

‘Mamie Jihad’ and ‘The White Widow’: Constructing French and British national identities in terrorist times of crisis

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Abstract

This article considers the media representation of two women who left the west for Islamic State (IS) in the mid-2010s: from France, Christine Rivière, nicknamed ‘Mamie Jihad’ (Granny Jihad); and from Britain, Sally Jones, known as ‘The White Widow’. Both were white, middle-aged mothers, born and raised in their respective countries, who converted late in life and left behind established lives and (adult) children to join IS. While much has been written on the migration of western women to IS territory, scholarship has focused on younger women and girls who have been represented as groomed and vulnerable to IS propaganda. These two ‘unlikely jihadists’ profoundly unsettled commonsense ideas about who was vulnerable to radicalisation, and, more troublingly, their defections could potentially be read as statements on the desirability of life in the west vis-à-vis IS’s model. Using Critical Discourse Analysis of leading French and British news media, the article demonstrates how journalists represented both women as always-already outside their respective nations through two key narratives: a gendered discourse of abject motherhood and an intersectional discourse that constructed them as abject inside Others. These narratives worked to suture the ideological rupture caused by these women, who were at first glance typically French/British, by demonstrating that they had actually always been on the margins of the national community and had always been dangerous to the nation.

Keywords

IS women; intersectionality; Critical Discourse Analysis; Christine Rivière; Sally Jones

Introduction

In 2017-18 two middle-aged women were the subjects of significant media coverage in France and Britain. The first was Christine Rivière, a French woman found guilty of travelling to Islamic State (IS) territory three times and financially helping her son Tyler Vilus, a high-ranking IS official, as well as encouraging young women to travel to marry him (Radio France 2017). Compared to similar cases against French nationals accused of IS-related offences, this case received extensive media coverage. Rivière did not directly take part in any violent activity, but rather played a relatively minor role in supporting only one individual: her son. The explanation for this extensive coverage may lie in the nickname she was given by the French press: ‘Mamie Djihad’ (Granny Jihad). Aged 51 at her first trial, Rivière was particularly newsworthy because she was atypical for IS-related offences (with other trials involving much younger people) and because she placed her maternal identity at the heart of her defence, arguing that she had only done what any loving mother would do.

In the UK, at the same time, media attention was focused on Sally Jones, a 50-year-old British woman killed in a June 2017 US drone strike in Syria, whose death was reported in October of that year. Jones had migrated with her 8-year-old son to IS territory in 2013 to marry an IS hacker, Junaid Hussain. Unlike Rivière, there was ample evidence that Jones had taken part in terrorist activity, by inciting violence on social media, propagandising and recruiting for IS, and allegedly training women for combat operations (BBC 2017). The extensive attention that her activities received was predictable, however, as with Rivière, the nickname used by the media was revealing. Known as the ‘White Widow’ (following the targeted killing of her husband in August 2015), Jones was portrayed as an ‘unlikely jihadist’¹ through focus on her ethnic and gender identity, rather than her activities.

¹ As is well known, the term jihad can comprise a range of activities, from striving in the name of God, through armed defence of Muslims and Islam, to conquest of (actual or declared) non-Muslims. Mark Sedgwick (2015) has argued that if a group or individual legitimises their actions through the concept of jihad we may consider them ‘jihadist’. We use this term deliberately in this article because of its fluidity. The fact that jihad may comprise disparate actions makes it useful when considering women, who migrated to IS territory knowing that they would not be permitted to fight but still using the language of jihad to speak about their identification with and commitment to the IS movement (L. B. Jackson 2021b, 3)

The nicknames used to describe these two women indicate how Western media understands and articulates politically violent women. Both ‘Mamie Jihad’ and the ‘White Widow’ served as discursive means of associating the two with terrorism at the same time as stressing femininity. In this sense they were represented in ways long noted in the literature on politically violent women (Bloom 2011; Gentry and Sjoberg 2015; Third 2014), unsettling the categories of both ‘terrorist’ (understood as a masculine domain) and ‘woman’ (understood to equate to peace) (Elshtain 1995; Martini 2018). In the representation of Rivière and Jones, however, media discourse focused excessively on other aspects of their identities that were stressed over and above their actual activities for IS, including motherhood, age, class, race, geographical origin, and religion. Emphasising their deviance through these categories served to re-articulate conceptions of national identity destabilised by the defection to IS of middle-aged, white grand/mothers, whose belonging to the nation would not normally be questioned. News discourse re-established the boundaries of national community by re-articulating Rivière and Jones as ‘Other’ through subtle and not so subtle signals that these women, at first glance typically French and typically British, had always been outside of and dangerous to the nation.

This article uses a comparative critical discourse analysis to explore how media representations of Rivière and Jones, in France and Britain respectively, worked to explain away their decisions to migrate to IS and in doing so (re)constructed national identity. To guide our analysis we employ Julia Kristeva’s (1982, 4) concept of the abject, “as a jettisoned object [which] is radically excluded” in order to retain the totality and unity of that from which it is expelled. By refusing to respect settled borders, positions, and rules, the abject transgresses boundaries of identities. Its expulsion therefore constitutes the self by defining what it cannot be. We argue that the discursive strategies used to explain Rivière and Jones functioned to ensure that the superiority of France and Britain, potentially challenged by their departures, was reasserted through consistent emphasis on their marginalised and abject identities.

The article first considers previous work on how women and terrorists have been used to constitute national identity, before moving on to outline our methodological approach. We then analyse and discuss the media representations of the two women, drawing attention to how gender, age, class, race, geographical origins, and religion were employed as markers of Otherness in nationally specific ways. Our analysis

contributes to the growing literature on the portrayal of women's involvement with terrorist groups, and particularly on how Western migrants to IS territory have been exteriorised (with important implications for IS-affiliates who remain in Syrian camps). In highlighting the discursive rendering of these women, this comparison allows us to understand the nationally specific discourses of power that condition access to belonging.

