

perspective. There is an urgent need to openly articulate, discuss, and theorize about the representations of religious, political, gender, and national differences that distinguish segments of Arab and Arab American communities from others with the goal of building bridges across them. Similarly, there is an equally urgent need to form coalitions with other minority groups whose histories and experiences are different but who share our concern for civil rights in the post-September 11 political system.

One can choose to accept or critique the clichéd representations of national, religious, class, sexual, ethnic, and gender differences within and between communities leading to sources of division or strength. The binary Orientalist categories that counterpose the presumedly oppressed and conservative *muhajabat* versus the presumedly assertive and independent feminist Arab, American, or Arab American need to be questioned. This examination should be part of an ongoing debate about the impact that these constructions have on the community and whose interests they serve at a time when the collective mobilization of important human resources is needed to meet the serious national and international challenges that September 11 produced.

3

Palestinian Women's Disappearing Act

The Suicide Bomber Through Western Feminist Eyes

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This chapter critiques some Western feminist representations of the female suicide bombers of the second Palestinian Intifada. It argues that Palestinian women suicide bombers posed a challenge to the Orientalist view of Arab and Muslim women's bodies as demure and passive. By looking at the way this figure is deployed in the works of three writers, Andrea Dworkin, Robin Morgan, and Barbara Victor, the essay points out the different ways these writers use a "death by culture" paradigm that erases the political and replaces it with the cultural to explain the motivations of the women's violent acts. In the resulting imperial "feminist" discourse, Palestinian women are seen as victims, not of war or occupation, which are factored out of their lives, but of a killer culture that always abuses and victimizes them. The chapter concludes by underscoring the damaging effects this kind of discourse has on transnational feminist solidarity.

My interest in writing this essay was sparked by an encounter I had in the spring of 2004 with a British reporter who called my office to interview me about Palestinian women suicide bombers. After introducing herself and the topic on which she was working, she asked her first question: "Can you please talk about the treatment of Palestinian women?" When I started to talk about the hardships Palestinian women experience living under occupation, she interrupted me. "I meant for you to talk about how Palestinian society treats its women," she explained. "But the occupation . . .," I stammered. "Well, the occupation is really another topic for another article." At that point, I asked the reporter how she knew there was a connection between the way women were treated by their society and suicide bombings. From her answers, it became clear to me that she had no evidence to support that connection, but rather an assumption, which I, the Palestinian feminist native informant, was being called upon to validate. For the rest of the

conversation, I questioned that assumption and insisted that she consider the occupation as a relevant issue for her piece. The rest of this essay is specifically an extended questioning of the connection the reporter assumed between suicide bombings and culture. More broadly, it is also a critique of some problematic paradigms in Western feminist writings about gender and Palestinian nationalism.

Mistranslating Gender

To illustrate some of these problematic paradigms, let me begin with two examples of gender-related mistranslations from Arabic into English. In an article about Arab women's war-writing in her book *Gendering War Talk*, and in a section devoted to a discussion of the first Palestinian uprising, miriam cooke translates the Arabic word "intifada" for her readers by writing: "It is worth noting that *intifada* is a domestic term referring to the shaking out of the dustcloths and carpets that illustrates so brilliantly the process of these women's almost twenty-five-year-old insurrection." Cooke maintains, "The naming changed the nature of the war."¹

The second example is from a recent book called *Army of Roses: Inside the World of Palestinian Women Suicide Bombers*, by Barbara Victor. Early in the book, Victor focuses on a 2002 speech by the president of the Palestinian Authority, Yāsir 'Arafāt, to a crowd of Palestinian women who came to his bombed-out quarters in a show of support. In this speech, 'Arafāt reportedly uttered a phrase that, according to Victor, "changed forever the nature of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict" and "would become his mantra in the weeks and months ahead." What was this amazing phrase? According to Victor, 'Arafāt said "*Shahida* all the way to Jerusalem," thus "coining on the spot the feminized version of the Arab word for martyr, *shahide*, which previously existed only in the masculine form."²

In the first case, cooke's statement is a mistranslation because "intifada" is not a domestic term. It is true that one of the uses of the root verb *nafad* may be to shake up the carpets, but it can also mean to shake hands, cigarette ashes, a part of the body, or anything else. To select that one possible use and generalize it as the main meaning of the word to underscore the domestic or feminized nature of the intifada is a stretch. It is to ignore that, after all, "intifada" also comes from the verb "intafada," which is an intransitive verb meaning to shake off, often the body or part of it. According to this meaning, "intifada" describes the Palestinian rebellion in the West Bank and Gaza as a shaking off of the chains of Israeli occupation and of Palestinian inertia by the collective Palestinian national body that includes men and women, adults and children. This definition is the generally accepted meaning of the word "intifada." Although it is true that the

first intifada witnessed a more visible role for women (one of the icons of that intifada is the Palestinian woman deploying her body between Israeli soldiers and Palestinian youth to prevent the latter's arrest), it is an exaggeration to say that it was a women's uprising or that, to use cooke's words, it was "the most explicitly feminized of all postmodern wars."³ It is significant that at the very moment Palestinian women were assuming a more visibly public political role (as opposed to their more traditional private political role), their actions are mistranslated into a language that emphasizes their domesticity. This domesticating language is the effect of a Western feminist paradigm that, in the name of politicizing the personal, ends up domesticating the political in third world women's lives. In the process of this domestication, the dichotomy between the political and the personal, the public and the private, is upheld.

