"From Mild Christian to Islamic Zealot" –Navigating Mediatised Tools of Othering in the case of Muriel Degauque

Oana Nițu

MSc. Political Science
Email: oana.nitu@uva.student.nl

Abstract

This article scrutinises the media narratives surrounding Muriel Degauque, the first 'Western' suicide bomber. Degauque, born in Belgium and raised as a Catholic, does not fit into the profile of the typical suicide attacker. Despite her 'ordinariness', I show how she was classed as an outsider in English- and Dutch language media narratives. Through the interaction of her class, gender and religion, she is denied agency in her violence, thus her motivations to commit a suicide attack are reduced to either a 'working-class rebel', an infantilised woman who loses her femininity or an erotomaniac who pursued violence because she was 'brainwashed' by her husband.

Keywords

Suicide bomber, Working-class, National identity, Muriel Degauque, Erotomania

Introduction

Muriel Degauque, born in Belgium and raised as a Catholic, was the first 'Western' woman to commit a suicide bombing attack in 2005 in Iraq (Brown, 2011). Muriel Degauque grew up in a working-class family in Charleroi, Belgium, the daughter of a cleaner and a crane operator (Smith, 2005). She had a tumultuous adolescence due to her issues with drugs and alcohol (Brown & Watson, 2005). Unable to keep a stable job, she moved to a 'poor' neighbourhood in Brussels with her second husband and converted to Islam. Together, they travelled by car to Iraq, where she detonated her suicide vest in Baquba in November 2005. She injured one soldier, but there were no casualties other than Muriel (Brown, 2011). Her death challenged the perceptions surrounding the "profile of suicide attackers", as she was a white, Catholic-raised woman who later converted to Islam, as opposed to a "young Muslim man, usually of ethnic appearance" (p. 705).

Some previous academic accounts tend to reduce women's violence to personal motives, such as revenge, earning respect, influence by male figures in their lives, general unhappiness and redemption (Bloom, 2007; Bloom, 2010; Jacques & Taylor, 2008). Other scholars problematise these narratives, suggesting that women's violence is often depoliticised because it contrasts gender stereotypes about women's innate peacefulness, passivity or motherly sacredness (Åhäll, 2015; Brown, 2014; Sjoberg & Gentry, 2008). Whenever women commit violence, Sjoberg and

Gentry (2008) suggest that mass media aims to "explain away the possibility that women make a choice to kill or injure" (p. 5), arguing that women's violent acts are sensationalised in a way that preserves women's submission to men, either by portraying them as sexually defective– for instance, by being unable to give birth to their own children– or sexually obsessed– committing violence because they are influenced by a male figure in their life, be it their husband or father.

This paper aims to investigate the mediatic narratives surrounding Muriel Degauque's violence, trying to uncover how gender, class, and religious stereotypes reduce women's complex motivations to engage in terrorism, leading to a denial of their agency (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2008). I, therefore, pose the question: *How was Muriel Degauque's suicide bombing framed in Western media in relation to her subjectivity (class, femininity, whiteness, and religion) directly following the suicide attack in Iraq in 2005?*

This paper enriches the academic debate surrounding women's violence and, in particular, female suicide bombers because it considers the atypical case of Muriel Degauque, whose agency–as a white Belgian woman–is harder to deny through "gendered neo-orientalist discursive strategies" according to which women from the Global South are controlled by their husbands (Bogain & Jackson, 2024, p. 368). However, I attempt to assess how Muriel Degauque is recast by Western media from a white woman to a racialised outsider through the interaction of her class, gender and religion. I use critical discourse analysis to explore English and Dutch media sources which covered the event, examining argumentative and discursive elements which construct and assign different meanings and narratives surrounding her identity and her violence.

This paper begins by outlining the academic debate covering women's violence, referring in detail to previous academic accounts studying female suicide bombers. Next, I discuss the methodology, going over the process of data collection and data analysis, and explaining the approach I follow for the critical discourse analysis. The paper culminates with the analysis of the media sources, where I discuss notions of how Muriel Degauque's identity is depicted using markers of class, femininity, whiteness and religion. I lastly explore the reasons constructed in the media for Muriel Degauque's violence.