Women, gender, and terrorism

Feminist scholarship has demonstrated how discourses of gender are central to media representations of terrorism (Brown 2020; Gentry 2020; Gentry and Sjoberg 2015; Nacos 2005), highlighting how societal ideas of women as naturally nurturing and peaceful 'beautiful souls' (Elshtain 1995) are disrupted by the reality of women's involvement. Two key narratives have been identified in news stories of women's involvement in politically violent projects, that work to re-establish hegemonic ideas about gender (Gardner 2007). The first may be understood as the 'not real terrorists' narrative. This works to preserve agential political violence as the domain of men, undermining women's ideological motivations and emphasising personal reasons for involvement through frames that position them as manipulated victims by denying or downplaying their agency (Parashar 2011; Sjoberg 2007; Toivanen and Baser 2016). The second, 'not real women' narrative, accepts their violence but restores the women-peace nexus by portraying them as deviant and focusing on their sexual dysfunction, their failure as mothers, or their badness/madness/sadness to explain their behaviour (Åhäll 2012; Melzer 2011; Sjoberg and Gentry 2008). Rearticulations of essentialist understandings of gender in media discourse thus enable violent women to be exceptionalised, allowing "the rest of the 'good' women to represent the universal non-aggressive feminine collectivity" (Krulišová 2016, 39).

Intersectional feminist scholars have extended gendered analyses to account for the ways gender, race, class, religion, nationality, and sexuality are mutually constituted and work together to secure privileges, deny rights, and dehumanise subjects (Collins 2004; Crenshaw 1989). By focusing on multiple and simultaneous positions within a matrix of domination, the operation of power within and through overlapping socially situated identities may be interrogated. In media analysis, this approach enables a more holistic examination of how gender works with and through other valued/devalued

identities (race, class, sexuality, citizenship) to construct ‘normal’ and deviant subjects and produce social value (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013; Molina-Guzmán and Cacho 2013). Previous studies have employed intersectionality as an interpretive frame to understand the construction of terrorism (Brunner 2007; Gentry 2020; Stenger 2023), and to interrogate media representations of specific women, including Samantha Lewthwaite (Auer, Sutcliffe, and Lee 2019), Muriel Degauque (Brown 2011), and Collen La Rose (Picart 2015). These studies demonstrate how matrices of privilege and marginality are reproduced in media explanations of women’s political violence.

The migration of thousands of Western women to IS territory in the mid-2010s led to comprehensive media coverage. Several studies have examined how these women were represented in the media (Azeez 2019; L. B. Jackson 2021a), emphasising how gendered, neo-Orientalist narratives have produced IS-affiliated women in infantilised ways as the groomed, vulnerable victims of jihadist men and/or as naïve seekers of utopia (L. B. Jackson 2021b; Krona and Caskey 2023; Martini 2018; Shaban 2020). These discourses are important to interrogate, but we argue that two issues have been under-studied in this literature. First, the existing scholarship on media representations of Western IS migrants has focused disproportionately on young women and girls. Given the large number of women under 25 who migrated to IS territory (Cook and Vale 2018), this is understandable, but older women did go to Syria and Iraq and they were subjects of extensive media interest. Second, the scholarship has tended to focus on specific countries, with very few studies attempting to understand differences in media representations across national contexts. To our knowledge, only one comparative media study of female IS migrants exists, comparing Finnish and Swedish news representations (Komulainen 2021). While this highlights the similarities in frames used, its focus is on the media portrayal of European migrants to IS in general, rather than Finnish or Swedish nationals, and therefore does not allow for a nuanced analysis of the ways that IS women were represented in nationally specific ways. This is important to study, because both women and terrorists play a central role in the construction of national identity.

Gender, terrorism, and national identity

As social constructs, nations are shaped and reproduced through discourse (Doty 1996; Hall 1992). The articulation of national identity is central to this, establishing

boundaries between the imagined political community that constitutes a nation ('us') and the outside world ('them') (Anderson 1991). As a "boundary-producing political performance central to the production and re-production of the state in whose name it operates" (Ballbach 2015, 142), the articulation of national identity is disseminated through various mechanisms, with the media playing a key role (Scollon 1998).

Gender operates as a crucial marker in the establishment of national boundaries. In their seminal work, *Woman-Nation-State*, Anthias and Yuval-Davis (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1989) outlined the potency of gender as a symbolic marker in the construction of nations and national identities. A common nation-building strategy frames women as the reproducers of the nation, biologically producing and raising 'the future of the nation,' at the same time as reproducing national culture for new generations through their ascribed role as the caretaker of the family (Basu 1996). Women also serve as symbolic signifiers of national difference. Often represented as vulnerable, they have been positioned as requiring protection from outside enemies who would jeopardise the nation's future, for example, through representations during wartime as symbols of 'the nation violated' to motivate patriotic feeling and reinforce the boundaries between the national community and the dangerous outside world (Enloe 2014; Hansen 2000).

The intersectional dimensions that position gender as a symbolic and emotional signifier of national identity are also crucial to note. Farris's (2017) work on femonationalism has demonstrated how national identities are constructed through religio-racialisation, positioning 'our' (assumedly white) women as endangered by migrant men (assumedly brown/Black, Muslim, and hypermasculine), as archetypal 'dangerous Others' (Khalid 2011). Migrant women are also implicated in these discourses, positioned as reproducing supposedly oppositional cultural values that jeopardise Western rights and values (Siim and Stoltz 2014, 247). These insights demonstrate how gendered national identity discourses are always inflected with intersectional understandings that reproduce hierarchies of citizenship in specific national contexts.

