Depoliticisation of Women's Violence in Armed Resistance: The Pathologisation, Eroticisation, and Aestheticisation of Leila Khaled in Contemporary Media

Risa Narsinghani[1*]

[1]BSc. Political Science

[*]Corresponding author. Email: risanarsinghani03@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper explores how media depictions of women in armed resistance undermines women's political agency, specifically that of Leila Khaled, a Palestinian militant. Through engagement with various media platforms, and by situating the analysis within postcolonial and feminist international relations (IR) theory, the analysis highlights how representations of Leila Khaled alienate her from her political context. Rather than being recognised as a rational political actor engaged in anticolonial struggle, Khaled is consistently portrayed as a gendered aberration, reducing her to symbolic and consumable imagery, which reflects patriarchal and orientalist understandings of women's political violence. The paper contributes to the discipline by emphasising the role of media aesthetics in regard to political visibility, agency, and legitimacy; it argues for the importance of a decolonial feminist framework to adequately recognise women's roles in armed resistance as legitimate political actors rather than mere subjects of fascination.

Keywords

Palestine, Postcolonial feminism, Political agency, Political violence, Media representation, Resistance

Introduction

Political violence enacted by women[1] in armed resistance is often situated and understood beyond the confines of the gender binary, as their participation disrupts traditional rules of gender. Their active participation is perceived as an anomaly, even though, historically women have always partaken during conflict or war, be it the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (Loken, 2021; Loken and Matfess, 2024). Despite this, women are still reduced to narratives that either villainise or sexualise them, disregarding them as political agents driven by ideological purpose.

This is exemplified through the media representations of Palestinian militant and member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, (PFLP) Leila Khaled (Makboul, 2005). She was involved in the hijackings of two planes and is also referred to as 'the poster girl of Palestinian militancy' (Makboul, 2005; Irving, n.d.). Born in April 1944, in Haifa, Palestine, she was forced to become a refugee at the mere age of four [alongside her family] (Makboul, 2005). Israeli settlers killed hundreds of Palestinians in her village of Deir Yassin on her fourth birthday, April 9, in what is known as the Nakba (Makboul, 2005). Her family, with the exception of her father, was forced to seek refuge in Lebanon, as did millions of Palestinians (Makboul, 2005). Today, she lives with her husband and two sons in Amman, Jordan, and remains one of the most recognisable revolutionaries in armed resistance (Makboul, 2005).

In this paper, I argue that media portrayals of Leila Khaled depoliticise her and her contributions to the liberation struggle by aestheticising, villainising, and sexualising her, which undermines women's political agency within armed resistance. The research discusses how such representations function discursively to decontextualise Leila Khaled's actions and reconfigure her violence within Orientalist and patriarchal frameworks. These depictions are fuelled by pathologising and paternalistic conceptions of what it is to 'be a woman'. This enables us to understand why women commit acts of violence in the context of security and women's violence. Hence, the guiding research question of this paper is: How do media portrayals of Leila Khaled distort understandings of women's political agency in armed resistance movements?

This research adopts a theoretical and interpretive approach by utilising a postcolonial feminist framework to analyse three artefacts across various mediums. These artefacts were selected as they are aesthetically and analytically relevant, serving as a symbolic intersection of visual art and society. To address the research question, I will first situate this study within postcolonial feminist theory in International Relations in order to contextualise media representations of Leila Khaled. Then, I conceptualise gender by utilising Judith Butler's (1988) notion that gender is not an essential, biological category, rather it is culturally and socially enforced; it is a performance. Further, I draw on several theorists to illustrate three dominant narratives surrounding women's political violence. In my methodology, I will focus on three such cases of media: the artwork, 'The Icon', by Amer Shomali, the song, 'Like Leila Khaled Said', written by Julian Cope, and an image of her wearing a keffiyeh over her head and holding a Kalashnikov, photographed by Eddie Adams. These media depictions will then be analysed through a feminist perspective by utilising theories and concepts, most notably by Loken (2021), Sjoberg and Gentry (2008; 2015),

[1] To clarify, I recognise gender is a social construct and upheld by presupposed patriarchal conventions of 'womanhood'. However, the nuance in existing literature regarding the binary confines and armed resistance/conflict is understudied and very limited. Therefore, I will be using the term, 'woman', for the sake of theoretical argumentation.

and Hiergeist and Schäfer (2024), amongst others. These frameworks are applied through an interpretive analysis to portray how women, such as Leila Khaled, are stripped of their political agency because their violence in armed resistance is pathologised due to patriarchal and orientalist pre-conceived notions of femininity and terrorism.

