

EL DESANGRAMIENTO LATINO AMERICANO:

UN PANORAMA POLÍTICO CONTEMPORÁNEO SOBRE
LA REORGANIZACIÓN Y LA RECONFIGURACIÓN
DEL ESTADO NEOLIBERAL

VIOLADA MINEDUCACIÓN



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Fotógrafo brasileño Eduardo Kuninari, de una villa en Perú. La foto evidencia el pasado indígena de nuestra Latinoamérica, donde había un sistema de gobierno funcional, que fue sustituido cuando los invasores aquí llegaron, instalando los gobiernos "democráticos" y/o totalitarios a lo largo de nuestra historia.

Periodista brasileña Luisa Nucada, de propiedad de Sinditest Sindicato-Curitiba, Brasil. La propietaria de la foto nos autorizó su utilización en este libro. La foto es referente a los movimientos por la defensa de la Democracia en Brasil, hecha en Brasilia, en 2017 lo que se conoció como 24M, donde el presidente Michel Temer autorizó la utilización de las fuerzas armadas (militares) para reprimir la manifestación que apoyaba a los derechos de los trabajadores/as.

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PRODUCTIVE UNEASE: FEMALE TERRORISTS, AESTHETICS, AND AGENCY IN CULTURAL REPRESENTATION

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RESUMEN

El análisis de la novela de Tabish Khair *Just Another Jihadi Jane* (2017) y el video clip "Bad Girls" (2012) de la artista M.I.A. revelan puntos comunes a través de los que aproximarse a un estudio de los límites de la representación de las mujeres terroristas. La estética exagerada e irónica del video resuena con la historia narrada en la novela, y ambas obras hacen un uso similar de elementos estereotipantes y estereotípicos asociados a las culturas árabes y musulmanas, bebiendo de narrativas orientalizantes tradicionales. Sin embargo, por otro lado, su propuesta también juega con una disonancia entre marcadores islámicos y occidentales, pobreza y riqueza, que problematiza de maneras productivas la relación entre feminidad, violencia, y bondad. Estas obras dialogan con las imágenes planas que producen los medios occidentales sobre las mujeres en el islam y desafían la capacidad del lenguaje occidental a la hora de representar la radicalización de algunas de estas mujeres como un proceso complejo. Enredadas en lo que Latour (2002) llama "la guerra de los mundos," las mujeres terroristas con sujetos avocados al fracaso. Incapaces de cumplir los requisitos de bondad femenina e incapaces también de subirse al carro de la modernidad, estas mujeres son siempre sospechosas de una maldad innata; reducidas a un ser infantil, debe someterse a continua vigilancia y tutela. Como las subalternas de Spivak (1988), las mujeres terroristas entendidas como víctimas quedan reducidas al silencio. Sin embargo, cuando estos sujetos son representados de manera que surge la esperanza de que tengan voz propia, surge siempre una cierta inquietud. Este ensayo explora esa inquietud como una forma de ahondar, no en la subjetividad de la mujer terrorista, si no en las estructuras discursivas que construyen sus estereotipos. Así mismo, estas narrativas intentan desvelar historias alternativas acerca de la agencia de las mujeres dentro de las organizaciones terroristas frente a la historia hegemónica que niega su posibilidad de agencia.

Palabras clave: Mujer Terrorista, Feminismo, Estética, Jihad, Representación.

ABSTRACT

Tabish Khair's *Just Another Jihadi Jane* (2017) and M.I.A.'s music video "Bad Girls" (2012) raise similar concerns about the limits of representation when it comes to the figure of female terrorists. The over-the-top, ironic aesthetics of the video resonate with the story narrated in this recently published novel. The two works make use of contrasting desert landscape and urban elements, Western and Islamic markers, poverty and luxury, problematize the relation between femininity, violence and goodness in the intersection of Islam and globalization. Bringing forth the flatness and the stereotyping force of the images produced by Western media, both novel and video challenge the capacity of Western language to perform the complex subjectivities that would account for the experience of radicalization. Caught in a what Latour (2002) called the "war of worlds," the female terrorist is a subject bound to failure. Unable to fulfill the requirements to become good and to inhabit modernity, she is always suspect of evil; reduced to childishness, she must always be under surveillance and guidance. Like Spivak's subaltern (1988) the female terrorist understood as a victim is reduced to silence. Nevertheless, representations of female terrorists that promise to give these subjects a voice cause certain degree of unease. Exploring this sense of unease might provide a way to explore, not the subjectivity of the female terrorist, but the discursive structures that construct the stereotypes, and, at the same time, be an attempt to carve another narrative of female terrorism into a global discourse that rejects their agency.