If gender is crucial to establishing national boundaries, so is the figure of the terrorist. In shattering the implicit social contract that places citizen security in the hands of the state, terrorist attacks institute a 'void of meaning' (Campbell 2001). In filling this void, state actors seek to make the world intelligible again by reasserting

state power through the affirmation of national identity. Much research has shown how President Bush discursively re-constructed American identity after the September 11th attacks (Margulies 2013), using cultural symbols (Silberstein 2002) and national myths (R. Jackson 2006) to unite the country by publicly emphasising “the strength, values, and vision of America as a nation and Americans as people” (Hutcheson et al. 2004, 27). The figure of the terrorist Other is central to these strategies, redefining the national in-group by ‘casting out’ the terrorists via relational pairs that produce ‘us’ and ‘them’ through discourses of ‘good’/‘evil’, ‘morality’/‘immorality’, ‘civilisation’/‘barbarism’ (Lazar and Lazar 2004). The terrorist has therefore acted as the ‘enabling other’ of the state (R. Jackson 2005, 153), and the reassertion of national identity enables the state to reaffirm itself as the ‘good’ (and implicitly masculinised) protector of the national community from the ‘evil’ outside Other.

In this article we focus on two women constructed as terrorists to understand how their media representation enabled the re-affirmation of national identity in France and Britain. Rivière and Jones were both born and raised citizens of their respective countries, both were middle aged grand/mothers, both were (ostensibly) white, both were recent converts to Islam before their migration, and both were actively involved in IS activities. As such, they are of interest for two reasons: first, their identities made them ‘unlikely’ jihadists. They did not emerge from those ‘suspect communities’ (Muslim, migrant, male) understood to be at risk of radicalisation in both France and Britain (Abbas 2019; Beaman 2023). Second, their agency could not be so easily denied through the gendered neo-Orientalist discursive strategies used to explain away younger IS women, who were frequently understood in media reports (L. B. Jackson 2021b; Martini 2018), counter-radicalisation programmes (Andrews 2020), and in communities (Pearson and Winterbotham 2017) as groomed victims. Understanding how their identities as ‘dangerous inside Others’ were constructed therefore allows us to interrogate how media discourse reasserts national identity in response to terrorist threats that emerge from inside the nation, exteriorising and exceptionalising women’s involvement, and reasserting the boundaries of ‘us’ and ‘them’.

Methodology

This article uses Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to analyse the media representation of Rivière and Jones. CDA views discourses as both socially constitutive and socially

shaped. It aims to uncover the power relations and dominant ideologies that are explicitly or implicitly contained within discourses and analyse their implications. CDA understands language to play a crucial role in the construction of reality. As a form of social practice, discourses shape the way the world is to be experienced and sustain and normalise forms of social power and inequality (Fairclough 2001). By investigating how discourses contribute to ‘meaning structures,’ we can uncover the way social, political, and cultural realities are constructed to reflect particular interests and ideologies. The media is particularly important to study in this respect, because it operates as a site of discourse construction, where ideological and hegemonic values are articulated and (re)affirmed via the reporting of events, often in mundane and embedded ways (Van Dijk 2009)

To understand how Rivière and Jones were portrayed in media reports, we draw on Ruth Wodak’s (2011) Discourse Historical Approach (DHA), which analyses three general dimensions: 1) the topics of a specific discourse; 2) its discursive strategies; and 3) its linguistic means. DHA elaborates five discursive strategies, however, due to space constraints, this article focuses on the first three: nomination (the way people, objects, events, or actions are linguistically referred to); predication (the traits attributed to them); and argumentation (the arguments employed to justify the ways actors are nominated and predicated). All these strategies serve to legitimise or delegitimise actors. In this paper we are particularly interested in delegitimation, i.e., the process by which a sense of negative, morally reprehensible or otherwise unacceptable action or overall state of affairs is established (Van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999). Delegitimation functions to reassert values, norms and boundaries because it draws on broader level discourses and ideologies (Steffek 2003). Of particular importance for our investigation are the delegitimation strategies of authorisation (going against the authority possessed by a custom, law, expert, or person) and moral evaluation (non-adherence to a value system). Investigating strategies of delegitimation allows us to focus on how news reports discursively discredited Rivière and Jones, while simultaneously (re)asserting national values, norms and boundaries (Screti 2013).

Articles were retrieved from the LexisNexis news database via the search terms ‘Christine Rivière’/‘Mamie Djihad’ (French sample) and ‘Sally Jones’/‘White Widow’²

² The monicker ‘White Widow’ is also used to describe Samantha Lewthwaite. These articles were excluded from the sample.

(British sample), drawing from leading media outlets that cover the ideological spectrum in each country.³ The initial search yielded 80 French articles and 75 British articles, and these were reduced to a manageable sample for CDA by selecting 50 articles with the highest frequency of search terms in each corpus (total N=100). After familiarisation with the data and translation of French articles to English by one of the authors whose first language is French, coding in NVivo proceeded in three steps. The first step employed iterative open coding, where texts were analysed without predefined codes to distinguish patterns of meaning within each article. The next step involved identifying recurring themes (topics), with both researchers cross-checking these in each corpus. The final step involved identifying the discursive and linguistic features implemented in each topic.

Analysis

The following analysis demonstrates how French and British media reconstituted the boundaries of the national in-group that Rivière and Jones had unsettled, via delegitimising intersectional narratives of gender, class, race, geography, and religion, which emphasised their abject Otherness. While for practical purposes we present these narratives in an admittedly rather linear fashion, considering each element of representation in turn, we attempt to draw out how devalued aspects of their identities worked together in specific assemblages to construct these two women in ways that exteriorised them from their national communities. Each narrative deployed a range of delegitimising strategies that justified the exclusion of these women from the national in-group, demonstrating that they were always-already Other to the nations from which they came.