The second example is also an attempt to draw attention to the role of Palestinian women but this time in the second intifada. Victor takes one of 'Arafāt's familiar statements, "Shahada hatta al Quds" (which literally translates to "Martyrdom till Jerusalem," a variation on, "Shahada hatta al nasr," or "Martyrdom till victory"), and transforms it into *shaheeda*, meaning female martyr (both have the regular feminized ending, but they are different words). Moreover, she claims that the feminine form *shaheeda* did not exist before and was invented by 'Arafāt on that wintry morning. As anyone who is familiar with the Arabic language knows, *shaheeda*, the feminine form of *shaheede*, preexists both 'Arafāt and Victor. It is the regular feminine form of a regular noun. Victor goes even further by arguing that on that same day, and after that explosive speech, a woman called Wafa Idris exploded a bomb and herself in Jerusalem, becoming the first Palestinian *shaheeda*. So not only did 'Arafāt invent a new word for the Arabic language, but he also invented a new woman for the Palestinian people. Like the sorcerer of *A Thousand and One Nights*, 'Arafāt used his magical words to conjure up the Palestinian woman suicide bomber. Victor mentions his amazing feat on page 20 and goes on to write three hundred more pages on the basis of this mistranslation. Ignorant of the existence of the word, she erases the hundreds of women martyrs in Palestinian history through an act of mistranslation.

Gendering Suicide Bombers

These mistranslations are symptomatic of a deeper problem relating to discussions of gender and nationalism. Whereas recent feminist scholarship has drawn attention to the relevance of gender to the study of nationalism, the specific ways by which gender and nationalism inform each other remain undertheorized and captive to certain feminist paradigms that are limited in their relevance and

application.⁴ When Western feminists, for instance, address gender and nationalism in relation to Palestinian women, they privilege sexual politics to the exclusion of all else, such as history, class, war, and occupation. The result is a privatization of the political instead of a politicization of the private. One important consequence of this privatization is the disappearance of women as national agents. This fact is nowhere more evident than in the Western feminist discourse on Palestinian women suicide bombers.

Since September 11th, a whole industry has evolved to explain the motive of the suicide bomber. Much ink has been spilled in an attempt to develop a profile for the male suicide bomber. The more serious studies tend to emphasize a complexity of motives and thus the elusiveness of a fixed profile, whereas the more ideological ones focus on psychological aspects, with special emphasis on pathology.⁵ Sex has figured prominently, with U.S. and Israeli media advancing the *hour el 'ain* theory of suicide bombing, according to which men become suicide bombers because they are promised seventy-two virgins in paradise.⁶ One thing that can be discerned from most of these studies is that the image of the male suicide bomber could fit easily into the preexisting dominant discourse about Muslim and Arab men as violent and licentious others. The female suicide bombers, however, have posed more of a challenge.

The female suicide bomber challenges the image of Muslim and Arab women as docile bodies that is dominant in the Western context. Although this image of docility has its roots in the long history of Orientalist stereotypes of Muslim women, it has become more visible in recent years. Certainly, in the aftermath of September 11th, the image of the veiled and beaten body of the Afghan woman under the Taliban was deployed on a massive scale and came to stand for Muslim and Arab women generally. U.S. feminists played a key role in disseminating this profile, when the Feminist Majority, a prominent U.S. feminist organization, joined forces with the Bush administration to “liberate” the bodies of the downtrodden women of Afghanistan. The oppressed body of the Muslim woman was inserted into debates about American national security and was offered as an important reason to justify a war. In contrast to this image, the female suicide bomber’s body is far from dormant or inactive, passively waiting for outside help. It is purposeful, lethal, and literally explosive. Sometimes veiled, sometimes in “Western” dress, this body moves away from home, crosses borders, and infiltrates the other’s territory. It is a protean body in motion and, therefore, needs a translation.

Another reason the woman suicide bomber poses a challenge to feminists in particular is the ambivalent view feminists have concerning women’s relationship to nationalism. Despite recent scholarship that attempts to provide a nuanced

analysis of women’s connection to national institutions, the dominant view continues to see women of the third world as victims of nationalism, simultaneously embodied by their governments, countries, and cultures. While U.S. feminists may acknowledge that American women have a complex relation to their country and its patriarchal institutions (such as the military), they often deny that same kind of relationship to Arab and Muslim women, who are usually seen as a monolithic group always tainted with victimhood. As a result, the nationalist Arab and Muslim woman, with the suicide bomber as her most sensational embodiment, urgently needs an explanation.

