

Human Rights & Human Welfare

Volume 9 | Issue 1

Article 17

2009

Tahira Khan on Women as Weapons of War: Iraq, Sex and the Media by Kelly Oliver. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2007. 208pp.

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Recommended Citation

Khan, Tahira (2009) "Tahira Khan on Women as Weapons of War: Iraq, Sex and the Media by Kelly Oliver. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2007. 208pp.," *Human Rights & Human Welfare*: Vol. 9: Iss. 1, Article 17.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw/vol9/iss1/17>



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Abstract

A review of:

Women as Weapons of War: Iraq, Sex and the Media by Kelly Oliver. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2007. 208pp.

Keywords

Human rights, Politics, Conflict, Feminism, Media, Iraq

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Women as Weapons of War: Iraq, Sex and the Media by Kelly Oliver. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2007. 208pp.

The book under review offers a thought-provoking analysis of the impact of US national socio-political culture on the ongoing international conflicts and wars in which it is currently engaged. The author blends feminist explanation of political conflict and violence and the role of the US media in the construction and perpetuation of violent images and perceptions.

Many books and articles have been published on the topics of torture, persecution and violence against the prisoners of war in Iraq and Afghanistan recently. What makes this book more interesting and unique is its feminist critique and gender analysis of how the general public was shocked and surprised over the gruesome images of torture of the Iraqi prisoners of war at Abu Ghraib by women soldiers. The author is very much aware of the fact that if the torturer at Abu Ghraib prison had been a male soldier, the public and the media would have taken it as a normal behavior of a warring army man. Here, the gender of the torturer was more shocking for the media and public, not the act of torture or violence itself. Such shock and surprise apparently motivated the author to explore the relationship between the creation and construction of violent images and the imagined profile of the perpetrators who are always men, brutal and barbarous. “Although the deaths of women soldiers receive little attention, the reports of women soldiers’ violence and abuse captured the public imagination. Why? Why did the images of women abusers from Abu Ghraib generate so much press and media speculation?” (2). After raising these pertinent questions, the author moves on to search for answers by asking many more disturbing questions such as, why did various feminist academics and organizations take different positions? Why and how did various media channels portray and differ on the issue of war, violence and women? What kind of perceptual split was there among the general public of a country, whose soldiers (male and female) were inflicting such torture in the name of patriotism and freedom. Which forces had created the images of “self” and “other” during the war on terror in Iraq?

In the first reading of the title of the book, it seems that this volume would be focused mainly on the issue of the Iraq war where women soldiers have been “used” as “objects” (weapons) of war. Objects (weapons) are used by someone else; objects do not decide to act independently (This is the way I personally understand the title). But as the reader moves forward from the introduction to the next chapters, it reveals that the author is not trying to portray or explain women soldiers’ role in war as weapons; she elaborates the socialization process of these women through the media and military training, which eliminate the gendered lines of perpetration. After going through such processes and trainings, male and female soldiers become similar as the “self,” torturing the “other” (the enemy). The book is not exclusively focused on Iraq war, however; it is about the ongoing media war and conflicts among feminist academic in US society.

Besides the Introduction and Conclusion, the book is divided into four chapters. In the Introduction, the author shares her own surprise and raises many questions relating to international war, national culture, and portrayal of gender, race and “other.” The next four chapters revolve around the questions and observations of the author. In Chapter One, she

brilliantly critiques and questions modern warfare and women by entitling it “Women—The Secret Weapon of Modern Warfare?”

Chapter Two also has a question marked title, “Sexual Freedom as Global Freedom?” Chapter Three becomes a statement of thesis as “Perpetual War, Real Live Coverage!” In this chapter, the author dissects the terms “violence” and “innocence” and explains the difference between so-called, “legitimate and illegitimate violence.” I cannot resist quoting a few lines from this chapter when the author very bluntly explains the legitimacy/illegitimacy dichotomy by saying, “[t]he war in Iraq ostensibly began because US intelligence (mistakenly) reported that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction. Never mind that the United States and most other technologically developed countries have weapons of mass destruction. Never mind that the United States is the only country to have used nuclear weapons in war, which affected the Japanese people in horrific and deadly ways” (125). After taking her readers through the corridors of state power, media towers and feminist academic writings, the author concludes the volume with a brilliant blend of politics, war, violence, gender and race in national and international contexts.

I would call this book a “must read” for students, journalists and researchers of inter/national politics, women/gender studies and American culture.

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