³ Each dataset is representative of the media landscape for each country. The French sample was drawn from a cross-selection of the main press outlets in France, covering perspectives from the left (Libération), left-of-centre (Le Monde, L'Obs), the centre (regional dailies) and the right (Le Figaro, Le Point). The British sample drew on broadsheet newspapers, the right-leaning Times and Daily Telegraph and the left-leaning Guardian and Independent. The British tabloid press consists of newspapers with high circulation and therefore represents an important site of discourse construction, however there is no equivalent in France, and we therefore chose to exclude this form of news and concentrate our comparative analysis on media which could be expected to be less sensational in its reporting. The purpose of the article is not to determine differences in reporting depending on the political stance of newspapers, but to analyse how a representative sample of the press in each country represented Rivière and Jones.

Abject Mothers

Motherhood was central to the representation of both women, with Rivière nominated as a mother ('Mamie', mother, grandmother) in 96% of all articles and Jones in 80%. Despite ample evidence that both were ideologically and materially invested in IS, their gendered nomination as mothers illustrates that this is what journalists thought most important about these women: their activities were reported secondarily to their maternal role. Rivière was never accused of any violent acts, yet news coverage delegitimised her as an abject mother through her association with violence. Jones did commit an offence under UK law by glorifying and inciting terrorism, yet her maternal role was prioritised in news reports, which represented her as a violent *mother*, rather than a violent *person*.

Two strategies used by journalists, fragmented speech and implicit antithesis (Smirnova 2009), served to sensationalise and delegitimise both women by selectively quoting and contrasting their own words with what good, proper mothers should do (i.e., treat IS as evil and protect their children from it). Table 1 illustrates how media discourse conveyed a sense of horror by reporting their words verbatim.

Table 1: Delegitimation strategies through reporting fragmented speech and implicit antithesis

	Rivière	Jones
Maternal pride in their children vs supporting IS	"I am not surprised [at her son becoming a high-ranking ISIS official] [...] I knew you would climb. You are made for this." (Le Point 2017a).	"If it was my son in the [execution] video i would be very proud, and may Allah swt [glory to him, the exalted] reward all of them cubs of the khilafah [caliphate] aameen." (Independent 2017a).
Maternal love of life vs welcoming death	"I know it is going to happen, of course, but if it does I will be happy for him because I know what it means for him. I know he will get into heaven, near Allah [...] I want what he wants [dying as a martyr], like any good mother." (Le Monde 2017a).	"By the way my son collects grenades now...not bugs Alhamdulillah for getting my beautiful boy to the Islamic State [all sic]" (Independent 2016)

Maternal peace vs advocating violence	“Kill cops. Women, preferably. Kill. Kill. You go out with a knife, you slit the throat of the first cop you see” (Le Monde 2017a)	"You Christians all need beheading with a nice blunt knife and stuck on the railings at Raqqa ... Come here I'll do it for you" (The Times 2014a).
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Statements such as these served to emphasise their abnormality. While mothers are expected to express love for and pride in their children, the reality of their sons' lives in IS territory made such expressions profoundly transgressive. By drawing on socially shared understandings about what good mothers should say and do, their abject articulations of the maternal role demonstrated their deviance.

The fact that both women were older mothers added to this transgression. Age was consistently highlighted in reports and juxtaposed to motherhood, for example, Rivière was systematically referred to as “the 52-year-old mother” (Le Figaro 2018) or “this mother, who is 52” (Le Monde 2018). This was further stressed through the personal authority of her other son: “can you imagine what it feels like to see my mother in this situation, at 52?” (Le Monde 2017c). Jones was similarly labelled as “a 50-year-old mother of two” (Independent 2017d), “the oldest among them [...the British ‘jihadi brides’,] Sally Jones, 46, a mother of two from Kent” (The Times 2015b) and “a 47-year-old mother of two [...who] took her 10-year-old son on her journey to marry an Islamic State fighter” (The Times 2015a). Grand/mothers are not expected to embrace violent causes, and repeated references to their age served to intensify their abjectness by emphasising their failure to live up to the role that society assigns to older mothers (Caldas-Coulthard and Moon 2020; Lemish and Muhlbauer 2012).

Their transgressions of motherhood were also conveyed through allusion. As a discursive device, allusion works by hinting at negative associations without stating them overtly, leaving readers to draw conclusions in the act of reception (Wodak and Cillia 1988, 10). These are powerful because they allow writers to hint at explanations for events without taking responsibility for their accuracy, and while decoding these hints audiences experience the enormity of what is implied. In the news stories about both women, it was strongly suggested that their motherhood was profoundly transgressive. Journalists alluded towards an incestuous relationship between Rivière

and her son, through claims that she was a “*fusional mother*”⁴ (L’Est Républicain 2017), a “mother with a *fusional and unhealthy relationship* with her son” (Le Figaro 2018), and “a mother with a *forbidden passion*” (Le Monde 2017a). These allusions are particularly important to note because Rivière placed her maternal love at the heart of her defence, claiming she had done what any good mother would do in trying to support her son. By implying that she was engaging in the ultimate taboo, incest, her motherhood was emphasised as outside the boundaries of acceptability and marked as abject.

Motherhood was also positioned as transgressive in allusions that both women were sexual predators. Rivière was presented as a ‘pimp-mother’ through reports of her attempts to procure women for her son’s sexual gratification: “I found a sister’s Skype. She is 25, she comes from Belgium, she is adorable [...] She doesn’t want polygamy. [So] *We should offer her to another brother*” (Le Monde 2017c). Jones was reported as “*enticing*” (Independent 2015) young women to Syria as wives for IS fighters, and journalists strongly alluded to the taboo of paedophilia. It was Jones’s maternal role, however, that made these allusions so sensationalised. She was represented not just as a recruiter of women, but “a *white British mother* [...] who had] been *grooming young women and girls* online to lure them to Syria,” (The Times 2014b), targeting girls who were “*seduced online* [...] and promised] a grown-up life of status and glamour” (Daily Telegraph 2016a). Her maternal deviance was constructed specifically through allusions that her activities resembled online child sexual exploitation, guiding readers to interpret Jones as a ‘groomer’ of young, impressionable girls, who “*targeted them* with tales of utopia” (Independent 2017b).