Theoretical Framework

In order to understand how female suicide bombers are depicted in media narratives, I first draw from different scholarly perspectives which reflect upon women's motivations to pursue violence. Both media and academic literature place women's participation in violence outside the realm of politics, often explaining their engagement in violence based on personal motives. Notably when it comes to suicide bombers, Bloom (2007) describes women as revenge-seeking subjects who "usually become suicide bombers in response to a personal tragedy" (p. 97), thus reinforcing the gendered assumption that women are more emotional than men in the face of adversity. Only in exceptional circumstances, out of the desire to escape "the predestined life that is expected of them" (Bloom, 2007, p. 97), do women want to make a statement "in the name of their gender", and hence commit suicide bombings. In contrast, male-dominated terrorist organisations have a more calculated and rational understanding of terrorism, being described as employing a "tactical response" (Bloom, 2007, p.98) by recruiting women due to both the need for manpower and their ability to increase the efficiency of suicide attacks by subverting gender roles through their

violence. This male-female divide is believed to be the case despite female suicide bombers being on average better educated and older than men, as well as outlining political motivations in their own video statements of martyrdom before the suicide attacks (Åhäll, 2015). Bloom (2007) thus seems to consider women's agency as an anomaly, describing suicide bombers as merely 'pawns' at the bottom of the male-female hierarchy by suggesting that they are easily manipulated and instrumentalised for men's deliberate strategies. In a later article, Bloom (2010) acknowledges that women can simultaneously have political motivations and personal reasons, which she calls "the four Rs–revenge, redemption, respect and relationship" (p. 95), completing her earlier piece with the latter three motivations. Redemption refers to women's desire to "reinvent themselves" due to previous wrongdoings or due to their incapacity to achieve 'true womanhood' by being unable to conceive or to marry. Respect is described in antithetical terms: respect is an *individual* desire to be perceived as noteworthy as a result of fighting for a *cause* (such as improving women's status), notwithstanding that the *cause* itself is not only a collective wish, but also intrinsically political and not personal. Lastly, relationship suggests that women become suicide bombers because they are influenced by a male figure in their life: husband, father or son.

Jacques and Taylor (2008) mirror the perspective outlined above in their study, which reveals that male and female suicide bombers exhibit important differences in their motivations, with men being more prompted to participate in violence due to religious or nationalistic motives, while women do so due to revenge and personal motivations, such as family issues, money, drug abuse, and unhappiness. Importantly, the data underpinning their analysis consists of open-source materials including newspaper articles which contained information about motives, personal backgrounds and recruitment. However, while the authors triangulated the data in their study, it was not scrutinised against gender stereotypes, which, as I will return to below, are prevalent in media narratives.

Therefore, it seems that the authors avoid attributing political motivations to women's violence, thus reinforcing harmful gender stereotypes (Bloom 2007; Bloom 2010; Jacques & Taylor 2008). In contrast, other scholars criticise these accounts of women's violence for stripping women of "their gender and humanity", by portraying them as "anomalies" (Brown, 2014, p. 449). Women's violence is both depersonalised and depoliticised due to the inability to understand "things whose existence is not morally comprehensible" (p. 451). Collective morality is subjectively constructed and informed by dominant gender norms depicting women as naturally peaceful, passive, and sacred (through motherhood)–therefore it is impossible to even fathom "how mothers became murderers" (p. 451). As a result, Sjoberg and Gentry (2008, p. 5) suggest that mediatic accounts of women's violence "explain away" the possibility of women's engagement in violence by instead *stripping them of their womanhood*, an attribute for which violence renders them unworthy. As such, because "women's agency in violence would interrupt dominant discourses about women's roles" (p. 6), women commit a "double transgression": the violence itself and the violation of the gender stereotypes which "deem her incapable of that violence" (p. 7).

Therefore, women's violence is marginalised and their agency denied through narratives which suggest women are either sexually obsessed with men–and hence commit violence as a result of being manipulated by their husbands or other male figures–or erotically dysfunctional–and therefore unable to marry and have children or unwilling to do so due to their homosexuality. Sjoberg and Gentry (2008) suggest that these narratives are not limited to gender but are also racialised: Western women engage in violence due to their rebellious character and

refusal to cater to men, whereas Islamic women are "unable to please men" (p. 17) as a result of an inner dysfunction. As such, women's violence is depoliticised and depersonalised because the violation of gender norms appears so inexplicable that women are deemed incapable to act violently out of their own volition, especially if they are Muslim. In the next section, I discuss aspects of religious identity in more detail, particularly emphasising the conversion to Islam.