To make this incomprehensible woman figure accessible to a Western readership, some U.S. feminists have deployed what Uma Narayan has called, in the context of her critique of Western feminist discourse on *sati*, a “death by culture” paradigm.⁷ This paradigm abstracts Palestinian women suicide bombers from any historical and political context and places them exclusively in a cultural one. Culture is opposed to politics and is seen as “natural,” “organic,” “essential,” and therefore unchanging.⁸ Doomed to this cultural context, Palestinian women are seen as victims of an abusive patriarchal Arab culture that drives them to destroy themselves and others.⁹ Thus, their violent political act is transformed into yet another example of the ways Arab culture inevitably kills its women.¹⁰

Going Back to Basics; or, One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

The uncontested spokeswoman for this paradigm has been Andrea Dworkin, who wrote an essay for the online feminist magazine *Feminista!* called “The Women Suicide Bombers.” When I first read Dworkin’s essay, I was simply irritated by it, regretting that with such publications feminist solidarity between first and third world women takes a step backward. But when I reread it through my graduate students’ eyes, I was angered. At the time the essay came out, I was teaching a seminar on postcolonial fiction and theory. Since one of the sections dealt with postcolonial feminist theory, I thought Dworkin’s essay would be a good example of problematic Western feminist writings about third world women, an easy exercise for the students to analyze using the feminist theory they had been reading. I e-mailed the essay to my nineteen students (seventeen of whom were women) without comment, just asking them to read it and post their responses to the rest of the class.

Their responses shocked me. The two self-identified feminists among my students admired the essay greatly. The others agreed. None of them questioned Dworkin’s racist characterization of Palestinian women and their society. On the contrary, those claims were assumed to be correct. The one dissenting post

came from the Arab American student in the class. But her response was delayed, making me suspect that she was intimidated by the consensus. I then e-mailed the class a letter to the editor responding to Dworkin's essay written by Monica Tarazi, an Arab American woman who was once a student of mine at Birzeit University. Unfortunately, Tarazi was attacked for her lack of sources, something the students never demanded of Dworkin. More ironically, she was chastised for daring to speak about women she did not know.

As I stood in front of my students the next class, I could not hide my distress and spent some time explaining it. I spoke as a Palestinian, a feminist, and a teacher. Although there were several uncomfortable moments, I could tell that my students heard me, and that, by the end of the day, we all had learned something: They learned to be more alert to their unexamined preconceptions about women of "other" cultures, particularly Arab and Muslim women, and not to let their misconceptions undermine their critical faculties. I learned that as sophisticated as postcolonial feminist theory has become, it might still fail, as it did in this case, in shaking deep-rooted assumptions about Arab women and their culture. The following critique of Dworkin's essay is an attempt to go back to basics, that is, to a critical examination of these faulty feminist assumptions that continue to undermine the efforts to consolidate a transnational feminist movement.

Death by Culture as Racist Discourse: Andrea Dworkin

Dworkin confidently gives her readers three reasons there are Palestinian women suicide bombers. The first reason is sexual abuse. She states that Palestinian women are raped "often by men in their own families," and since they will be killed by their families, they "trade in the lowly status of the raped woman for the higher status of a martyr." Although one cannot deny that Palestinian women, like women everywhere, are subject to sexual assault and that so-called honor killing does exist in Palestinian society, the second part of Dworkin's statement is baseless. Dworkin offers no evidence whatsoever to support a link between sexual abuse and suicide bombing. The only evidence she provides to support her claim is that Palestinian and Israeli feminists have worked together in rape crisis centers to repair torn hymens of Palestinian women. That no one else has uncovered the truth of the suicide bomber as sexual abuse victim "has to do with the invisibility of women in general and the necessary silence of injured victims." Indeed, an American feminist is needed to expose these women for the sexual abuse victims they really are.

It is fascinating that despite the loud explosions, Dworkin can hear only the "silence of injured victims." Blind to the hundreds of Palestinian women whose

bodies have been torn to shreds by Israeli missiles and bullets during the intifada years, she can shed tears only for the torn hymens between Palestinian women's legs. According to Dworkin's logic, Palestinian suicide bombers are really victims of their culture, a culture that systematically rapes them and then punishes them for the act. The only context that matters in understanding their action is a reified cultural one that completely supersedes all historical and political contexts.