Keywords: Female terrorist, Feminism, Aesthetics, Jihad, Representation.

Certain subjects and certain objects make us uncomfortable. Such subjects and objects are oftentimes silenced, dismissed, or cynically attacked. Nonetheless, there are very specific dynamics at work in the articulation and circulation of that sense of unease. The recent regulations implemented across the globe present unease as an unavoidable reality while connecting racial otherness with potential danger. On the one hand, the current implementation of harsh immigration policies issued by President Donald Trump's administration limit and prevent the free movement of certain bodies within and into the United States. These policies are grounded on the of a continuity between racialized bodies, religious belief, and violent religious radicalism. On the other hand, the threat held by territorial and political reorganization, such as Brexit, anticipates radical changes in the lives of immigrants in the United Kingdom. Brexit, although mostly an economical and financial strategy, is presented to the public also as an administrative and bureaucratic wall that will keep the *South* and the *East*, whether of Europe or the world, outside. Thus, Brexit also racialized the Other, because it promises to keep away an invasive wave that Europe lets through, and that is threatening, radically different, unassimilable, and above all, uncivilized and potentially violent. Although the bodies targeted by these policies are very varied - ranging from European workers to allegedly illegal Mexican immigrants raided by the ICE or anyone considered Muslim - we are witness to the transformation of preexisting dominant discourses of Otherness into very particular legislative enunciates that imply the surveillance, interpellation, and ultimately control of those bodies.

Intensified as they currently are, the discursive politics of othering operate within specific fields in order to acquire an appearance of public approval, and one of the spheres in which they operate more effectively, and to some extent more surreptitiously, is that of emotions and affect. Sara Ahmed (2004a) is one of the contemporary scholars who has looked more extensively at the intersection of politics and emotions. In her work *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, she looks closely at "emotion as a form of cultural politics or world

making” and the way emotions structure relations between collective and individual bodies (p.10). According to Ahmed “emotions are bound up with the securing of social boundaries; emotions become attributes of bodies as a way of transforming what is ‘lower’ or ‘higher’ in bodily traits” (Ahmed, 2004a, p.4). Her criticism of the Cartesian tradition of the dualism of body and mind that still exist in most psychoanalytical critique is exerted by a materialist approach to affect. In her article “Affective Economies” (2004b), Sara Ahmed (2004b) argues that “emotions do things”, that “they work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective” (p.119). Emotions accumulate social and political value over time and contribute to establishing the boundaries of individual and communities, and they negotiate symbolic and physical space. The affective capital deployed in the political moves presented above deals extensively in emotions of fear and unease. Separatist trends and strict immigration laws alike are constructed upon an imaginary in which immigrants are potential threats to the body of the nation - and therefore to the bodies that constitute the nation. Controlling the bodies of Others is presented as the condition not to end the threat itself, but its potentiality: it proposes the end of fear, the alleviation of unease.

Affect therefore articulates relations between Self and Other, drawing and hardening the boundaries that keep the two apart, the skin that may bring them to touch each other and still always separates them. If we adhere to Marxist model of affect proposed by Ahmed, then there is certain potential in the exploration of discourses of discomfort and fear as they accumulate upon cultural artifacts and products. Unease aligns individuals and collectives in relation to cultural objects and the subjects they represent. In this chapter, I want to look at unease in relation to two cultural objects in particular: M.I.A.’s music video and hit “Bad Girls” (2012) and Tabish Khair’s recently published novel *Just Another Jihadi Jane* (2017). In the current political climate in which every body that can be associated with Islam is inexhaustibly targeted as a possible threat to the West, anxiety, unease, and fear have be-

come some of the major emotions at work in the articulation of relations between bodies. When dress, country of origin, and religion have become in so-called democratic and free countries the source of anxiety for those targeted by the policies that promise to free the nation from fear, while these bodies are themselves the source of great unease. I challenge us to read into these feelings as the product of accumulated discourses of threat. Unease arises precisely when the relation between the bodies those discourses pretend to protect and those other threatening bodies remains unclear, when we are unable to tell where we end and where the Other starts. M.I.A.'s music video and Khair (2017) novel have been the object of extensive criticism because they inhabit that zone of uncertainty. Produced and circulated in global markets, endorsed and produced by Western sponsors, they portray the female body of Islam in ways that do not completely align with dominant Western discourses of Otherness.