Most of the literature on female suicide bombers pays little attention to female converts to Islam who take part in suicide bombings. Perešin (2015) draws attention to "Western female migrants" (p. 22) who join ISIS, but suggests that most of them are "second or third-generation Muslim immigrants" who find themselves "between traditional and liberal values" (p. 24). Up to date, only two studies have examined detailed case studies of converts. Bogain and Jackson (2024) emphasise the story of "two unlikely jihadists" (p. 354), Christine Riviere and Sally Jones, who, despite appearing "at first glance typically French/ British" (p. 355), were characterised in media through "matrices of privilege and marginality" which constructed them as *others*. Intricately, Bogain and Jackson (2024) show how gender is a "crucial marker" (p. 357) for national identity, describing how the 'atypical' mothers were cast as "dangerous inside Others" (p. 357) through notions of class. The working-class background of the two women placed them outside the "boundaries of 'good' French and British society", helping reinforce the imaginary frontiers of the "superiority and goodness of the national community" (p. 368). As such, framing their status as undeserving outsiders to the national community was crucial in *explaining away* other motivations for violence, notably those related to the internal problems of their native societies.

Lastly, Brown (2011, p. 715) is the only academic to offer an in-depth analysis of Muriel Degauque's suicide bombing, suggesting that her Muslim faith–which she adopted later in life–was key in her *othering*, marking her as radical and unlike other Western European women. As such, despite being white, she was racialised and became a "victim of Islam". Albeit limited, the previous literature referring to converts shows that in order to excuse any factors which might make individuals more prone to radicalisation, such as poverty and lack of access to education, social narratives are intricately crafted to deem converts as improper citizens.

Muriel Degauque's suicide bombing poses an empirical puzzle. She does not originate from a "suspect community" for radicalisation, as she was a white, Belgian-born, and Catholic-raised woman, and, as a result, her agency was more difficult to deny through "gendered neo-orientalist discursive strategies" (Bogain & Jackson, 2024, p. 357). As such, this paper aims to uncover processes of racialisation perpetrated against Muriel Degauque using insights from Bogain and Jackson (2024) about the intersection of race, gender, and class, which similarly rendered her as *other*. In addition to Brown (2011), I explore both sources in English and Dutch and attempt to conduct a comparative analysis of media portrayals, distinguishing between different forms of *othering* perpetrated against Muriel Degauque and showcasing that Belgian media more evidently placed Muriel Degauque outside the border of the 'good' nation.

Research Design

Data Collection

Using the LexisNexis database, two searches were conducted using the search term "Muriel Degauque". One search included all newspaper articles in English and the other search included all newspaper articles in Dutch. The date parameters were set between 01.12.2005 and 31.05.2006, reflecting a period of 6 months' worth of media sources following the date of Muriel Degauque's suicide bombing in Iraq. This period coincided with the large majority of the search results. Only the search results generating at least two hits of the search term "Muriel Degauque" and simultaneously amounting to at least 400 words were considered in order to ensure that Muriel Degauque's suicide bombing was mentioned substantially and not just in passing. After discarding duplicates and very similar search results, a total of 19 news articles were found, 10 in English and 9 in Dutch, which were analysed in detail.

I want to note that I only have an intermediate understanding of the Dutch language which may have impacted or obscured the coding process. However, a dictionary was consulted where necessary to mitigate the risks resulting from this. Despite my limited understanding of the language, the reason behind including both Dutch and English-language sources in the data set was to conduct a comparative analysis between the two, investigating the similarities and differences in how Muriel Degauque is portrayed. My initial expectation was that Dutch sources were more likely to cast Muriel as an outsider to the national community than English sources, as I believed Belgian media would be more inclined to obscure the structural conditions regarding the Belgian society leading to Muriel's violence.