Coverage on Rivière and Jones followed the patterns noted in previous scholarship on maternal discourses, going beyond reporting facts and instead deploying the delegitimising techniques of authorisation and moral evaluation to create a sense of horror of these ‘deviant wombs’ (Åhäll 2012). These narratives rested on shared macro understandings between journalists and readers about what good mothers are and were constructed through micro textual strategies that juxtaposed the signifier ‘mother’, and its attendant imagery of nurturing, selfless love, with the actions of these women that marked them out as transgressing the boundaries of appropriate maternal behaviour.

⁴ All emphases are added, unless otherwise indicated.

Kristeva (1982, 54) theorised that the maternal body, “desirable and terrifying, nourishing and murderous, fascinating and abject,” provokes more unease in patriarchal society than anything else. Policing motherhood is therefore vital to the reproduction of said society, and those who do not conform to societal expectations are exceptionalised as ‘monsters’ (Gentry 2009; Gentry and Sjoberg 2015; Melzer 2011). The depraved older mother narrative, emphasised through allusions that both Rivière and Jones had transgressed profound societal taboos, thus served to position them as exterior to ‘normal’ maternal identity. Women’s engagement in sexual violence or exploitation is often downplayed in news media (Cohen 2013; Sjoberg 2011). Here however, stressing their (implied) sexual depravity enhanced their abject abnormality, allowing the boundaries of ‘good’ motherhood, so central to the construction of national identity, to be retained.

Classed, ethnic, and geographical discourses of Otherness

While the discourses of gender and motherhood were similar for both women, other strategies positioning these women as inside-outsiders had national specificities. These drew on socially shared understandings of classed, ethnic, and geographical identities, which have particular connotations in specific contexts.

Because classed explanations for social problems are so embedded in French and British life, they need only to be hinted at through allusion to bring to mind in readers the constellation of images associated with socio-economically marginalised people and the moral evaluations that accompany these. Classed constructions of both women were abundant and relied on the insertion of apparently superfluous information within news reports that called up shared social understandings about the cultural habits of working-class people, and particularly working-class women. Reports noted that Rivière had started working in a factory “as young as 16” (Le Point 2017a), and listed her many menial jobs, while Jones was described as a “former department store beautician [who] lived in a council house” (The Times 2017) and had “left school at 16” (Independent 2017d). These descriptions drew on understandings of working-class women as low achievers who struggle to hold down employment and become productive members of society. Both Rivière and Jones were constructed as uncouth and under-educated. For example, adding ‘[sic]’ to their direct quotations was part of the repertoire that guided readers to view them as unable to communicate properly.

Readers were informed that Rivière's children had "American names" (Le Monde 2017c), and that she named her first child after a character in the TV show 'Fame' (Le Monde 2017c), information that would be superfluous if not to allude to socially shared understandings that working class people in France have little culture beyond an enjoyment of low-brow (American) television programmes (Masclet, Misset, and Poullaouec 2019). Descriptions of Jones as someone who talked to her neighbours "over the garden fence" (The Times 2017) similarly called up longstanding images of British working-class women as idle gossips (Tebbutt 1995).

Of particular importance were allusions that both were 'scroungers' who lived on state welfare benefits. Reports consistently highlighted that Rivière was receiving state benefits when she left for Syria, and quoted her boast that "in any case, I had the Assedics [benefits] money" (Le Point 2017b). Jones was similarly described as "a single mother of two living on benefits" (Daily Telegraph 2016b) who "lived in Kent on welfare payments" (Independent 2016), and was "receiving grocery parcels from a church-run food bank" (The Times 2016). Their construction as 'benefit scroungers' was sure to produce moral outrage in readers: these women had not only migrated from liberal Western democracies to join IS, but the state benefits they had been receiving had likely financed their trips to the Caliphate.

Discourses equating the lower classes with danger and disorder have a long history in both countries. In France, the 'dangerous classes' of the 19th century, and their associated traits of laziness, inbreeding, lack of education, and dangerous volatility (Beauchez and Zeneidi 2020) are still very much present, with derogatory expressions such as 'vivre des allocs' (benefit scroungers) and 'Cassos' (social cases) routinely used to refer to people with little education, living on welfare benefits at the margins of society. In Britain, historical discourses have associated the lower classes with filth and fecklessness in contrast to middle class respectability, merging into a contemporary neoliberal delegitimisation of the British working class as 'Chavs': chaotic, uncouth, and dependent on state benefits (Valentine and Harris 2014). But these discourses are not just classed, they are also profoundly gendered (Starkey 2000). By associating Rivière and Jones with the moral panic of the feckless single mother supported by the welfare state, the marginality of both women was re-emphasised, positioning them as members of an already-abject social class, outside the boundaries of their (respectable, hardworking) national communities. The scholarship has shown how the production of

internal, abject Others serves to establish a certain conception of the national in-group. Thus, Tyler has demonstrated how the British national identity relies on demonising the working class to construct an imagined national identity, with the figure of the ‘Chav mum’ positioned as a promiscuous and excessively fertile gendered ‘lower class’ subject whose existence endangers a national ideal of middle-class, respectable white femininity (Tyler 2008). The gendered, classed representation of both women worked to position them as members of an already-abject social class, and therefore not part of ‘us.’ As such, the threat that their radicalisation potentially posed to the ‘good’ national community could be eliminated and the boundaries re-established.

These classed discourses were also tinged with narratives of inside-Otherness that focused on these women’s ethnic and geographical origins. Drawing attention to markers of origin is a common discursive strategy to Other and exclude particular groups from the national community (Johnson and Coleman 2012; Hartigan 2003). Here, the two cases differed markedly. Rivière was cast out from the nation for not conforming to dominant white French ethnicity, whereas Jones’s whiteness was emphasised to sensationalise her story.