The other two reasons Dworkin gives illustrate that not only abused women but also the "best and brightest" die by culture. She claims that the suicide bombers are Palestinian women who are trying to "rise up in a land where women are lower than the animals." Their societies are so oppressive and demeaning that these women are left only with the option of exploding their bodies to advance the cause of women in their societies: "The more women want to prove their worth, the more women suicide bombers there will be" is Dworkin's ominous prediction. She does not explain whether these women are recruited by Palestinian feminist organizations or are free feminist agents working on their own.¹¹ But worried that she may have assigned too much agency to them, she does remind us that they are really just dupes of nationalism. To seal her argument, she invokes what has become the scarecrow of Arab women nationalists, the "Algerian woman," who heroically fought for her country but was "pushed back down" after liberation.

Not only are Palestinian women dupes of nationalism, but they are also dupes of their families, according to Dworkin. "The best and the brightest are motivated to stand up for their families," who, Dworkin begrudgingly admits, suffer from Israeli occupation. Whereas Palestinian women's violence against Israel is highlighted at the beginning of the essay and even given a "long history," this reference is the first time that Dworkin mentions the occupation and its violence against Palestinians. This violence, however, is reduced to "beaten fathers," "destroyed homes," and "angry mothers." There is a tentative mention of "the brothers," but before one thinks that the brothers too must be suffering from Israeli aggression, Dworkin adds, "who are civilly superior to them [their sisters]." In other words, Palestinian women are acting on behalf of brothers, fathers, and mothers who, as we were told earlier, abuse and kill them. At no point in her article does Dworkin consider that Palestinian women themselves can be subject to Israeli violence.¹²

On the contrary, Dworkin works hard on suppressing Israeli violence against Palestinian women. At some point she quotes an unnamed Palestinian woman as saying: "It is as if we were in a big prison, and the only thing we really have to lose is that. Imagine what it is like to be me, a proud, well-educated woman who has traveled to many countries. Then see what it is like to be an insect, for that is what the Israeli soldiers call us—cockroaches, dogs, insects." This testimony

undermines Dworkin's main argument: the Palestinian woman here is not speaking as a victim of her patriarchal society; she is educated and proud. She, like others, is imprisoned and treated like "less than animals" not by the culture but by Israeli soldiers. She sees herself in unity with, and not in opposition to, Palestinian men, who, like her, are oppressed by the racism and injustice of the occupation.

Dworkin, however, turns a blind eye to all of it. She quotes this woman to prove that "the best and the brightest" are dupes who find it easier to blame "the Israelis for women's suffering than to blame the men who both sexually abuse and then kill them according to honor society rules." This woman's complaint about Israeli oppression is, according to Dworkin, misplaced. Dworkin, the American feminist who has not spent one day in her life living under occupation, clearly knows what is oppressing Palestinian women better than the women themselves. She can only shake her head in disbelief that a woman who is treated like a cockroach by her Israeli occupier is directing her anger at him and not at the men of her culture, who, after all, can only be rapists and murderers. Dworkin's imperial and racist discourse regarding Palestinian women blinds and deafens her to their suffering for which she can allow only one reason—culture.¹³

Robin Morgan's Demons

The racism of Dworkin's essay is so blatant that it is tempting to dismiss her argument as an exception. But, unfortunately, the "death by culture" paradigm seeps into the discourse of feminists who have expressed more sympathy toward women of the third world and who have worked hard to build bridges among women globally. One such feminist is Robin Morgan, founder of the Sisterhood Is Global Institute, editor of the landmark *Sisterhood Is Global* anthology, and former editor in chief of *Ms.* Morgan entered the fray when she wrote an article in *Ms.* explaining the phenomenon of the Palestinian female suicide bombers. In this article, Morgan extends to them the argument she made in her 1989 book, *The Demon Lover: The Roots of Terrorism*, a new edition of which was issued after September 11th. According to Morgan, these women are "token terrorists"; they are "invariably involved because of . . . the demon lover syndrome, their love for a particular man: a fraternal or paternal connection but more commonly a romantic or marital bond." Whereas men, according to Morgan, "become involved because of the politics," the women "become involved because of the men." To support her point, she mentions that two of the women had fathers or brothers or both who had been tortured while in custody of the Israeli army. Morgan undermines the women's political motivation by privatizing their political agency. She ignores all the signs that framed their action as

a political one: that the would-be bomber publicly declares her allegiance to a political group (by leaving a videotaped message in the hand of that group, by allowing her picture to be used on their posters, and by inscribing their slogans on her body); that she declares in a read statement her motivation to be nationalist, not personal; that she commits the violent act in a public place for all to see (restaurant, supermarket, checkpoint, street)—all these facts are ignored, and Morgan can see this woman's action only in "private" terms.

