69). These women are seen as deviating from "normal" forms of femininity (SJOBERG and GENTRY). "Abnormal" women challenge the traditional understanding of women as 'nurturing souls', and so they seem even more dangerous than men, due to their unpredictability. But understanding women as victims of manipulation also reiterates gender stereotypes which see women as non-violent and apolitical subjects who, unlike men who have rational motivations, are led by emotions (SJOBERG and GENTRY): this, in turn, leads to a specific connotation between femininity and women's roles within society. Within the "mother discourse", which is based on the idea that women are "naturally nurturing souls", women's violence is understood as a «perversion of the private realm»,(SJOBERG and GENTRY, p. 32) placing them in the role of supporter of violent groups. Hence, women are understood as "domesticated terrorists", and their roles is often linked to the need for love and belonging (SJOBERG and GENTRY, p. 33). However, this understanding not only tends to reinscribe Muslim women in the position of "othered victims", reiterating imperialist notions of western superiority (KHALID, p. 7), but it also misrepresents women's radicalisation, rendering it a simple passive

process, and obscuring the various roles that women have within ISIS (COTTE). Here, an alternative intersectional gendered reading can be offered.

3. An Alternative Narrative

Shamima grew up in Bethnal Green, an area of London inhabited by a deeply conservative Muslim community where the line between extremism and religion is often blurred. Hussen Abase, father of Amira, one of the girls who travelled to Syria with Shamima, was found attending an Islamic rally organised by a famous hate preacher, Anjem Choudary, while screaming "Allahu akbar" ("God is great") in front of a burning American flag.
In this community, Muslim girls face different challenges from their male counterparts. While Muslim girls such as Shamima, Amira, and Kadiza outperform the boys in schools, their life choices are often limited in their own community. Khadiza's sisters, for instance, had arranged marriages when they were just teenagers. Many Muslim girls are alienated from the West, with the need to fill the "void the West has so far failed to address," (BENNHOLD, p. 5) and they "have come to resent the Western freedoms and opportunities their parents sought out" (BENNHOLD, p. 4).Those young girls reject the western identification of freedom with the sexed body and the conceptualisation of the *hijab* as a symbol of women's oppression. Nine days before her trip to Syria, Amira wrote on a Twitter message: «I feel like I don't belong in this era» (BENNHOLD, , p. 4). Many Muslim girls do not feel integrated into London life; they do not feel accepted, and they are often subjected to episodes of racism and Islamophobia.
The Islamic State has used appealing strategies to recruit young girls, by promising them a "home", a place to build an utopic Islamic state. ISIS propaganda empowers women through messages tailored to attract western women to travel to Syria (NELLY LAHOUD, 2018) borrowing from western pop culture. One message, mimicking the L'Oréal advertisement, showed a girl with a headscarf and the slogan «COVERed GIRL. Because I'm worth it» (BENNHOLD, p. 6). For Dr Joana Cook, assistant professor of terrorism and political violence at Leiden University, «it's fascinating, because when […] look[ing] at internal documents like letters from women to other women in the IS, they speak about being 'empowered' by the rights they attain under the Islamic State – the right to wear religious symbols and practice their faith as they see fit, for example. So they reframe these narratives [of female empowerment] in a way that fits with IS ideology» (BJURWALD).

For many Muslim girls from working class neighbourhoods in the West, joining ISIS is a way to emancipate from their parents and from the western society that has rejected them. For the lawyer of Shamima's family, Tasnime Akunjee, joining the Caliphate was a way to «take control of their own destiny» (BENNHOLD, p. 5). It is therefore possible that Shamima and her friends, at the time 15 years old, were only partly aware of the reality of Raqqa, and that at that time they wanted to join Islamic State because it made more sense than the secular liberal democracies in which they lived. Probably, like many others who joined ISIS, they just wanted

to live under what they thought to be Islamic law and to submit to God's will (COTTE). For Dr Katherine Brown, King's College London, by joining Islamic State, these women think they will become "perfect people" (JAFFER), but they also escape from racism and patriarchal family structures (KAPOOR). Saltman and Smith distinguish between push and pull factors in women's radicalisation. Among the pull factors are ideological and religious beliefs, while as push factors they identify the feeling of alienation from the West and the perception of persecution of the Muslim community worldwide (often with the involvement of western countries, which increases negative feelings towards western society).

This is not to give an explanation of Shamima's choices: probably, we will never know why she decided to travel to Syria and whether she is still a supporter of ISIS. What we know, however, is that by embedding gender stereotypes in the discussion, the Commission has failed to understand the complex roots of radicalisation which would include, at least, an understanding of Shamima's life in London before her trip to Syria.

4. A missed opportunity

Neither the Secretary of State nor the Commission have taken into consideration issues related to gender, age, social class, and religion that are at the crossroads of this case. The Commission was satisfied that «any individual assessed to have travelled to Syria and to have aligned with ISIL poses a threat to national security» (Begum v the Secretary of State for the Home Department, para.128), portraying Shamima as a 'monster' of a barbarous ideological zealotry. Scholars have noticed that female perpetrators are seen as inhuman, irrational, violent, and so outside of the norms of femininity, leading to a sensationalism which suggests that those women are psychologically disturbed and sexually deviated (SJOBERG and GENTRY). But Shamima has also been portrayed as a victim in need of help, mirroring Orientalist discourses of Muslim women as passive agents 'to be saved', and not as subjects who make choices within gendered social structures (SJOBERG).

What is missing, then, when reading the Begum case, is an analysis of the complex intersection of socio-political structures which include Islamophobia, gender violence, and geopolitical ruptures. A more critical analysis of those factors would not only make sense of Shamima's story, but it would also «allow for complex mappings of how agency and vulnerability act in concert, revealing the deep human knots that shape any such situation. A complexity that might for once disrupt the tired Orientalist binary of villain/victim that remains the insistent schema through which Muslim women must always be read» (KAPOOR). Ignoring gender stereotypes obscures the structural roots of the problem of radicalisation, limiting the capacity of western countries to prevent extremism (UN Security Council- Counter Terrorism Committee).

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