Literature Review

In the case of Leila Khaled, a Palestinian militant and symbol of resistance, this paper seeks to examine how media representations of her reproduce orientalist, patriarchal, and imperial regimes, which inadvertently distort perception and understanding of women's agency in armed conflict and resistance. This paper discusses how dominant (Western and Eurocentric) epistemologies in IR have historically obscured the political agency of non-Western women, especially those involved in armed resistance, and considers how media portrayals reinforce this marginalisation (Bleiker and Hutchison, 2023). The primary focus of this paper is to acknowledge and encourage how postcolonial feminist frameworks challenge Eurocentric narratives by prioritising the voices and experiences of non-Western women, rather than homogenising them.

For many decades, International Relations (IR) has privileged and reproduced rationalist, masculinist, state-centric and Eurocentric conceptions of the global order. Feminist IR theory emerged in response, seeking to expose and deconstruct these biases. However, feminist IR often reflects liberal Western values, thereby failing to adequately assess the [historical] material conditions of non-Western women (Agathangelou, 2017). Mainstream IR treats culture as static and distinct from imperialism, ignoring the inextricably linked histories of the West and the non-West, and its ramifications for contemporary cultural and political identities. This further marginalises non-Western women as either 'victims' or 'backward' and treating them as a monolith. Postcolonial feminist theory challenges both mainstream IR and Western feminist IR by highlighting the racialised, gendered, and colonial basis of imperial hierarchies and epistemics in the field; it seeks to portray how racialised 'subaltern' groups are feminised in opposition to a masculinised European identity.

Edward Said's (1978) seminal view of Orientalism provides a critique of how knowledge and power function in/under imperialism. He reveals how European imperialism established the 'Orient' as an ontologically and epistemologically different 'Other', to ensure occidental dominance by naturalising or essentialising the West's racial and cultural superiority over the 'Oriental' other (Said, 1978). This rationale has manifested in academic, cultural, and political discourses and has been critical in sustaining European imperial enterprises. This, in turn, has contributed to cultural symbols such as the veil becoming synonymous with "oppression" in Western discourse, reinforcing Orientalist biases. In contemporary media, these Orientalist epistemologies are reproduced through recurring tropes of dangerous threats, exoticism and fetishisation, and [moral] deviance. Said's (1978) work demonstrates how the production of information about non-Western people is intrinsically related to racialised and hierarchical power dynamics, an insight that continues to guide postcolonial critiques of IR, which offers a space to not only criticise hegemonic narratives, but also allows for resistance through counter-narratives and alternative knowledges by recognising the agency of marginalised people. This framework emphasises a dialectical relationship between academic theorising and politics to avoid reductive contradictions.

Postcolonial feminist theory builds upon these ideas to critique Western feminists' interactions and depictions of the 'Third World woman'; feminist theory is not a neutral endeavour, but rather a response to challenge

hegemonic discourses. Nonetheless, it is also rooted in power dynamics that can both resist and perpetuate dominant ideologies (Chowdhry and Nair, 2002; Mohanty, 1984). Western feminist writing on 'Third World women' often unintentionally reproduce imperial logics by universalising women's experiences and imposing Eurocentric standards on them (Mohanty, 2002). This disregards variations based on class, race, and locale, and homogenises them into a single category of 'Third World woman' in contrast to the 'liberated' Western woman. Mohanty (1984) criticises the 'Third World difference' as a paternalistic and essentialist frame that portrays 'Third World women' as backward, traditional, and lacking agency, which reiterates colonial notions of 'underdevelopment' and cultural inferiority. This limitation within Western feminist IR attempts to incorporate 'Third World women's' issues into otherwise Eurocentric feminist narratives. This reaffirms hierarchical binaries between the 'local' as the normative Western 'Self' and the 'global' as the non-Western 'Other' by reproducing Orientalist and colonial divisions (Chowdhry and Nair, 2002; Mohanty, 1984; Mohanty, 2002). This undermines the diverse nature of women's experiences in varying cultural and political circumstances, which allows for Western feminism to continue serving as the normative standard.