Moreover, Morgan belittles the women's political agency by casting the "demon lover" syndrome as a form of false female consciousness that women should transcend. Here is another version of the "they are duped" argument that Dworkin propagates. But this time, Palestinian women are dupes because they are adopting a male form of political expression. While the Palestinian woman has engaged in nonviolent resistance, Morgan maintains that such a woman discovered that "to be taken seriously—by her men, her culture, her adversary, and even eventually herself—she must act through male modes, preferably violent ones." By "acting through male modes," she is not really exercising her full agency or will; she is under the spell of the "demon lover." Only nonviolent activities can be accepted as genuine expressions of women's will since, according to Morgan, women are essentially nonviolent.¹⁴

To be fair to Morgan, her essentialism has a universal sweep and does not target specific cultures. Still, Palestinian culture as a source of the suicide bomber's motivation does creep into her argument. After mentioning the two women who fit the diagnoses of the "demon-lover syndrome," Morgan refers to a third suicide bomber, one who "was reported to be depressed about [her] impending arranged marriage." Although this example obviously does not fit Morgan's theory, the "demon lover" explanation slips in nevertheless. In this case, the violent act is seen as an expression of female agency, but this agency is allowed only because it is to "escape" the woman's oppressive culture, metonymized by the "arranged marriage." We are back, then, to the formulation of "death by culture." The woman destroys herself and others in order to escape a traditional oppressive patriarchal culture, the root cause of her violent act.

Morgan has written about Palestinian women's relation to their culture in more detail in a chapter in *The Demon Lover* titled "What Do Men Know about Life? The Middle East," in which she relates her encounters with Palestinian women in the West Bank and Gaza in the late 1980s. Morgan is eager in this chapter to dispel stereotypes of the Palestinian woman as either "a grenade-laden Leila Khaled" or "an illiterate refugee willingly producing sons for the revolution." She acknowledges the Palestinian women doctors, nurses, dentists, midwives,

social workers, educators, researchers, professors, architects, engineers, and lawyers whom she meets. Still, she admits that the “focus of this journey was the women in the refugee camps, who suffer from the sexuality of terrorism with every breath they inhale.” Although Morgan does not explain what “sexuality of terrorism” is, the meaning of the phrase becomes clearer as she proceeds in her narrative. It becomes evident, for instance, that “sexuality of terrorism” cannot be referring to the Israeli military occupation, for even though Morgan mentions it as a factor in refugee women’s lives, she minimizes its effects (for example, she calls the houses the Israeli army demolishes “shelters”). Soon we realize that the one issue that seems to plague refugee women’s lives and terrorize them is multiple pregnancies. In fact, the body of the Palestinian mother haunts Morgan, and by the end of her journey, it assumes demonic proportions. Ironically, it is this image with which she concludes her chapter in solidarity with Palestinian women: “The form is also grossly misshapen. This specter has a protruding belly, and balances a bucket on the head. Dark, cheap cloth shrouds the body, and smaller forms cling leechlike to every limb like growths on the flesh—children at the hip, thigh, calf, waist, breast, back, and neck. She is trying to refuse the job he requires of her. She is almost dying, almost surviving.”¹⁵ What we have in the above image is a description of the body of the Palestinian woman as an “other.” Hers is a nonhuman body, a “grossly misshapen form,” a “specter,” made up of disjointed body parts, such as a “protruding belly,” a head, a hip, thigh, calf, waist, breast, back, and neck. It is a zombielike body, wearing a shroud, and invaded by alien, nonhuman “smaller forms” that “cling leechlike . . . like growths on the flesh.” This deformed, diseased, silent body of the Palestinian mother can only put her in the range of our condescending pity, rendering Morgan’s profession of empathy in the chapter’s concluding words, “she is ourselves,” completely hollow. Morgan can express solidarity only with women abstracted from men, country, and history; she certainly has little sympathy for real women of flesh and blood and is almost terrified by those women with children.

The horror that permeates Morgan’s description of Palestinian women’s bodies echoes the racist Israeli anxieties about the high birthrate among Palestinian women. Morgan’s reference to diseaselike growth brings to mind those Israeli officials who always saw the Arab presence as a “cancer” in the body of the Jewish state. Morgan’s feminist rhetoric, then, coincides with the colonialist racist discourse about Palestinian women’s bodies. With this view of Palestinian women’s bodies, it is not surprising that any explanation of their political involvement would be seen as an example of their subservient bodies and minds to their demon lovers or as a desperate attempt to escape from their repressive culture.

Barbara Victor’s Sensational Designs

But if the discourse of death by culture is implied in Morgan’s narrative, it is the structuring principle in Barbara Victor’s *Army of Roses: Inside the World of Palestinian Women Suicide Bombers*. Although Victor is not a feminist theoretician and activist, as Dworkin and Morgan are, she does employ a feminist language in addressing her general reader. Using investigative reporting to construct a profile for the first four women suicide bombers, Victor discovers that “all four who died, plus the others who had tried and failed to die a martyr’s death, had personal problems that made their lives untenable within their own culture and society.” Victor offers a parable that “tells the story of four women who died for reasons that go beyond the liberation of Palestine,” a feminist morality tale that serves “as an example of the exploitation of women taken to a cynical and lethal extreme.” Political motives are allowed only in relation to the men. Thus we are told, without any evidence, that ‘Arafāt “shifted the emphasis on his military operations onto a very special kind of suicide bomber” because he failed to find any men who would do the job.¹⁶ Then he sent out his men to “seduce” the women. When it comes to the women’s motives, politics is jostled to the background by seedy narratives of sex and seduction. Victor writes a book full of egregious factual errors, unsubstantiated claims, distortions, and suspicious evidence to prove that culture, not politics, is indeed the main factor behind these women’s violent actions.