At the inevitable intersection of discourses of terrorism and Islam, fear is deployed widely and uncritically to mobilize public opinion, enforce national and international policies, and justify physical and structural violence and abuse. The current rise of alt-right populism throughout the globe makes it necessary for us, cultural critics and scholars, to rethink the relations among discourses of unease and the subjects and objects that are regarded as the source of discomfort. Analyzing the dominant stance taken towards the works proposed here provides a vantage point from which we might be able to tackle the assumptions and prejudices embedded in the sort of cultural critique that produced around them. Since the two works deal with the image of female Islamic terrorists, they are subject to paternalistic approaches issued equally from Western media and academia, and feminist groups East and West¹, both constructing an image of the female terrorist as victim of global and local circumstances. As V.G. Julie Rajan (2011) argues in her

1 See Hunt and Rygiel (2006) for a commentary on the articulation of Islamic feminism and its development in relation to Western feminism and global politics.

book *Women Suicide Bombers: Narratives of Violence*, in spite of the diverse approaches and narratives regarding women suicide bombers, “these representations surface patriarchal ideologies that remind readers that women bombers are first and foremost *women* as identified by patriarchy” (Rajan, 2011, p.29, emphasis in the original). While it remains true that global patriarchal forces play a crucial role in the current rise of extreme forms of Islam, the fact that most narratives identify these subjects primarily as women and as victims of several oppressive systems leaves no space for them to articulate their stories using their own voice. This sort of discourse denies the agency of women terrorists while still positioning them as a major source of threat for the West.

“Bad Girls” and *Just Another Jihadi Jane* highlight the contradictions inherent to most discourses on female terrorist. Despite the disparity of in genres and audience, both works have been greeted ambiguously with unease and praise by critics around the world. While Khair’s work had received several reviews in India, it did not issue much attention elsewhere with only a few reviews in the United States and none in the United Kingdom. Nonetheless, after President Trump’s immigration ban to seven *Muslim countries* - Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Yemen, and Iraq which was later removed - in the United States, the novel began to appear in some of the well-established newspapers and magazines in both countries. With reviews in *The Huffingtonpost UK* (December 2016), *The Washington Times* (January 2017), *Library Journal* (March 2017), or *The Guardian* (April 2017), the novel’s title started to echo in the mass media as a veritable story about two young Western-born women who become Islamic terrorists. The shift, even if subtle, involved a change in the mainstream perception of the novel. Whereas its success attributed to its truthfulness the silence around the narrative was credited to its lack of authenticity: a work of fiction written by an Indian man that tries to account for the psychology of two Muslim British teenagers of Commonwealth heritage. Similar concerns about authenticity in representation have been raised by critics regarding a number of songs and videos by M.I.A. Ayesha A.

Siddiqi (2013) reports in her article for *Noisey* "The Pop Diaspora of M.I.A." (2013) that

In a review of M.I.A.'s debut *Arular* for the *Village Voice*, Simon Reynolds wrote that while "the record sounds great," there's "something ever so slightly off-putting about the whole phenomenon... don't let M.I.A.'s brown skin throw you off: She's got no more real connection with the favela funksters than Prince Harry." Those baffled by the range of M.I.A.'s sources are eager to dismiss the collage as inauthentic and tellingly root their anxiety in her "ethnicness". (Siddiqi, 2013, parr. 6°)

The fact that the artists as well as their cultural creations are judged on an alleged lack of authenticity is directly linked to issues of ethnic, class, gender and religious identity as a key signifier that legitimizes discourse that is perceived as the expression of specific social groups. That is to say, since M.I.A. (2012) is not perceived as an *authentic* Muslim woman due to her economic status, and nor does Khair (2017) due to his gender, religious background, or status either, but since they can to some extent be read as part of that ethnic and/or religious group, their narratives hold an ambiguous position in which they can simultaneously be conceived as real and as unauthentic. This nativist approach is grounded on essentialist understandings of identity, and it serves once and again as an argument to veto certain accounts in favor of others which are considered more legitimate and authentic, but that often also harbors other political agendas. The problems raised by this nativist perspective should be clear as it ignores the many intersections that construct M.I.A.'s and Khair's public identities as well as their multilayered position in the global economies of culture, not to mention the very process of production of their cultural works. Siddiqi writes that "if M.I.A. is guilty of decontextualization, critics need to understand that decontextualization is the lived experience of an immigrant" (2013). This way, she is able to legitimize the singer not in relation to authenticity but acknowledging the - often contradictory - multiplicity of references that coexist in her songs and videos

as belonging to the global economies her work circulates. In addition, approaching these works regarding merely on the basis of the *essence* and *purity* behind the stories they narrate precludes the potential readings they may produce - regardless of whether these readings make us feel uncomfortable, or precisely because they do. Moreover, any belief that these accounts might be, unmediatedly, *truthful* ignores the fact that the representation of women terrorists is always "a mediated voice and visibility" (Rajan, 2011, p.30). The need for cultural translation that Ulvija Tanović discusses in her introduction to the publication of an excerpt from Khair's novel emphasizes the theme of mediation and the impossibility of ever having access to the true stories that might resolve the mystery² that these figures present (Tanović, 2016, p.2).