Data Analysis

This paper employs critical discourse analysis to examine the argumentative and discursive elements of the news articles selected, following the belief that language is not a neutral medium, but rather "profoundly shapes our view of the world and reality" (Hajer, 2006, p. 66). Discourse analysis allows for the exploration of different narratives which are producing meanings about a problem. It also explores how "language has the capacity to make politics" (p. 67) through signs, symbols and metaphors. To understand how Muriel Degauque was portrayed in the newspaper articles, I follow the approach of Bogain and Jackson (2024), who focus on three main aspects of discourse: the general topic, the discursive strategies, and the linguistic methods. In terms of discursive strategies, I pay particular attention to how Muriel Degauque is referred to in the articles, what traits are attributed to her and what arguments are used to explain her violence. In terms of linguistic methods, I analyse strategies used by journalists in the construction of different narratives: hyperbola, antithesis, and allusion. These strategies help sensationalise (and delegitimise) Muriel Degauque's violence. This approach served as the basis for the coding process, which involved three rounds of inductive coding using ATLAS.ti. No codes were predefined in the first round, rather the codes emerged from the text and were later grouped into similar themes. In the first round of coding, articles were first categorised based on dominant themes, investigating how Muriel Degauque's violence was portrayed (for instance, based on her past or on her relationship with Muslim men). If multiple frames were present in the same article, then only the dominant frame was coded. Next, I coded for the traits which are attributed to Muriel and how she is referred to in the article (for example, as pretty woman). In the third and last coding

round, I considered the linguistic methods, which were in explored in relation to their function in the text (for instance, depoliticising Muriel's violence).

A limitation of discourse analysis is its reliance on the researcher's subjective interpretation, which may lead to less reliable results (Halperin & Heath, 2020). To address this, multiple rounds of coding were used, and short memos were recorded in the researcher's notebook to reflect upon initial impressions of the text and potential bias. Furthermore, due to its interpretative nature, the research might be difficult to generalise to other cases. Due to the time and word count limitations of this paper, it was impossible to expand the research beyond one case study. However, this is an avenue for future research to analyse cross-national discourses about female suicide bombers.

Media Depictions of Muriel Degauque

Muriel as a Working-Class Rebel

Media accounts of Muriel Degauque's suicide bombing render her as an outsider to the boundaries of Belgian national identity. Muriel Degauque's class background is alluded to consistently across all articles. She started life in a "coal mining *corner* of Belgium known as the black country" (Cas, 2005) or an "arbeiderswijk" (from Dutch: working-class neighbourhood) (Dirks, 2005) in an "*ordinary* family" (Brown & Watson, 2005, emphasis added). She "spent her formative years" in "a social housing complex" (Smith & Tihon, 2005). The daughter of a cleaner and a crane operator, Muriel Degauque worked at bakeries and cafes after finishing high school (Smith, 2005). She is often described as unable to keep a job–"she was accused of stealing" (Brown & Watson, 2005) from the bakery, she had "frequent absences" (Smith & Tihon, 2005), and showed signs of drug abuse–and, as a result, she was "claiming state benefits" (Brown & Watson, 2005). She later moved to "one of the poorest [...] areas of Brussels" with her husband Issam Goris before the two headed to Iraq by car, "determined to kill themselves and as many Americans as possible" (Brown & Watson, 2005).

The language used to describe Muriel's background is imbued with symbols denoting her *otherness* since her birth. The word "corner" emphasised above places her outside the imagined national community of 'good' Belgian citizens, pointing to a shared understanding of a marginalised, classed, geographical identity which comes with an implicit moral evaluation–the Belgian "rust-belt" town facing industrial decline, poverty, and crime (Bogain & Jackson, 2024). This moral evaluation associates working-class people with, at best, *ordinariness*, and at worst, delinquency, suggested by the emphasis on Muriel's habits–"Ze rookte en dronk" (From Dutch: She smoked and drank) (Dirks, 2005). These habits hold cultural significance, revealing stereotypes particularly perpetrated against working-class women, who are often depicted as "low achievers who struggle to hold down employment" (Bogain & Jackson, 2024, p. 361). Furthermore, the fact that Muriel received state benefits reinforces her "marginality" (p. 362), placing her in a lower class, an outsider to the "respectable" national community. This depiction reveals the narrative that Muriel was pulled by the vortex of an inevitable, inescapable *class habitus*, reasserting a fatalistic understanding of working-class women's lives (Maton, 2008). This fatalistic understanding of her class helps discoursively reinforce an inner, almost destined dysfunction of working-class individuals deliberately constructed in order to secure the imaginary borders of "good society" (Bogain & Jackson, 2024) and to evade responsibility for structural problems faced by the working class which might explain their actions. The interaction between her