Postcolonial feminist IR academics, such as Chowdhry and Nair (2002) and Mohanty (1984; 2002), have challenged traditional IR theories for failing to adequately contextualise cultural practices or understand the differences in Western and non-Western histories. While postcolonial feminist IR has extensively critiqued representation, there is fewer contribution on how media aesthetics construct and reproduce perceptions of women's political violence and agency. Literature within postcolonial feminism on visual aesthetics and media representation highlights how political violence is not only enacted, but also reproduced and perpetuated by overwhelmingly gendered and racialised regimes of visibility. Bleiker and Hutchison's (2023) challenge the discipline's traditional approach by demonstrating how images and aesthetics play a role in shaping political meaning and public perception. They claim that there is no neutral depiction of global politics, as images and media narratives are inherently endowed with power, which actively impacts how agency, violence, resistance, and legitimacy are perceived (Bleiker and Hutchison, 2023). Likewise, Naaman (2007) depicts terrorism as a performative and mediated act, as the media is a participant in creating meaning. Female soldiers are typically portrayed through aestheticised tropes of sexuality, monstrosity, or moral and cultural deviance, rather than political ideology.

Gentry and Sjoberg (2008; 2015) indicate that these accounts use gendered archetypes of mothers, monsters, and whores to individualise and depoliticise women's violence. These depictions become more prevalent in contemporary mass media, where violence is made consumable through fetishisation and entertainment (Hiergeist and Schäfer, 2024). Visual aesthetics consequently function as a regulatory mechanism, controlling which forms of political violence are digestible and which are cast aside as aberrant and inconceivable. Representation, therefore, acts as a means for normalising gendered hierarchies and certain identities through repeated and controlled narratives, and tropes to foreclose recognition of women's agency. This provides an analytical bridge between feminist security studies and media studies, acknowledging representation as a site where power, gender, race, and legitimacy are continuously negotiated. This interdisciplinary lens is essential for understanding how figures, such as Leila Khaled, are rendered visible in ways that distort their political significance and revolutionary meaning. This research, therefore, contributes to postcolonial feminist international relations theory by emphasising the importance of media aesthetics in producing and exacerbating orientalist and patriarchal notions.

I argue for a renewed understanding of these frameworks in order to recognise representation as essential to political autonomy, power, and resistance.

Theoretical Framework

This research examines how women's political violence is constructed, particularly that of Leila Khaled. The paper adopts an interpretive approach to consider how representations operate discursively as it impedes on women's political agency, undermining their political violence. This theoretical framework utilises the works of Judith Butler (1988), Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry (2008; 2015; 2023), Morrissey (2003), Malver and Koureas (2014), and Dorit Naaman (2007) to critically engage with such narratives regarding the essentialist construction of gender, the notion of a 'double transgression' in relation to women's political agency in armed conflict, and the racialised eroticisation of non-Western women under the orientalist gaze. These frameworks are utilised to comprehend the intersecting dynamics between gender, race, power, and the racialised processes of media representation.

Judith Butler's (1988) theory of gender performativity serves as a conceptual foundation for understanding how women's political violence challenges normative gender norms. Butler (1988) argues that gender is a socially regulated performance rather than an innate, biologically determined characteristic; it is an identity that is constantly generated and established through repeated behaviours within a social context (Butler, 1988). This perspective challenges essentialist conceptions of femininity, which have historically represented women as submissive, nurturing, and fundamentally nonviolent. In terms of political violence and security, such assumptions render women's involvement in armed resistance invisible or unfathomable. Acts of violence committed by women, specifically in politics, are viewed not just as risks to national or global security, but also as transgressions of gender norms (Sjoberg and Gentry, 2008). As a result, their participation in political violence is often erased, dismissed, or misunderstood; rather than seeing such actions as political, hegemonic narratives tend to portray them as anomalies, moral failings, or psychologically and sexually deviant (Sjoberg and Gentry, 2008). Butler's (1988) work allows us to reframe women's violence not as a betrayal of femininity, but as a political intervention, one that disrupts patriarchal binaries and reinforces female agency.

Building on Butler's (1988) notion of gender, Sjoberg and Gentry (2008; 2015) theorise the "double transgression". According to them, women who engage in political violence challenge not only legal or moral norms, but they also violate deeply rooted ideas regarding femininity (Sjoberg and Gentry, 2008, 2015, 2023). This double transgression often produces discomfort in the public eye, which is then understood through reductive narratives that pathologise the women involved. The media, in particular, tends to cast them in extreme terms, either as psychologically unstable or sexually deviant. Their political motivations are obscured and dismissed, regardless of whether they are portrayed as emotionally damaged, unfeminine, erotically obsessed and irrational, ultimately, the underlying effect is the same (Sjoberg and Gentry, 2008, 2015, 2023). These representations reduce these women to simplistic and patriarchal archetypes, which not only undermines their agency, but also disregards broader political issues, such as structural violence, occupation, and displacement.