Mystery and ambiguity contribute to the atmosphere of unease present in the works discussed here. It is not only a potentially morally challenging story, but the fact that the narrative and characters are difficult to pin down to neat categories that adds up to the effect of potential threat, of being fooled, of something dangerous unnoticeably passing by. "Bad Girls" and *Just Another Jihadi Jane* are, at times, incoherent and fragmented narratives, puzzles that should be made sense of. While the juxtaposition of contrasting cultural elements in M.I.A.'s video disrupts its aesthetics, Khair's voice interrupts in far less instances Jamilla's first person narration, which would, otherwise, resemble a coherent and continuous traditional account. Nonetheless, Khair's novel presents side by side imageries and imaginaries that seem to belong to two completely opposite worlds: fashion and war. Bringing together these aesthetics through continuous references to fashionable accessories and

2 Scholars of female terrorism emphasize the language of mystery that surrounds the narratives about female terrorists, even more so when dealing with women suicide bombers. In her analysis, Rajan asserts that "the drive towards death affected by suicide bomber after suicide bomber, and supported by multiple cultures globally, implies the looming presence of something both significant and unworldly, unearthly. In the Western imaginary, the suicide attack assumes something entirely symbolic, the effect of which cannot entirely be captured by and explained in language" (Rajan, 2011, p.16). Her argument runs parallel to that of Tanya Naroznha and Andy W. Knight who point out that "in the West, the perplexing, obscure character of female suicide bombings enables problem-solving scholars to authoritatively determine their meaning for Western audiences and to creates raced gendered silences" (Naroznha & knight, 2016, p.221).

fashion brands while setting the story in Syria's warzone, Khair echoes under a critical light familiar images of terrorist chic which have been exploited by the Western fashion industry during the last decade.

Articulating fragmentation through affective theory might provide an insight that accounts for the sense of anxiety that Siddiqi (2013) points out. Ahmed (2004b) argues that fear is grounded in anxiety as it "involves an anticipation of hurt or injury" (p.65). A hurt or injury, in this case, might present itself in the disappointment of expectations. But, more importantly, fear relies on dynamics of presence and absence since "it is the structural possibility that the object of fear may pass us which makes everything possibly fearsome" (Ahmed, 2004b, p.69). In other words, such works as those of M.I.A. and Khair, in their own internal fragmentation and incoherence, seem to hold the potential for express something other than what they seem to portray, to have a hidden value or meaning to them, to feature something that might pass us by - and whether this content is there or not, this *potential* is what issues unease.

In addition, ambiguity adds to the threatening potential of these two works. As the theme of good and evil becomes a common thread in the discourse of the video and the novel, the unclear positioning of the works and their characters in any of the sides of this divide increases the sense of unease they articulate. The over-the-top, ironic aesthetics of M.I.A.'s video resonates with the conflicted story narrated in *Just Another Jihadi Jane*. The imagery in both works make use of contrasting desert landscapes and urban elements, Western and Islamic markers, poverty and luxury, in order to problematize the relation between femininity, violence and goodness in the intersection of Islam and globalization. An examination of "Bad Girl" will provide a framework for a different reading of Khair's work, one that looks beyond the story to what makes us uncomfortable. I will start by analyzing the video's internal incongruence and its possible meanings in order to be able to explore the novel's potential for unease.