gender and class is also evident, as a white woman's violence produces great shock due to evading the perception of an imagined ideal white femininity–"België vraagt zich af hoe een *autochtoon* zo kon radicaliseren" (From Dutch: Belgium asks itself how a *native* could radicalise like this, my own emphasis) (*Dirks*, 2005). Through her violence, Muriel committed a "double transgression" (Sjoberg and Gentry, 2008, pp. 6-7): the violence itself and the violation of gender roles imposed upon her, and, as a result, she needs to be cast as an outsider–a deviant working-class woman–to remove the threat of radicalisation from the "good" national community (Bogain & Jackson, 2024: 362). This depiction of Muriel is discursively constructed by her belonging to an "abject social class" (p. 362).

Loss of Femininity and Infantilisation

In the newspaper articles analysed, Muriel's physical appearance and her behaviour as a child are used as instruments to infantilise her and deny her agency in her violence. Muriel's physical aspect is often emphasised in the news articles analysed and often conflated with her childhood looks. Attributes such as "pretty blonde" (Smith & Tihon, 2005), "friendly, pretty face" (Brown & Watson, 2005), and "pretty daughter" (Cas, 2005) reveal the shock created by the violence perpetrated by a *good-looking* white woman, as if "pretty" women are incapable of violence. This is in line with Brown's (2014) analysis, which suggests how hegemonic notions about femininity–such as beauty–contrast with the pursuit of morally incomprehensible acts. Muriel's appearance–a white blonde woman–only serves to augment the shock, and as a result, her agency is denied and her violence is attributed to other factors, namely her conversion (Sjoberg & Gentry 2008). Through antithesis, her appearance as a child–"adorable little child, smiling all the time" (Smith & Tihon, 2005) – is contrasted with her image as a veiled Muslim–it was hard to "recognise her because her face was concealed by a veil" (Smith & Tihon, 2005). This stark contrast simultaneously alludes to her radicalisation–"from mild Christian to Islamic zealot" (Brown & Watson, 2005), suggesting that, through conversion, *she also lost her femininity*, which makes her an anomaly. Furthermore, by depicting elements of her childhood–"She was just like all the other girls, dreaming I suppose about becoming a teacher or a nurse" (Smith & Tihon, 2005)–Muriel is not only infantilised through the implicit expectation that her adult life would resemble her life as a girl, but also her apparent trajectory to achieve ideal "white femininity" (Bogain & Jackson, 2024). This trajectory which would subordinate her to gender roles is shattered by her conversion to Islam–"the little girl who had played with their [neighbours'] children had chosen to end her life so brutally in the name of Jihad" (Smith & Tihon, 2005). Therefore, by forces outside of her control–her husband who "brainwashed her" and recruitment by terrorist organisations (both discussed in detail in the following section)–her childhood purity and beauty, as well as her whiteness, are lost the moment she converts, leading to a process of racialisation which renders her "a victim of Islam" (Brown, 2011, p. 715).

Reasons for Violence

In this section, I compare the reasons attributed to Muriel's violence in English and Dutch-language sources. A majority of the English-language news articles describe Muriel Degauque as an *erotomaniac* from an early age throughout her life–"She was more interested in boyfriends than studies" (Brown & Watson, 2005); after her divorce from her first husband, "she had several boyfriends" (Smith, 2005); "she was [...] so popular with boys she wasn't even sure how many boyfriends she'd had" (Smith & Tihon, 2005). Her marriage with Issam Goris is mentioned 21 times across all the English-language news articles as the primary cause for her violence–"Goris [...]

brainwashed her daughter. When Muriel returned to Belgium, [...] she had become 'more Muslim than Muslim'" (Brown & Watson, 2005). This narrative mirrors Sjoberg and Gentry's (2008) notion of "erotomania" suggesting that Muriel Degauque was "sex-crazed" (p. 10), due to her relationship with a male terrorist, thus being stripped of agency and "forgoing her womanhood".