Allusions were central in Rivière’s case, where repeated references to her origins in “the travelling community” (for example, Le Point 2017a) enabled her to be discursively separated from the nation without descending into overt racism. In France, where citizenship takes precedence irrespective of difference (Schor 2001), focusing on her ethnicity indicated that she was outside of good society, and called up a range of negative stereotypes that have historically positioned members of the Travelling Community⁵ as transient (therefore dangerous), unintegrated, and not properly French (Cossée 2016). Rivière’s geographical origin was also key to her Othering. Readers were repeatedly reminded that she was from a rural part of France, emphasised through the technique of category stress: an accumulation of details within the same sentence that all reinforced the rural marker. For example, in the sentence: “this Champagne dweller born in Troyes (Aube)” (Le Monde 2017c), the Champagne region, the département, and the small sleepy town of Troyes all reinforced one another to anchor her in a specific (de-valued) rural territory. This has important connotations in France,

⁵ This is a French administrative term referring to a non-sedentary way of life and encompassing “people whose traditional housing consists of mobile homes” (Vie Publique 2021). This includes, inter alia, Roma, Manouches, Gitans, Tsiganes and Yenniches.

where the cultural division between town and countryside, and particularly between sophisticated, bourgeois Paris and the uncouth, peasant-laden Provinces, has a long history. The binary opposition between the cultured, educated metropolis and the vulgar, uneducated rural areas prone to peasant revolts runs deep in the French national narrative (Moulin 1991). For example, the recent Yellow Vest movement, which originated in peri-urban and rural territories, partly stemmed from resistance to the contempt and humiliation from the metropolises felt by many people outside of these areas (Bourdin and Torre 2023). Emphasising Rivière's rural origins, therefore called up long-established negative connotations attached to being a 'country bumpkin.' Along with the references to her Traveller heritage, this discourse of place served to mark her as the 'Gypsy yokel', anchored in an ethnic and geographical territory outside of the good society.

Jones's deviance from the national ideal was represented differently because her whiteness and her Britishness were extensively emphasised, which seemingly positioned her within the nation. Jones was subjected to category stress and repetitive statements that she was white, British, and from Chatham in Kent (a South England suburb), which all marked her as part of the 'in-group'. This served to make her radicalisation all the more newsworthy. Whiteness in Britain operates as an invisible, de-raced identity and the 'normal' against which other racialised identities are contrasted (Bonnett 1997). Discussing her whiteness alongside her terrorism thus served to emphasise the unusualness of her radicalisation to IS. This was particularly clear in the repetitive use of her nickname: 'the White Widow' which served to highlight her whiteness, her gender and her sexuality, at the same time as alluding to her terrorism through associations both with the original 'White Widow' (Samantha Lewthwaite) and with the Chechen female suicide bombers known as the Black Widows (Nivat 2005). However, the radicalisation of a middle-aged white British woman would have been disturbing unless the tension between her race and her behaviour could be resolved. This was accomplished by deploying other aspects of her identity to undermine her access to whiteness. The classed discourses noted earlier served this purpose, positioning her outside of 'good' middle-class British whiteness and were augmented by assertions that she was unhinged and chaotic, with claims that she was frequently "visited by drug dealers and bailiffs" (The Times 2017), references to her former life as the "singer and guitarist in an all-female 1990s punk band called Krunch" (The

Guardian 2017) and her interest in “conspiracy theories and witchcraft” (Independent 2016). This information served to indicate to readers that she was not really ideologically wed to IS, and that joining it was simply another phase in the life of a turbulent working-class woman.

In different ways, the reporting on both women served to re-establish national boundaries centred on whiteness. Whereas Jones’s whiteness could be preserved by pointing to extraneous reasons for her behaviour (class, chaos), it was Rivière’s lack of access to whiteness that was presented to explain her radicalisation. In both cases the focus on their class, ethnic and geographic origins served to preserve the myth of white innocence in terrorism (Pears 2022) and re-establish the boundaries of a particular valued whiteness as central to national identity.

Religious Othering

News discourse placed considerable importance on both women’s religious conversion. Drawing on neo-Orientalist tropes of the danger, irrationality and foreignness of Islam (Said 1978; Samiei 2010), both women were positioned as inside-Others through their association with an ‘alien’ religion and with Muslim men. In both cases, Islam was implicitly constructed as menacing, however the articulation of religion in these stories varied because the role accorded to Islam in national imaginaries of danger and difference has country-specific distinctions.

Both women were assumed to have been manipulated into conversion by important men in their lives. In Rivière’s case, it was repeatedly emphasised that she had been “converted by her son” (Le Figaro 2018) and was “*under his influence*” (Le Point 2017a). As one article stated, “to start with, she had no links with Islam, it was her youngest son who *pushed her to tumble into it*” (RFI 2017). Her other son served as the personal authority delegitimising actor, asserting that “*she lost herself in this religious business. In Syria, she was brainwashed! Over there, they prey on people’s weaknesses*” (Le Monde 2017c). These statements alluded to Islam as a manipulative and dangerous religion, in which one can lose oneself. The implication here, that converting to Islam means falling into a dark and perilous place, was further augmented by reports that stressed the supernatural speed at which she became radicalised: “Converted by her son, *almost immediately radicalised*” (Le Monde 2017b); “her conversion to radical and violent Islam was *quick, even spectacular*” (RFI 2018). Apparently superfluous

information also served to underline this point. For example, by stressing that her first husband had been a deeply devout evangelist preacher while Rivière was indifferent to religion, reports indicated that Islam must have a special kind of magic to transform an unbeliever into a follower of IS in such a short time.