Political agency is integral to feminist analyses of women's political violence, although it is often disregarded through gendered and racialised representational practices. According to Gentry and Sjoberg (2015), women who

commit violence are rarely regarded as political actors; instead, they are portrayed as women terrorists whose actions are rationalised and misrepresented through femininity rather than ideology. This denial of agency, according to Morrissey (2003), is enforced by repeated discursive methods which include vilification or monsterisation, mythification, and victimisation; this detaches women from their rational political subjectivity and agency, which misrepresents their true intent and renders their use of violence pathological or involuntary. While contemporary popular culture continually capitalises on the image of the armed woman as a symbol of empowerment, this visibility is conditional and depoliticised. Hiergeist and Schäfer (2024) depict how the "gunwoman" is absorbed by neoliberal feminist narratives that commend individual 'resistance' while dismissing structural inequality and collective struggle.

This aestheticisation of violent women emphasises how visual and cultural representations in media tend to render violence visible yet devoid of political meaning (Hiergeist and Schäfer, 2024; Bleiker and Hutchison, 2023). Aestheticisation refers to representational practices that prioritise notions of beauty, [heteronormative] desirability, and performativity and spectacle over political content, which risks alienating militant figures from their ideological intent and responsibility. The gun serves an ambivalent purpose; it indicates modernity and opposition while allowing for misogynistic and eroticised images of violent women as "occult" spectacles rather than political agents in their own regard (Morrissey, 2003; Hiergeist and Schäfer, 2024; Malver and Koureas 2014). This framework does not assume that aestheticisation is inherently depoliticisation; rather, it allows for a focus on the implications of aesthetic-driven framing, including its ambivalence.

This is further complicated when these women are racialised, especially within the Global South. Dorit Naaman (2007), in her analysis of images of Palestinian women fighters, illustrates how Arab or Muslim women are subjected to a particular kind of orientalist framing. Unlike Western female combatants, these women are simultaneously exoticised, hypersexualised, and dehumanised (Naaman, 2007). Their actions are rarely understood as rational or political, instead, they are often framed as manifestations of cultural backwardness or religious extremism (Naaman, 2007). These various forms of erasure through gendered essentialism, sexualised tropes, and racialisation and orientalism do not operate in isolation, rather, they work together to pathologise women, such as Leila Khaled (Naaman, 2007). When a woman from the Global South takes up arms, she not only transgresses gendered expectations but also disrupts political narratives on modernity, civilisation, and who is 'allowed' to resist (Naaman, 2007). In this way, Khaled becomes more than just a historical figure, she becomes a site of ideological struggle.

Methods[2]

This research paper adopts an interpretivist approach, grounded in postcolonial feminist perspectives. It is neither my aim nor my intention to provide an empirical assessment of media representations of Leila Khaled, but rather to examine the discourses that produce dominant assumptions on political violence perpetuated by women. This research offers an understanding of how women's political agency in visual and representational politics is constructed and contested in the public sphere through the depiction of Leila Khaled. Thereby, I analyse three

[2] The artefacts analysed in this research are provided in the Appendices for reference.

distinct artefacts: The Icon, a digital artwork by Amer Shomali; the 1980 song, "Like Leila Khaled Said" by The Teardrop Explodes; and a widely circulated photograph taken by Eddie Adams in 1970 after Khaled's participation in the hijacking of TWA Flight 840 (Shomali, 2011; Cope, 1981; The Guardian, 2017). These artefacts were selected due to their diversity in media forms, popularity and [historical] relevance, and the different ways they contribute to the construction or the distortion of Khaled's public image. Together, they allow for a rich analysis of how representation not only normalises gendered and racialised power structures, but also is an active participant in constructing narratives that render women's violence intelligible within popular culture, mass and news media, and visual art.

I. Visual: *The Icon* by Amer Shomali

Shomali's portrait of Khaled, composed entirely of 3,500 lipstick tubes, offers a striking juxtaposition between the aesthetics of femininity and the figure of a revolutionary woman (Shomali, 2011). On one hand, it challenges gender norms by using a traditionally feminine object to depict someone engaged in armed resistance. However, it also raises questions about whether such visual tactic may inadvertently aestheticise and depoliticise Khaled's politics; the aestheticisation of militant women often reproduces the same gender binaries it seeks to destabilise.

II. Music: *Like Leila Khaled Said* by The Teardrop Explodes (written by Julian Cope)

Popular music functions as a powerful form of cultural storytelling, and this 1980 track brought Khaled into the Western pop-cultural consciousness through romanticised and eroticised tropes (Cope, 1981). The analysis focuses on the song's lyrics and narrative framing to portray how the song reconstructs her image into one of danger and allure by minimising her political violence and revolutionary struggle, especially given the historical and material conditions that produced her violence.