Of Racing and Violence

The official video for M.I.A.'s hit "Bad Girls" (2012) begins with a few seconds of documentary-like silent footage, during which static landscapes and scenes of a moving van follow each other. First a desert landscape is followed by a scene in which the van drives on a dirt road, loaded with clinging figures clothed Arab-like attires as it approaches the silhouette of a low-rise village in the distance. Next, we see a wall with bricked up windows, a rusty door, and a word in Arabic script. A shot of a group of men, their heads covered with *kufiyyas* and wearing white thawbs, as the rising sun fills the scene with warm light. Yet another wall appears behind a row of columns and arches, red Arabic script on its bricks and another reddish rusted door. Only at this point does the music begin, with recognizable Arabic tones and yet another shot of another desert road landscape. As the music rises to the beat of a strong bass, the viewer is introduced to a scene where a group of women, dressed in military print *niqabs* and wearing sunglasses lean boldly on an old car in front of a brick building surrounded by sacks of sand, reminding us of a war setting. Squeezed between more images of desert landscape, the singer appears, unveiled, while one of the veiled women from the previous scene assertively takes hold of a car wheel. M.I.A. swags to the first line of her lyrics, "live fast die young bad girls do it well", while observed by men standing static on top of brick walls, their arms crossed ("Bad Girls" 2012). As the other women start dancing, they are joined by more women, these clad in animal print outfits, their scarfs adorned with golden jewelry, golden chains hanging from their necks. While cars and the orange van race on the dirt road, the lyrics continue:

My chain hits my chest
When I'm bangin' on the dashboard
My chain hits my chest
When I'm bangin' on the radio
Get back, get down
Pull me closer if you think you can hang

Hands up, hands tied

Don't go screaming if I blow you with a bang ("Bad Girls" 2012)

As M.I.A. sings the last line, her cast of dancers produce automatic guns that they hold up or against their chest. Despite the linguistic ambiguity of the phrase, or precisely because of it, "Bad Girls" achieves to produce certain sense of unease as the meaning of the song remains unclear through a play of imager, music, and language.

In the video, the desert and war-like setting becomes the scenario of a car race that stands somewhere between the famous violent and tense race in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) with its old cars and an imminent sense of danger, and the brazen world of *The Fast and The Furious* (2001) with its crews of women cheering on the boys as they risk their lives in races involving luxurious cars. Nonetheless, the landscape in which M.I.A. situates the action in her video brings an ironic undertone to the intersection of narratives of luxury and risk at play in the construction of masculinity that the Western films mentioned above present. The contrast between the setting of poverty and war implied by the location and the dancers' rich attires question assumptions regarding the bodies that populate Islamic war zones. Old beaters and vans appear beside new BMWs, their difference pointing towards the fact that we are witness to a space of extreme inequality. Female dancers and cars become a spectacle that is observed by a male gaze of men and boys - who are meant to follow the steps of those men, as the similarity of their attires and their stance suggests.

The critique of global capitalism yielded in these contrasting elements reveals the presence of the West in what is represented as *the territory of Islam*, using images familiar to Western audiences. While this juxtaposition may lead to questioning certain mass assumptions related to the Western stereotypes about Islam, it also perpetuates stereotypes about female oppression, social and economic inequality, and even backwardness. The overall mood

of the song is, nevertheless, defiant and celebratory. As they dangerously ride at top speed, skidding on the dirt road and barely missing the other cars, female figures make victorious gestures out of their car windows, or they stand on top of a car as it drives on its two side wheels. This sense of victory claims their conquest over fear, and affirms their power over the control of their own lives and bodies, as well as their right to put them at risk. If the representation of female terrorists is one that usually depoliticizes their acts and presents them as victims of a backwards patriarchy (Narozhna & Knight, 2016), the play on the stereotype of a potential terrorist in the video defies such assumptions. M.I.A. and the dance crew look intently at the camera, as if challenging the audience to react to the explicit violence of the lyrics and their acts, to reprimand them for putting themselves and others in danger. There is also an implicit claim for independence. The song states that these women are “leaving boys behind cause it’s legal just to kill” and advocates the power that violence endows, wondering “who’s gonna stop me when I’m coming through” (“Bad Girls” 2012). Such a celebration of autonomy and power contests the reading of women as commodity produced by scenes in which the male gaze monitors the female body.

M.I.A.’s particular articulation of female terrorism as a site of empowerment uses mainstream imagery and language, and then defamiliarizes it in order to enhance the sense of unease that the video has produced in certain audiences. In their work *(En)Gendering the War on Terror* (2006), Krista Hunt and Kim Ryegeel state that the language that constructs Islam as the Other in Western discourses carries

ideas that are easily and uncritically absorbed by the masses as a means to legitimate the right to power and the right to rule over others in an almost benevolent and paternal gesture of bringing modernity, democracy and liberalism to those Fanon (1963) poignantly described as “the wretched of the earth.” This new hegemony operates as a form of “camouflaged politics” masking the self-serving economic and po-

litical rationale behind the global dynamics of power. (Hunt & Rygiel, 2006, p.31)

While the women in the video echo stereotypes of Muslim women in their attire, the fact that these clothes are rich, colorful, and vibrant stands against the very images they recall. In the same way, the music, dance, and stance performed by the dance crew contrasts with the idea of female subservience in Islamism. Staying true to Siddiqi's claims about her eclectic array of references and the contrasting images she creates, M.I.A. uses such images and ideas to undermine this paternalistic discourse and reveal the works of hegemonic camouflaged politics. Eventually, M.I.A.'s dance crew states that they do not need to be saved, disrupting the savior impulse and the moral high ground political discourse that justifies governmental policies and decisions that affect populations and countries that are perceived as Muslim.