In Jones's case, her husband was understood to have instigated her radicalisation. Journalists stressed that Hussain was the 'dangerous other' who "*drew her into Islam*" (The Guardian 2018), and her conversion and radicalisation were represented as unlikely through the juxtaposition of contradictory clauses: "*raised a Catholic with a past life in a punk rock band and the drug scene, she converted to the most violent form of Islam and married a terrorist*" (Independent 2017c). As with Rivière, Islam was constructed as supernatural through juxtaposing her punk past and her statements in support of violent jihad, constructing Islam as a supernatural force able to gain entry "*into the very furthest reaches of British society*" (The Guardian 2017). In both cases, this supernatural narrative pointed to Islam as bewitching, seducing, and overpowering 'our' women, thereby reinforcing its abject nature.

For all the similarities noted here, however, the representations of Rivière and Jones differ in one important respect. For Rivière, journalists deployed a dissimilation process strategy (Cillia, Reisigl, and Wodak 1999), framing Islam as incompatible with French values. A hyperbolic lexis was used to describe her practice of Islam, guiding readers to understand it as antagonistic to the values of French society. Thus, she "*embraced*" and "*raved about*" sharia law (Le Monde 2017c). The word 'sharia' has deep symbolic significance in French public discourse as oppositional to national values (Nilsson 2015), and these lexical choices therefore operated as exclusionary devices. Considering the national debates over the burqa and, more recently, the calls to ban all religious symbols in public, focusing on Rivière's choice to wear "*straight away the jilbab*" (L'Obs 2017) emphasised that she was practicing Islam in 'dangerous' ways (Riley 2009). Further demonstrating her distance from the national ideal were the selection of quotes, in which she stated in a matter-of-fact way that cutting someone's hand for stealing was "normal" (L'Est-éclair 2017), that sharia law was "nothing exceptional" (Le Figaro 2018), or that she was "at war" with anyone who did not behave like a Muslim (Le Monde 2017c). The use of expert authority also laid bare the contrast between her nonchalance and the reality of IS. For example, in the reporting of the prosecutor's response to Rivière's court testimony no journalistic explanation was

necessary, readers knew that her son was involved in violent acts and could only react with horror to her statement: “‘I love my son. Ever since he became a Muslim, he behaves better.’ The prosecutor repeated, word by word, ‘a better behaviour’” (Le Monde 2017c).

The strategy of dissimulation constructed Rivière as outside her national in-group for rejecting French values, in particular Laïcité. While initially “devised as a means to ensure the free exercise of religion by all citizens” (Hunter-Henin 2012, 6), Laïcité has increasingly morphed into a cultural marker and “a frame for an ethnicised debate on the place of Islam in French society” (Almeida 2018, 28). This has led to the emergence of an exclusionary secularism, increasingly interpreted as a bulwark against radical Islamism and equated in many quarters to a defence against Islam itself (Moran 2017). The emphasis on Rivière’s radical Islamist actions and statements, interpreted through the lens of Laïcité, thus served to emphasise her distance from French values and the national ideal.

Jones, by contrast, was not seen as a credible Muslim. Unlike Rivière, her religious conversion was presented as immaterial because of the assumption that it was Hussain for whom she converted, rather than any spiritual fervour for Islam. The insincerity of her conversion was emphasised by sexualizing her. Alongside photographs of Jones playing guitar, “with a shock of blond hair and wearing a miniskirt,” (The Times 2017), reports pointed to her online alias, “Pu55y Hussain” (The Times 2017), which undermined any commitment she might have to Islam by stressing her ongoing sexualised online persona. Positioned as sexually chaotic, Jones’s radicalisation could then be explained through her online relationship with a man several years her junior by claiming “*it was love* that led Sally Jones to leave her punk past behind and join the death cult of Islamic State” (The Times 2017), with her brother serving as confirmation authority, in his statement that: “*She fell in love* and went away” (The Times 2017). Hussain was thus presented as the ‘dangerous Other’ “with whom she became *besotted*” (Daily Telegraph 2016b). This narrative allowed journalists to present her departure as resulting not from her own convictions but from her romantic obsession with a ‘dangerous brown Muslim man’ (Bhattacharyya 2008). The presentation of Jones as a ‘besotted’ woman, undermined the possibility that she was a committed Muslim even as she delivered statements in support of violent jihad. Similarly, emphasising that her conversion happened *after* her arrival in Syria - “She

married Hussain the day she arrived in Syria, and converted to Islam” (The Guardian 2018) - indicated that she had migrated to marry Hussain and that religion was secondary. As a result, her conversion itself was not understood as an assault on British values (although her support of violence certainly was). Rather, by emphasising her relationship with Hussain as the reason for her presence in Syria, Jones could be repositioned in gendered ways as acting for the sake of love (Nacos 2005). Brown (2011, 711) has noted similar narratives in the media representation of Muriel Degauque, whose whiteness was erased through a focus on her (non-European) husband as the source of her deviance. These representations allowed the broader danger represented by the radicalisation of a white, Christian, ex-punk to be smoothed over through assertions that she was merely an emotional middle-aged woman who had fallen for a much younger man.

The representation of religion in both cases drew on specific national fears of the danger posed by Islam and Muslims that, at first glance, did not require rearticulation of national identities. In France, anxieties about Islam have long centred on its presumed disruption of a national identity that positions *Laïcité* as the means through which the primacy of citizenship is maintained (Billaud and Castro 2013). In Britain, contemporary fears about Islam have revolved around the dangers of supposedly failed multiculturalism and Muslims’ purported lack of integration into British values (Kundnani 2007). However, the assumed superiority of the national in-group – underpinning any construction of national identity - was disrupted by these older women, who had apparently rationally *chosen* to live under IS as a better alternative to their lives in France and Britain. This was problematic because rationality is positioned in neo-Orientalist discourse as the preserve of the West, vs the irrational, barbaric, and hypermasculine ‘Muslim world’ (Clément 2021, 249–50). The depictions of Islam as mystical and other-worldly (Gentry 2020, 77) thus worked to reassure readers that socio-political conditions in France and Britain were not relevant to the actions of these women. Rather, responsibility lay with Islam and the powerful men acting on its behalf. This discourse served to reaffirm the superiority of French and British national identity by repositioning the defection of Rivière and Jones as arising not from their own rational choices, but from their gendered vulnerability to a ‘dangerous alien religion.’