The erasure of politics is evident even when Victor mentions the role women played in the first Palestinian Intifada. She writes that the Palestinian woman became a symbol “who for the first time in the history of her culture was involved in and indicted for acts of subversion and sabotage and jailed in Israeli prisons.” This statement erases a long history of women’s political involvement and foregrounds culture by using the curious phrase “history of her culture.” It reflects the reductive view that Palestinian women’s history has always to be a cultural history, because their lives are mostly shaped by culture even when they are asserting their political wills. Not surprisingly, women’s political involvement, according to Victor, takes the form of them “shorten[ing] their skirts, wear[ing] trousers, and leav[ing] their heads uncovered.”¹⁷

The erasure of Palestinian women’s history of victimization by, and resistance to, the occupation is glaring when Victor declares Wafa Idris the first *shaheeda*. In Victor’s hands, *shaheeda*, meaning female martyr, becomes a synonym for “suicide bomber.” This “mistranslation” ends up writing off hundreds of Palestinian women martyrs and makes incomprehensible statements such as “the whole question of the religious legitimacy of martyrs in general prompted debate

within the Muslim community.”¹⁸ According to Victor, suicide bombing marks the beginning of Palestinian women’s history. But, of course, martyrdom, defined as dying for one’s country or faith or both, has the highest national and religious values ascribed to it, and, contrary to Victor’s claim, at no point has it been a subject of debate in the Palestinian or Muslim community. What has been debated are suicide attacks (*al ‘amaleyyat al inihareya*) against Israeli civilians, which the Palestinians prefer to call *al ‘amaleyyat al isteshhadaya*. The man or woman who undertakes such an act is referred to as *Isteshhadi* and *Istishhadaya*, respectively, which can be translated as “that who seeks martyrdom.” This word distinguishes him or her from the regular “martyr,” whether a member of an armed militia or a civilian bystander, by underscoring the individual will and purposefulness behind the act.

So perhaps Victor intended to say that Idris was the first Palestinian woman *istishhadaya*. Even this statement, however, is not totally accurate. Both Palestinian and Israeli sources raise questions about her being an *istishhadaya*/suicide bomber and speculate that it is likely she was a carrier of a bomb that may have gone off prematurely. Victor herself quotes an Israeli eyewitness, for instance, saying that Idris’s backpack was caught up in the door of the store on her way out, which may have led to the explosion. Others point out the fact that unlike in every other case of a suicide bombing, no taped or written statement was found left behind from Idris. Such evidence should alert us to the possibility that Idris’s *isteshhadaya* identity was constructed by both the Palestinians and the Israelis after her death. Nevertheless, Victor ignores this evidence and takes Idris’s *isteshhadaya* status for granted and then goes on to focus on the motives that drove her to suicide.

In exposing the motives of the female suicide bombers, Victor constructs a fictional narrative that casts the women as always victims of their culture. According to this narrative, Wafa Idris and Hiba Daraghmech may seem confident and independent on the surface but are in fact brutalized by their culture, one as a divorced and barren woman and the other as a rape victim. Darine Abu Aisheh is a “brilliant” student and an ambitious “feminist” who is thwarted by a culture that values only defeated women. Shireen Rabiya, “a beautiful, long-legged girl with all the attributes and grace of a fashion model,” is demoralized by a culture that teases its “too attractive” women. A ubiquitous Arab “honor code” is invoked to explain the actions of some: thus, Ahlam al Tamimi (a.k.a. Zina), for example, was pushed by her family to become a suicide bomber to redeem the family honor after becoming pregnant out of wedlock, while Ayat al Akhras sacrificed herself to redeem the honor of a father accused of collaboration with

Israel. And when the woman has “no sensational story,” and Victor is unable to conjure up any scandal to explain her motivation, as in the case of Andaleeb Takatka, we are told that she wanted so much to be a “superstar” and suicide bombing was her only route to stardom (the evidence for this claim is that as a teenager she had pictures of Arab entertainers on her bedroom wall).¹⁹ In other words, marginalized, talented, and ordinary Palestinian women are all persecuted by their culture in one way or another and therefore are viable candidates to carry out suicide bombings.