"Bad Girls" reveals Western participation in the global economies of power that produce discourses of macho bravado, luxury, and femininity across the world. Although the video does not necessarily deal with female suicide bombing, it helps questioning some of the assumptions that terrorist studies and mass media produce and reproduce in relation to Muslim women and female terrorists. The clashing elements in the song and the video make manifest that "the production and dissemination of specific representations of suicide attacks thus cater to prevalent views of people residing in certain geographies. That dynamic reveals those images to be political commodities, produced for and sold to the public who is the most likely to buy into certain stereotypes of Otherness" (Rajan, 2011, p.14). While playing on these stereotypes, the video also undermines them. The hit proposes structures of female agency that find no space within Western discourses around Islam. Where femininity and violence are already traditionally at odds, the victimization of Muslim women as powerless and oppressed figures turns M.I.A.'s depiction a strange and unreadable language that can only be dismissed, whether it is discharged as untrue or altogether nonsensical (see Siddiqi,

2013). The song title provides a signpost to guide the video's reading nonetheless. "Bad Girls" articulates the feminine bodies on screen in opposition to the expectation created by Western media images. Rather than victims, these women engage in dangerous driving and threaten to shoot the audience and blow them up. The attires inevitably establish connections with imaginaries of war on terror and terrorism. The irony of first reading the bodies on screen as potential female terrorists, and then calling them bad girls is rampant. Their performance undoes the infantilization that the category girl imposes on adult women, while the adjective bad reproduces the traditional dichotomy of Western culture that posits women as good or bad according to parameters concerned with sexual behavior or assertiveness, among other. At the same time, these women fail to fulfill orthodox Muslim standards of goodness. Their explicit boldness and the sexualization of their bodies transgresses the invisibilizing barrier imposed by the *niqab*.

While the West and Islam have been largely constructed as absolute opposites by Western media, "Bad Girls" reveals a series of subjects that remain outside the definitions of goodness that stem from Western and Muslim cultures. The intersection of these supposedly opposing cultural standards of female goodness dislocates expectations about the discourses and images reproduced in mainstream music industries, as the critiques' and viewers' responses cited here have shown (see Siddiqi, 2013, for a commentary on the Youtube viewers' responses to M.I.A.'s videos). The fact that these women would be deemed bad or evil according to both cultures reveals a commonality in their discourses on femininity that disrupts the usual Western paternalistic perspective about Muslim women. The video may make viewers feel uncomfortable because it shows that the audience might have in them something that they have easily dismissed as characterizing the Other. "Bad Girls" plays the audience. It provides stereotypes and traditional mass media discourses just to undo them, making the audience cringe at its own tendency to bite the bait, to participate on the assumptions that the images carry and to do so uncritically. A critical approach to M.I.A.'s music wonders at why

we like it and if we should like it. It is not that it produces unease that an object that may pass us viewers, as Ahmed (2004) stated, it is the restlessness given by the suspicion that we might find that object already within us.

Fragmented Voices

My analysis of *Just Another Jihadi Jane* meditates on the issues raised by the previous analysis of “Bad Girls” and finds coherence between these two works. The novel presents a first person narration in which Jamilla, a Muslim teenager born in the United Kingdom, tells the story of becoming a so-called “Jihadi Jane” in Syria together with her friend Ameena, the latter’s self-immolation and her eventual flight to Bali to an unknown narratee. Throughout her narration, Jamilla’s voice is disrupted by comments that might resonate with previous works by the author, Tabish Khair. Nevertheless, the fact that Jamilla is an incoherent and fragmented character which agglutinates different voices might provide space for a different critique, one that focuses less on the authenticity of her account but touches on different reactions raised by such lack of wholeness. It is in analyzing these responses that the previous analysis of “Bad Girls” proves useful. Because the video articulated female terrorists as outside Western and Muslim discourses of femininity, making it difficult for its audience to pin down the women it portrayed, we can analyze Khair’s novel in relation to this articulation. Where do Jamilla and Ameena, both female participants in the Jihad –widely understood as a Muslim war against non-Muslims in order to spread and defend their faith–, stand in relation to Western and Muslim standards of feminine behavior? Or to put it simply, are Jamilla and Ameena good or bad girls according to any such standards? Are they even *girls* at all if their narrative is constantly disrupted by the voice of the author?