Interestingly, the portrayal of the *erotomaniac* Muriel is inconsistent with previous accounts of her personality in the very same news articles, which describe her as hard to control and even rebellious during her teenage years– "She showed the rebelliousness of a teenager" (Brown & Watson, 2005), "Muriel [...] was running away from home, one time disappearing [...] 100 miles away without her parents' knowledge" (Smith & Tihon, 2005). In an antithetic way, after her marriage to Issam Goris, her character is constructed as opposite to the previous rebellious teenager, despite having two previous relationships with other Muslim men (Brown & Watson, 2005). This suggests that her marriage to Issam Goris served as a key aspect in her racialisation by the media, mirroring the Western-Islamic dichotomy presented by Sjoberg and Gentry (2008). As a white woman, Muriel's violence results from her unwillingness to conform. Once she becomes Muslim, she forgoes her whiteness and her agency.

In contrast, Dutch-language news sources, while still mentioning Muriel's marriage with Issam Goris, tended to focus more on the arrests of individuals believed to have recruited her and her husband to go to Iraq–"Muriel Degauque maakte [...] deel uit van een organisatie die in Belgie en Frankrijk zelfmoordenaars ronselt" (From Dutch: Muriel Degauque was part of an organisation which recruits suicide bombers in Belgium and France) (*De Stem*, 2005). Nonetheless, the reasons why women join such organisations were vastly omitted from Dutch-language media, signalling, similar to English-language media, a denial of agency, albeit more implicit. The focus on national security and anti-terrorism efforts also aligns with Bogain and Jackson's (2024) observations surrounding the discursive narratives whose aim is to defend the 'good' national community by placing the problem of radicalisation on racialised outsiders–here, Belgians of Arabic and Middle-Eastern descend who become recruiters for terrorist organisations–instead of admitting the domestic factors which aggravate their radicalisation. Therefore, English sources predominantly use the erotomania narrative to describe Muriel's motivations for violence, while the Dutch sources emphasise the gravity of recruitment performed by terrorist networks as a national security risk.

Conclusion

Using critical discourse analysis, this paper examines the media narratives surrounding Muriel Degauque's suicide bombing in Iraq in late 2005 present in both English- and Dutch-language newspapers. As a white, Belgian-born, and Catholic-raised woman, she is an atypical suicide bomber, less likely to face "gendered neo-orientalist" stereotypes which deny her agency (Bogain & Jackson, 2024, p. 357). Nonetheless, using insights from several scholars, I show that she is still classed as an outsider to the Belgian nation through notions of class. Muriel Degauque is depicted as the daughter of working-class parents, a crane driver and a cleaner, who is unable to keep a job and claims social welfare benefits. She is also portrayed as a "delinquent" who smokes, drinks and does drugs. As such, through discursive strategies, newspapers construct her identity as an "inside *other*" who does not belong to the respectable national society (Bogain & Jackson, 2024, p. 354). I further show that her marginalisation is not only classed, but also gendered, as her violence evades stereotypical white femininity, which makes her

repel her womanhood by committing a "double transgression of violence" (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2008, pp. 6-7). Through discursive narratives which emphasise her (white) beauty, her transgression becomes even more apparent, suggesting how women's violence contrasts the collective mentality's perception of gender roles (Brown, 2014). Lastly, I show how English-language media constructs her as an *erotomaniac*, a woman who is sex-craved and thus engages in violence not out of her own volition, but as a result of being manipulated by her husband (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2008). This narrative contrasts depictions of her rebellious childhood and adolescence, when her being out of control implicitly rewards her some level of agency. This suggests that Muriel Degauque went through a process of racialisation once she became a Muslim, being stripped of her agency. In contrast, Dutch-language sources tend to focus more on the national security risks caused by terrorist organisations, despite still mentioning Muriel Degauque's husband, in order to externalise the danger to outsiders, instead of looking inside the imagined "good" national community (Bogain & Jackson, 2024).

Due to time limitations, this article only focuses on the case of Muriel Degauque. The advantantage of a case study is that it can discuss rich political phenomena in detail, thus uncovering causal mechanisms while being attentive to the socio-political context. However, it is difficult to generalise based on only one case. Therefore, future research should attempt to analyse more cases of convert suicide bombers from different countries in order to assess how these are portrayed in relation to their gender, class, and nationality.

Conflict of Interests

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