Noncultural reasons that may explain the women’s actions do appear in Victor’s book, but only to be subtly dismissed or transformed into cultural effects. Thus, Victor reports the stories about how Idris was moved by the injuries of children that she witnessed as a volunteer paramedic, that she herself was shot twice, that Ayat al Akhras was shaken by witnessing the killing of a neighbor, that Abu Aisheh was humiliated at a checkpoint by Israeli soldiers who unveiled her in public and forced a cousin to kiss her on the mouth. These reasons, however, along with the women’s public political activism (as in the case of Abu Aisheh and Daraghmech), invariably recede into the background once Victor uncovers the “secret” reason that supersedes all others and becomes the basis for her psychoanalysis of dead women she has never met. As a result, Victor’s narrative predictably dwells on Idris’s marital problems, on al Akhras’s “disgrace,” on Abu Aisheh’s desire to escape a marriage, and on Daraghmech’s alleged rape. Even when a certain “cultural” practice is not relevant to her story, Victor still uses it the way a prosecutor prejudices the jury with immaterial yet tainting evidence. An example of this strategy is her going on about “wife beating” as a practice in Muslim society only to conclude that Idris’s husband did *not* beat her.²⁰

However, the nature of the evidence Victor uncovers and her way of uncovering it are both problematic. Her sensational information usually comes in the form of gossip whispered to Victor by a friend or relative of the dead woman or a “confession” of some juicy detail that hitherto has been kept secret. An example of the first kind of revelation is the statement by Abu Aisheh’s friend that Darine “told me she would rather die” than marry.²¹ Victor uses this statement to construct a profile for Abu Aisheh as a desperate feminist rebelling against her culture. There is no other evidence to support this conclusion, and Abu Aisheh’s public political commitments as a student activist at An Najah University are eclipsed by this friendly revelation.

More sensational are the “confessions” Victor receives from, for instance, Hiba Daraghmech’s mother and the woman she calls “Zina.” In the first case, the mother tells Victor that her daughter was raped by a mentally retarded uncle,

and in the second, Zina, who was indicted for aiding a suicide bomber, reveals that she had a child out of wedlock. These confessions are problematic because Victor does not explain why these women would trust her with information that was not revealed to anyone else. Why would Hiba Daraghmeḥ's mother allegedly reveal to Victor, a foreign reporter she is meeting for the first time in her life, a much guarded secret about her daughter, now celebrated as an *istishadeya*, that would tarnish the family's name? In Zina's case, Victor claims that at the request of the woman's family she gives her an alias. But this attempt at protecting her identity is not convincing because the moment we read that "Zina" is the woman who helped transport Izz el Deen al Masri, the bomber of the restaurant Sbarro's, her real identity as Ahlam al Tamimi is revealed. Al Tamimi is well known; in fact, her posters are all over the walls in the West Bank, and her defiant words in court after her sentencing are quoted all over the Internet. Why would a woman who has the status of a national celebrity, whose story is common knowledge, make such a gothic confession of secrets she and her family supposedly guarded for years? And if we assume that Victor is not really slandering al Tamimi in this underhanded way and is truly ignorant of her public image, how could she justify such ignorance when she supposedly researched the minutest detail of this woman's life? It does not help matters that Victor does not explain how she conducted her interviews: How did she introduce herself to her subjects? What language did she use in interviewing them? Were these "confessions" made in front of an interpreter as well? Were the people aware that she was researching a book and that she would be making the intimate details of their lives public?

The veracity of Victor's "evidence" is further undermined by the many factual errors that riddle her narrative. According to her, the late Syrian president Hafez al Asad is a Christian Alawi (no such thing exists; he is a Muslim *alaway*); Birzeit University is Christian and its student council was Christian before it was over taken by Islamists (both the university and the council are secular; different political groups, including the Islamists, run for the council's elections); the color of mourning in Palestinian culture is white (it is black); and Darine Abu Aisheh is Hamas's first female suicide bomber (a simple Google search would reveal that Reem al Reyashi was, whereas Abu Aisheh was claimed by Al Aqsa Martyr's Brigades, who prepared her for her mission after Hamas refused to).²² In addition, Victor either gets the names of her interviewees wrong (Wafa Idris's mother, Wasfeyeh, is renamed Mabrook, a male name) or consistently misspells them beyond recognition (I counted twenty-two such instances). The accumulative effect of the egregious factual errors, the misspellings, and the mistranslations should undermine Victor's authority as someone reporting from "inside the world

of Palestinian suicide bombers," as her subtitle claims. But while reviewers of her other books, such as her biography of Madonna, point to Victor's love for sleaziness and her penchant for unnamed sources,²³ none of the reviewers of her book on Palestinian women seems to be bothered by the sloppiness of her evidence and her, at best, questionable relationship to her Palestinian informants.²⁴