III. Photojournalism: Eddie Adams' Photograph

This iconic image of Khaled, captured shortly after the TWA hijacking, has become one of the most enduring and contested depictions of a female militant (The Guardian, 2017). This explores how framing, distribution, and interpretation across media platforms contribute to how visual representations of femininity in relation to militancy shape public perception, and ascribe Khaled to gendered and racialised narratives of violence.

In culmination these artefacts offer a rich, multifaceted perspective into the representation of women's political violence and agency, such as Leila Khaled. The inclusion of different media sources allows for a wide range for the analysis, and avoids privileging any one epistemological lens, whilst remaining grounded in feminist and postcolonial literature. Ultimately, this research argues that the representations of Khaled are not passive reflections of her identity, but active constructions that shape how we understand women's agency, violence, and resistance, especially in regard to race. By critically engaging with these portrayals, this research contributes to broader discourse in IR concerning gender and race, human security, and the politics of visibility; representation is not secondary to politics rather it is constitutive of it.

Analysis

The three media portrayals of Leila Khaled analysed in this research, visual art, music, and photojournalism, highlight different mediums of media through which women's political violence is rendered intelligible through patterns of depoliticisation, eroticisisation, and aestheticisation. The analysis proceeds by employing a critical discourse analysis within an interpretive framework to portray how gendered, racialised, and orientalist representations continually shape dominant narratives, disregarding women's agency in political violence.

Amer Shomali's, The Icon, reimagines the image of Khaled through the medium of 3,500 lipstick tubes, an overt symbol of femininity and consumerist beauty ideals (Shomali, 2011). This aesthetic choice creates a striking visual dissonance between the militant and the feminine, compelling the viewer to confront ingrained assumptions about the mutual exclusivity of womanhood and political violence. Shomali unsettles normative gender binaries, by employing a stereotypically feminine object to depict a woman defined by her participation in armed resistance. This juxtaposition exhibits gender as a performative, socially legible script rather than innate nature (Butler 1988); the artwork becomes a pointed subversion of gender. The lipstick is reconfigured in this context; it is no longer merely decorative or cosmetic, but rather an integral aspect through which femininity is recontextualised into a reflection and representation of a revolutionary figure. In re-envisioning Khaled's image through a symbol of femininity, Shomali urges reflection on the patriarchal expectations imposed upon women's bodies and behaviours, and on how violence is differently interpreted when enacted by those cast in traditionally passive or nurturing roles.

However, this representation is not without ambiguity; Shomali himself claims revolutionary imagery is increasingly incorporated in commercial marketing strategies, by “transforming a political poster into a shelf and a revolution into a product” (Shomali, n.d.). This shift highlights the political power of aesthetics and visual representations, as described by Bleiker and Hutchison (2023); meaning is not embedded within the image itself but produced through its interpretation and circulation. While the artwork can be understood as both a critique of neoliberal appropriation, and a testament to Palestinian resistance and Leila Khaled herself, the aestheticisation of militant women risks reproducing the very gendered structures it seeks to critique, as the image is subject to detached neoliberal consumption (Hiergeist and Schäfer, 2024; Malver and Koureas, 2014). The Icon's relevance, therefore, does not lie within its definite subversion or depoliticising intent, but rather in its acknowledgment of how women's political violence remains structurally unstable under our current and commodified conditions.

Julian Cope's, "Like Leila Khaled Said", transforms Khaled into a cultural symbol, departing from her historical and political context. The lyrics romanticise and mystify her, invoking her name metaphorically rather than engaging with the specificities of her political struggle. In doing so, the song exemplifies what Sjoberg and Gentry (2008) describe as the "double transgression"; violent women are either eroticised as enigmatic femme fatales or dismissed as psychologically unstable. This is exemplified by the lyric, "You can always be the mistress of my schemes", which depicts how Khaled is transformed into an archetype, the radical woman as a muse, rather than represented as a historical subject with agency (Cope, 1981). By portraying her as a “mistress” rather than a militant, the song reinforces heteronormative desirability and relations, while also stripping her of any reference to the Palestinian liberation movement or her involvement in the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine; she functions as a poetic motif rather than a depiction of revolutionary intent.