If M.I.A.’s video engaged on the dichotomy good/evil and challenged it, as it questioned the possibility of women ever embodying the conflicting definitions of good when it came to the overlapping of Western and Muslim culture, *Just Another Jihadi Jane* also reflects on these issues. Jamilla meditates on the meaning of good and evil as she states that

Goodness reveals itself only in its capacity to tolerate the pettiness and dullness of evil. Goodness has to live with the possibility of evil, not eradicate it. As long as as it does so, the evil that confronts goodness stays petty, dull, limited, essentially unimportant. But when goodness wants to become pure and alone, that is when it turns evil, truly evil; not the grubby evil that it has to tolerate in order to be goodness, but Evil itself. (Khair, 2017, p.118)

At a certain point of her experience as a female jihadi in Syria, Jamilla reflects on the antagonism between good and evil. In the binary proposed by Jamilla, evil must be of a minor sort, always subdued to goodness. Her description resonates with traditional definitions of Cartesian dualism and the Saussurean theory of the signifier: the meaning of a term derived from its opposition to other term (Saussure, 1959, p.89). Her statement is also connected to discourses of Otherness. We need the Other in order to define ourselves, and at the same time, because the Other is traditionally constructed a menacing presence, we struggle between tolerance and our desire to eradicate Otherness. A desire that is connected to Jamilla's words which issue also a warning. Jamilla sees good and evil as mutable, in need of each other and essentially impure, never fully exclusive. She emphasizes the potential of goodness to turn into evil, and of evil to exceed its own boundaries, becoming uncontrollable. It is this mutability that undoes the categories and their limits.

Jamilla herself embodies this potential for mutability. She goes on to recount how "this was something I have only thought of only in recent months. In those days, as I told you, I still believed in the good fight. But soon my belief in our good fight was to be shaken. It had to do with Halide" (Khair, 2017, p.118. The emphasis is mine). Her belief is shaken by a situation that makes her question her own values, her own assessment of good and evil. Jamilla finds herself unable to situate her friend Halide into neat categories of good and evil when the latter starts being critical of the acts carried out by lo-

cal Jihadist groups which lead to the killing of two “good girls” (Khair, 2017, p.128). Halide provides their religiousness as proof of their goodness, not necessarily because she believes this is the only marker of goodness but because in the context of her conversation with Jamilla, she thinks this is the best justification.

Their conversation leaves Jamilla questioning her own defense of Islam, which produces a sense of uneasiness in her, not the sudden realization but rather the reassertion that things might not be quite what they seem, that the good fight might not be so or might not be hers. Her sense of uncertainty is related to her own position in the world. If the fight she supports might not be the good fight, what is her position within the discourse of Islam? Can Jamilla herself become evil for inadvertently—or as she will later admit, knowingly but in denial of that knowledge—taking part in that fight? When presented with the task of taking care of two female prisoners of the opposing, Jamilla would assert that she “felt ashamed to sit in front of them, and if the older one had not abused me, as she obviously did, I would have found it intolerable” (Khair, 2017, p.141). At the same time, there is a questioning of her belonging. Does her assessment of the fight change because she discovers that it is not hers, that she does not belong to that side of the war? Or does her new evaluation of the fight prevent her from belonging?

In presenting the reader with a first person narrator that continually doubts her own judgment, and in getting the reader to empathize with that narrator, the novel may have misled the reader’s compassion. Many elements and plots within the narrative agree with Western media discourses about the Muslim world as oppressive to women—for instance, the way in which the women are secluded behind the wall that protects them, or the fact that their provisions are provided only by the men outside, thus they hold control over their survival and can enforce their participation—the Jihad as a brainwashing organization that prods violence and death, and young women as naive and easily manipulated. These assumptions are undone by Jamilla’s com-

mentary on her own story. As she goes on to tell how she discussed with Halide whether some of the girls in the Daesh orphanage were being prepared to become suicide bombers, Jamilla states: “You may wonder at my stupidity in believing this lie for so long, but all of us did –and in many ways we were not different from people like you who might want to believe that the hundreds of civilians killed by Western government forces are just ‘mistakes,’ simply ‘collateral damage’” (Khair, 2017, p.128). The use of the pronoun *you* is consistent with the structure of the novel and its use of an explicit naratee, but it inevitably also connects with the actual reader of the novel. Its original context of publication –first India, then the United Kingdom, and then the United States– assumes a mostly non-Muslim audience that will identify with the implied reader of Jamilla’s comment.