The Consuming Gaze: The Woman Suicide Bomber as an Object of Desire

In Victor's narrative, Palestinian female suicide bombers, and Palestinian women generally, are objectified through a voyeuristic Western perspective that can see them only as sexual beings violated by their culture. When Victor meets Idris for the first time, she presents her as an object of Western desire: she lingers on Idris's attractive physical features, and then concludes: "It was not surprising, given her cheerful personality and good looks, that I later learned that several Western journalists had asked her out, although, as a good Muslim woman, she had refused their advances." Then there is the odd description of Idris's body after the explosion: "I rushed over to see it, and while the entire scene was horrifying, the sign of Wafa's body lying in the middle of Jaffa Road in Jerusalem, covered haphazardly with a rubber sheet, was stunning. Even more shocking was the image of an arm, her right arm, which had been ripped from her body, lying bloody and torn several inches away."²⁵ The choice of the word "stunning" (synonyms: "beautiful," "gorgeous," "lovely," "irresistible," "breathtaking," "awesome") in this context shows how Victor's gaze is fixated on sexualizing and objectifying Idris's body, even in death.²⁶ Victor's voyeurism is not unique. Mainstream Western media have referred to Palestinian female suicide bombers as "lipstick martyrs," who are "dressed to kill." Writing for the *Observer*, Kevin Toolis could not hide the sexual undertones in his description of Hiba Daraghmeḥ's poster: "On the walls of Jenin she stares out from her poster like a vengeful nun. Her eyes are defiant, her pupils enlarged, and her eyebrows are plucked." This is the same Toolis who offers the following sexually loaded mistranslation of Hanadi Jaradat's will. According to him, Jaradat declared in her videotaped statement: "By the will of God I decided to be the sixth martyr who makes her body full with splinters in order to enter every Zionist heart who occupied our country."²⁷ It is a statement that is, in Toolis's words, "suffused with sexuality." But in fact Jaradat did not say what Toolis attributes to her. A more accurate translation of her Arabic words is: "I do not have but this body, which I will make into splinters to uproot anyone who had tried to uproot us from our homeland." By using the word "uproot," Jaradat is employing a familiar national metaphor used by the Palestinians to describe their

experience of displacement and exile. The sexual connotations that Toolis reads in Jaradat's words are but a figment of his overheated imagination—an imagination more interested in the woman's "plucked eyebrows" and "ruby lips" than in the causes and consequences of their act.

Early in her book, Victor recalls an encounter she had with a Palestinian woman in the Shatila refugee camp in Lebanon right after the Phalangist militia, with Israeli complicity, massacred hundreds of Palestinian men, women, and children. Sitting in the midst of a scene of carnage and destruction, cradling a dead child in her arms, this survivor confronts Victor, whom she recognizes as an American: "You American women talk constantly of equality. Well, you can take a lesson from us Palestinian women. We die in equal numbers to the men." Victor chooses to understand this woman's bitter and ironic statement as an expression of a "tragic concept of women's liberation," that is, Palestinian women cannot be equal in their society except through death.²⁸ By ignoring the context of the encounter, Victor misses the obvious—that the woman is condemning the hypocrisy of Western feminists who clamor for women's rights but turn a deaf ear to Palestinian women suffering at the hands of Israeli soldiers and their friends. Victor's blindness to the context in which this woman is speaking—the scene of death and devastation around her, the dead child in her arms—is astounding. She is so fixated on seeing the woman as a victim of her culture that even when the woman's loss and suffering, as a result of political violence against her and her family and neighbors, is staring Victor in the face, she is blind to it.

This Western feminist discourse on Arab women has a chilling effect particularly on the relationship between Arab and Arab American feminists, on the one hand, and their American counterparts, on the other. Arab American feminists and activists have long shouldered a double burden: not only do they work against sexism and patriarchy in their communities, but they also have to contend with the harmful stereotypes propagated about them and their Arab culture in the mass media. Because of their hard work and their forming of important alliances with other women of color in the United States, who also had to struggle against the racism and classism of mainstream white feminists, their voices have made some impact and better channels of communication have been opened. However, since the tragic events of September 11th, these small gains in feminist solidarity seem to have been eroded in the face of the mobilizing of U.S. feminists in the service of nationalism and militarism. The discourse on Palestinian women suicide bombers, just like the one on Afghan women, is bound to widen the gap separating Arab Americans from feminists like Dworkin, Morgan, and Victor.

But beyond feminist solidarity, invoking the "death by culture" paradigm to understand why some women become suicide bombers leads to a dead end, for this understanding implies a Kurtzian "exterminate all the brutes" solution, the "brutes" in this case being all those persons who are made by Arab or Palestinian culture. For anyone who does not believe this solution is a viable one, it is crucial to acknowledge that suicide bombings by women, just like the ones by men, are, first and foremost, forms of political violence. The culture that is implicated in this phenomenon is not a fetishized, oppressive "Arab culture," but rather a culture of militarization whose effects are by no means limited to Palestinian society. The recognition of suicide bombing as a political form of violence neither trivializes nor idealizes the suicide bomber/*istishadeya*. On the contrary, seeing her as a political agent is a first and necessary step for launching a feminist critique of women, militarization, and nationalism that goes beyond casting Palestinian women as demons, angels, or victims of a killer culture.