Cope's later account of the song as "just a love song to her" because he believed, "she was really one of the most beautiful girls in the whole world" further suggests eroticisation and fetishisation of Leila Khaled (Internet Archive: Wayback Machine, n.d.). Naaman's (2007) critique is particularly relevant here, as Arab women's political violence is eroticised within Western cultural production; haled is characterised as enigmatic and alluring, framed as "bad news" rather than a political actor engaged in anti-colonial struggle (Internet Archive: Wayback Machine, n.d.; Cope, 1981). Depoliticisation, therefore, can be understood here through omitting any mention of Palestinian liberation and anti-colonial struggle, and reducing Khaled to a romantic and sexual muse. These depictions of her are deeply gendered and racialised, as they deprive her of political agency and reinforce orientalist stereotypes of [Western] civilisation and [Eastern] barbarism (Naaman, 2007)). In doing so, the song, therefore, contributes to a broader pattern of symbolic and cultural appropriation, wherein Khaled's image is reimagined not as an agent of resistance, but as a vague figure of [sexual] deviancy and rebellion.

Lastly, Eddie Adams' 1970 photograph of Khaled, taken after the TWA 840 hijacking, remains one of the most widely circulated images of her (The Guardian, 2017). The photograph shows her as composed and politically defiant, as she is wearing a keffiyeh, a symbol of Palestinian resistance, while holding a *Kalashnikov* (The Guardian, 2017). The photograph challenges gendered assumptions by presenting a woman whose portrayal of militancy disrupts normative understandings of femininity and passivity. However, the photograph's meaning does not inherently lie within, but rather is produced through its circulation and subsequent discourse. In the documentary, *Leila Khaled: Hijacker* (Makboul, 2005), she describes how journalists often ignored her political role and instead asked personal, invasive questions, "One asked me how long I usually stood in front of the mirror… One of them wondered if I was in love," she recounts. These moments portray how the media's questioning functioned to reposition her within familiar gender roles, despite her clear refusal to conform. Her rejection of questions regarding beauty and romance led to her being labelled "unfeminine" or "cold", which reiterates how women are pathologised, as any deviation from normative femininity is perceived and reframed as a failure (Makboul, 2005; Gentry and Sjoberg, 2015). Instead of engaging with her political actions, the media situates her within conventional romantic or psychological narratives. In this sense, her keffiyeh and Kalashnikov, both being symbols of resistance, are transformed into markers of danger; and Adams' photo functions as a discursive tool through which depoliticisation operates by steering attention away from her anti-colonial struggle, and towards beauty and intimacy (Bleiker and Hutchison, 2023; Sjoberg and Gentry, 2008; Morrissey, 2003).

Leila Khaled directly challenges gendered prescriptions by refusing to fall into either category through her active involvement in armed resistance and her everlasting symbolic influence. However, instead of being commended for her political agency, she is depoliticised by a system that pathologises her resistance and fetishises her. Her representation serves as a means for broader discourse regarding knowledge production and resistance, as her identity is filtered through both gendered and racialised lenses, making it even more difficult for her to be recognised as the legitimate political actor she is.

Conclusion

This research has explored how women's political violence, particularly that of Leila Khaled's, is portrayed and perceived through a gendered and racialised/orientalist lens, which reflects how such hierarchies continue to dictate knowledge production in both international relations and popular culture. A similar rationale is observed in all three of the media artefacts examined. Shomali's The Icon challenges conventional notions of femininity and political violence by modelling Khaled's image through the aesthetics of beauty and consumerism. While this approach highlights the construction of gendered expectations, it also demonstrates its limitations because her political intent risks being transformed into a spectacle. Similarly, the song 'Like Leila Khaled Said' alienates Khaled from her context by representing her as an embellished metaphor rather than a revolutionary. This reflects orientalist tendencies that romanticise resistance, devoid of political meaning. Finally, while Adams' image is often regarded as a symbol of defiance, it serves as a means to undermine Khaled's agency due to the media's obsession with her attractiveness, femininity, and personal life; an attempt to discipline her by redirecting attention away from her political violence.

The implications of this analysis are significant, as women who engage in political violence are reduced to such tropes, which not only disregards their political motivations and agency, but also reinforces patriarchal and colonial narratives regarding resistance and liberation movements. Moreover, it is also significant due to its contribution to postcolonial feminist IR, which criticises both liberal and traditional feminist methodologies. The research expands upon existing literature on women's political violence and emphasises the need for adequate representations regarding visibility, legitimacy and interpretation, and autonomy and erasure. In this sense, representation becomes a site for struggle, requiring for more reflexivity in how women in resistance are portrayed and analysed. To combat these narratives, we must engage with women as political agents in their own right, not as symbols, spectacles, anomalies, or transgressions.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests in relation to this paper. This research was conducted independently.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my tutor, Dr. Lucy Hall, for their consistent encouragement, guidance, and support. I am also especially grateful to my friends for always challenging me through our incredibly insightful conversations. Lastly, I would like to show my appreciation and acknowledge the broader academic community of postcolonial feminist scholars whose critical engagements with resistance and anti-colonial struggle continue to inspire many young academics, including myself.