Just like M.I.A.’s video creates an opportunity for self-reflection that might lead the viewer to fear the Other within, *Just Another Jihadi Jane* articulates empathy in a way that the reader identifies with Jamilla but also with her naratee, dislocating not the character’s, but the reader’s identity. Khair’s novel does not dwell on binaries but places its emphasis on the instability of the boundaries that define them, on the war-like quality of the zones in which definitions are negotiated, where terms and ideas become liquid. Jamilla and her friend Ameena inhabit this muddy, uncomfortable terrain. The war of meanings and definitions becomes, in their case, a real war, a space where good and evil blur into each, making them impossible to tell apart. The difficulty of telling friend from foe, good from evil, creates an atmosphere of uneasiness as we feel helpless in knowing what or who may hurt us, or come to our aid. *Just Another Jihadi Jane* transports its reader to this uncomfortable zone. Certain subjects, certain topics make us uncomfortable. The very idea of a female jihadi is one of those topics; Jamilla and Ameena are such subjects. As readers, we struggle to pin them down, but they scape our assumptions. They stand uncomfortably somewhere between stereotype and a psychologically deep character. As female jihadis whose life story we come to know, it becomes difficult to tell if they are good or evil; as British

girls that become jihadis, they stand between Islam and the West. The novel making readers accompany Jamilla and Ameena in their uncertainty, making readers doubt them, but also trust them –and thereby question their own judgment.

Embracing the Otherness Within

“Bad Girls” is not only a provocative hymn that advocates the right for women’s agency and freedom through the exercise of violence. As it seeks to articulate a productive space for self-reflection, it challenges the viewers to embrace the multiple contradictions its images present. The line “pull me closer if you think you can hang” is repeated throughout the song as a call for closeness that mobilizes the audience to take in, rather than reject, what the song offers. Just as the structure of empathy built into Khair’s novel asks us to step in the shoes of the two protagonists, Jamilla and Ameena, in order to find out that we might not be so different, M.I.A. projects Western culture into Islamic culture in a way that undoes the strong edges that separate them.

In order to accept the challenge posed by these two works, we have to come to terms with our own unease. In her work *Gender and the Political: Deconstructing the Female Terrorist* (2014), Amanda Third states that “if the female terrorist is the shadowy figure of excess or deviance that, albeit tenuously, demarcates legitimate femininity from its Other, so, too, does she mark the limits of *feminist agency*” (Third, 2014, p.4). The characters presented in the works analyzed in this paper test those limits. M.I.A. and Khair make us wonder where and when agency becomes excessive. But we might as well wonder what leads us to want to draw the line between *acceptable* and *excessive*, *feminist* and *non-feminist*. The potential raised by portrayals of female terrorists and female suicide bombers lies precisely in getting us to question where and when limits are drawn and by whom. In the current political climate, when boundaries and the policies that reinforce them contribute to the perpetuation of racialized stereotypes of Islam as inherently radical, Muslim women as victims, and Muslim people as backwards and violent, to

challenge the boundaries of the categories that create these stereotypes is to challenge discourses that reinforce division. Presenting the world through nationalist discourses as an *us versus them* struggle for legitimate ownership of physical and symbolic space, policies such as Brexit and the United States' immigration ban draw a hierarchy of humanness in which some individuals are more human, and thus must be protected, and others are less humans, and therefore have less rights.

Considering these dynamics also points out how violence is used as a strategy that legitimizes and de-legitimizes certain subjects and their objectives. As Khair (2016) himself argues, "evidently, it is one thing to say that violence should not be propagated or preached as a remedy; it is another thing to maintain that it invalidates its objects" (p.11). Violence becomes something attributed always to the Other in an attempt to erase and overlook the physical and structural violence that processes of othering and the policies mentioned above exert over certain bodies. These policies and discourses do not only mark bodies as racially different, and locate them within an unassimilable and unfathomable culture, religion, or language, it denies these individuals and groups the condition of human. The possibility offered by M.I.A. and Khair to empathize with the Other, with the not-fully-human, in unexpected ways brings them inside of us erases the boundaries of our collective and individual selves in a way that challenges the discourses of fear upon which global politics are constructed. To be able to feel the Other within eliminates, to a certain extent, the strangeness of the stranger, the one we need to construct our own normality (Khair, 2016, p.13). Somehow, then, to embrace the lack of boundaries, to accept the Otherness within, is to become ourselves othered or to have the Other become us, in as much as the premises upon which our world rests may come undone in this transition.

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