Bibliography

Agathangelou, A. M. (2017). From the Colonial to Feminist IR: Feminist IR studies, the wider FSS/GPE research agenda, and the questions of value, valuation, security, and violence. *Politics & Gender*, *13*(4), 739-746. https://doi.org/10.1017/s1743923x17000484

Bleiker, R., & Hutchison, E. (2023). Art and Aesthetics. In L. J. Shepherd & C. Hamilton (Eds.), *Gender Matters in Global Politics: A Feminist Introduction to International Relations* (3rd ed., pp. 94-108). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003036432-10

Butler, J. (1988). Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory. *Theatre Journal*, *40*(4), 519. https://doi.org/10.2307/3207893

Chowdhry, G., & Nair, S. (2002). Introduction: Power in a Postcolonial World: Race, Gender, and Class in International Relations. In G. Chowdhry & S. Nair (Eds.), *Power, Postcolonialism and International Relations: Reading Race, Gender and Class* (1st ed., pp. 1-32). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315017181

Cope, J. (1981). *Like Leila Khaled Said*. Chicago: Mercury and Fontana Records.

Gentry, C. E., & Sjoberg, L. (2015). *Beyond mothers, monsters, whores: Thinking about Women's Violence in Global Politics* (1st ed.). Zed Books. https://doi.org/10.17585/ip.v74.451

Gentry, C., & Sjoberg, L. (2023). Terrorism and Political Violence. In *Gender Matters in Global Politics: A Feminist Introduction to International Relations* (3rd ed., pp. 370-384). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003036432-29

Hiergeist, T., & Schäfer, S. (2024). *Ladies in Arms: Womens, Guns, and Feminisms in Contemporary Popular Culture* [First published in 2024 by transcript Verlag, Bielefeld]. Deutsche Nationalbibliothek. https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839469552

Internet Archive: Wayback Machine. (n.d.). The Teardrop Explodes Discography | Albums. Retrieved May 11, 2025, from https://web.archive.org/web/20040716055135/http://screamingsecrets.com/discography/tx_albums/html/a_5.html

Loken, M. (2021). 'Both needed and threatened': Armed mothers in militant visuals. *Security Dialogue*, *52*(1), 21-44. https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010620903237

Loken, M., & Matfess, H. (2024). Introducing the Women's Activities in Armed Rebellion (WAAR) project, 1946-2015. *Journal of Peace Research*, *61*(3), 489-499. https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433221128340

Makboul, L. (Director). (2005). *Leila Khaled: Hijacker* [Film]. Tussilago.

Malvern, S., & Koureas, G. (2014). Terrorist Transgressions: Exploring the gendered representations of the terrorist. *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung*, *39*(3), 67-81. https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.39.2014.3.67-81

Mohanty, C. T. (1984). Under Western Eyes: feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. *Boundary 2*, *12*(3), 333-358. https://doi.org/10.2307/302821

Mohanty, C. T. (2003). "Under Western Eyes" Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, *28*(2), 499-535. https://doi.org/10.1086/342914

Morrissey, B. (2003). Introduction: killers and corpses. In *When Women Kill: Questions of Agency and Subjectivity* (1st ed., pp. 1-29). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203422830

Naaman, D. (2007). Brides of Palestine/Angels of Death: Media, gender, and performance in the case of the Palestinian female suicide bombers. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, *32*(4), 933-955. https://doi.org/10.1086/512624

Irving, S. (n.d.). *Leila Khaled: Icon of Palestinian Liberation*. Pluto Press. Retrieved May 12, 2025, from https://www.plutobooks.com/product/leila-khaled/

Shomali, A. (n.d.). *Amer Shomali: The Icon*. Retrieved May 8, 2025, from https://www.amershomali.info/the-icon/

Shomali, A. (2011). *The Icon* [3500 Lipsticks]. Dalloul Art Foundation, Beirut.

Sjoberg, L., & Gentry, C. E. (2008). Reduced to Bad Sex: Narratives of Violent Women from the Bible to the War on Terror. *International Relations*, *22*(1), 5-23. https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117807087240

The Guardian. (2017, April 10). *The photojournalism of Eddie Adams – in pictures*. Retrieved May 16, 2025, from https://www.theguardian.com/culture/gallery/2017/apr/10/eddie-adam-photojournalism-saigon-execution-pictures

Appendix I - The Icon by Amer Shomali



Shomali, A. (2011). *The Icon*. [3500 Lipsticks]. Dalloul Art Foundation, Beirut.

Appendix II - Like Leila Khaled Said by The Teardrop Explodes [written by Julian Cope]

"You can smother me with kisses
You can smother me with dreams
You can always be the mistress of my schemes

But the sad is a very special thing
It can leave you at the start
It can see you standing naked
In a jar

But another ship could find you
And now's your chance, and now's your chance
Another ship could find you
And now's your chance, and now's your chance

Just like Leila Khaled said
Just like Leila Khaled said

Meeting people round the table
Trying hard to get excited for your brand new name
Bringing friends all round for dinner
Shown an empty crazed pack that said "Crystal was here"

Just like Leila Khaled said
Just like Leila Khaled said

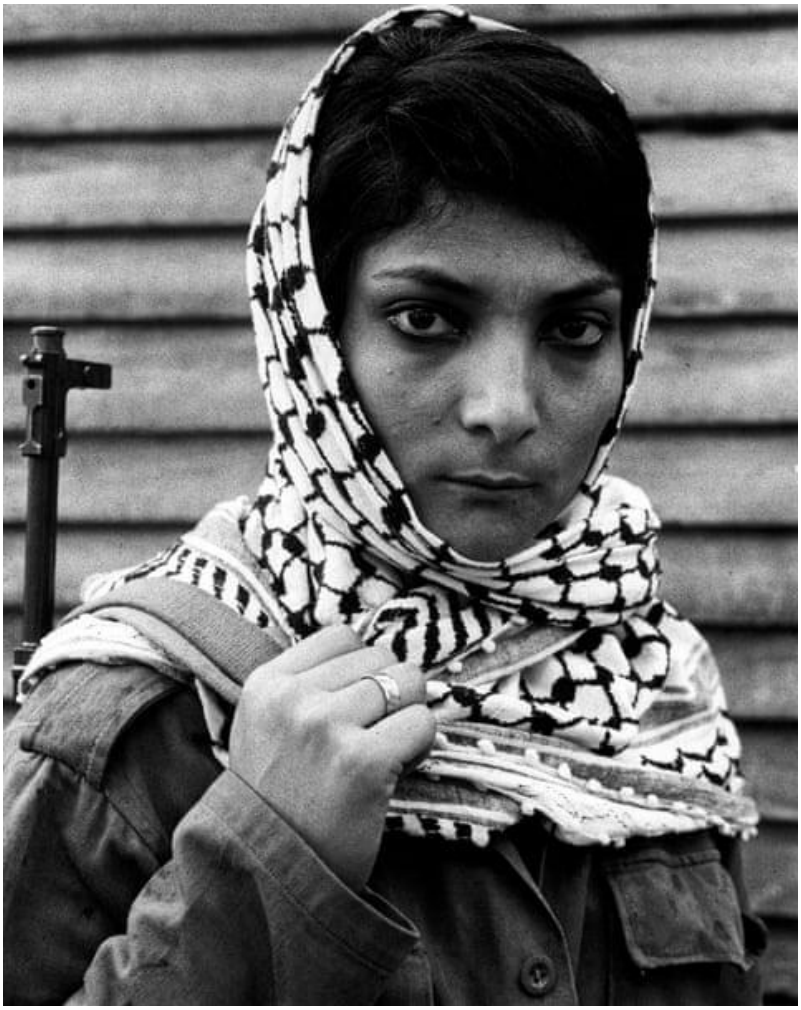
Hey, how does he do those things?
They never really get the chance
And before this we wake
We'll forget the things that drive affection
Put aside these old reflections

Just like Leila Khaled said

Just like Leila Khaled said"

Cope, J. (1981). *Like Leila Khaled Said*. Chicago: Mercury and Fontana Records.

Appendix III - Photograph by Eddie Adams after her first hijacking of Flight TWA 840 from Rome to Tel Aviv [but landed in Damascus, Syria]



The Guardian. (2017, April 10). *The photojournalism of Eddie Adams – in pictures*. Retrieved May 16, 2025, from https://www.theguardian.com/culture/gallery/2017/apr/10/eddie-adam-photojournalism-saigon-execution-pictures