Discussion

The coverage of Rivière and Jones demonstrates how the media represented them in ways that re-constituted national identity. Casting both women outside of the in-group through intersectional markers radically excluded them from the national community, functioning to secure and discipline the boundaries of 'good French/British society.' Kristeva (1982, 10) argued that the abject serves the moral function of constituting the good subject. Both women were constructed as abject in ways that contributed to securing the national in-group against these "immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady" (Kristeva 1982, 4) women who transgressed gendered, classed, religious, and ethnic boundaries. Representing them as abject mothers who broke all taboos re-established the contours of 'good motherhood' (and by implication 'good womanhood') so important to the construction of national identity. As members of an already-Othered social class, and as converts to a 'threatening' alien religion, Rivière and Jones were shown to have never truly belonged in the first place. Their abjectivisation allowed their actions to be presented as resulting from the inherent deviance of the already-outside dangerous Other.

In representing these women as such, dominant identities and power relations were reproduced, allowing the boundaries of the national community to be re-established. Representing both women as abject enabled their actions to be explained (away) as emerging from their identities rather than from their rational agential decisions. Through this discourse, other explanations for their defections, such as feelings of alienation and finding in IS an alternative model, did not need to be considered. The consistent references to the age of these women are important to note in this respect. Women's migration to IS was associated with youth and naivety (Tollu 2023; Heath-Kelly 2013). Older women are not usually considered 'at risk' of taking up violent jihad, because it is believed to be the preserve of idealistic, naïve young people (and especially young men) (Harris-Hogan and Barrelle 2020). But, unlike younger 'jihadi brides,' who were frequently understood as groomed victims, Rivière and Jones were middle-aged women whose agency could not so easily be denied and who were assumedly 'old enough to know better.' Downplaying their agency was thus all the more necessary, because allowing them to be understood as adults who had rationally chosen IS would undermine the assumed superiority of France and Britain. The discourses of abjectness highlighted here worked together to emphasise that their acts

were not the decisions of rational agents but of exceptional and exteriorised individuals. Thus, their age and their transgressions of maternal identity emphasised that their rejection of the West for IS was not a broader issue to be contended with, but rather resulted from their abnormality as mothers whose (implied) sexual depravities explained their behaviour. Similarly, neo-orientalist discourses of an abject Islam and the powerful men believed to control it served to undermine the possibility that French and British women may have rationally opted to join IS. Discourses of class, ethnicity and geographical origin also worked to deny these women their agency. These well-established markers of Otherness positioned them as uneducated, uncouth, and unreliable, positioning their actions as emerging from their origins rather than their political decisions.

We have sought to demonstrate here the importance of an intersectional lens and a comparative approach, to enable a deeper understanding of the relative importance of differently situated identities in the gendered Othering of politically violent subjects. While the de-legitimisation strategies for both women used were similar, journalists reproduced Othered identities that were context dependent to create deeper resonance in readers depending on the specific construction of inside-Others in each country at a particular historical moment. Journalists converged on what would resonate most with their readers, and this is why allusions are so important to analyse. What may appear at first glance to be anodyne information is, when analysed more closely, crucial in the process of abjection once the context is appreciated. For example, the rural markers used so frequently to describe Rivière in the French press evoked images and ideas particular to this country and its history. Allusions require shared cognitive landscape between writers and readers that need to be understood in their specific context. Discourses that appear similar may in fact have different implications, because allusions activate particular responses in differently situated audiences. While the ‘scrounging’ narrative was used in both cases and appears similar, French allusions to Cassos with their attendant imagery of laziness, stupidity, drunkenness, and anti-social behaviour are not synonymous with British discourses about Chavs and their associations with sexual immorality, violence, and disorder. These narratives have different meanings in their national contexts, and it is important to interrogate these variations in order to understand the discursive work they do to produce subjects as abject ‘undesirables’ positioned apart from the national body in nationally specific ways.

Conclusion

Much of the scholarship on Western women who migrated to IS territory has concentrated on young women and girls. This is understandable because younger women made up the larger portion of female travellers and received extensive media coverage. However, while the migration of young women was experienced as a socio-political crisis in France and Britain, their departures fit into well-established narratives of misplaced youthful idealism and the ‘grooming’ behaviour of jihadists. For Rivière and Jones, as older women who could be understood to be less susceptible to ideological manipulation, who had been born and raised in their respective countries, and had established families and lives there, these explanations did not quite fit.

By constructing both women as already-outside the national in-group, through gendered, classed, geographical and religio-racialised narratives, news discourse marked them as abject-Others on the margins of their societies. The discursive work undertaken to position these women outside the national community indicates that their presence within it was deeply disturbing. If middle-aged, French and British grand/mothers could be convinced to leave liberal democratic Western societies to join IS then this might indicate a need to more deeply examine the internal problems of these societies that may have contributed to their decisions to migrate. Instead of facing the reflective work implied by this, news discourse constructed Rivière and Jones as abject in ways that emphasised their intersectional Otherness and in doing so contributed to the securing and disciplining of the boundaries of ‘good’ French and British society. The consistent undermining of agency of both women served to reassert the fundamental myth at the heart of any national identity: the superiority and goodness of the national community. By emphasising their deviance and casting them outside the boundaries of their nations, the possibility for seeing in their stories any potential mitigating circumstances for their actions – and therefore any possible problems within their societies – was closed off.

The analysis presented here contributes to deepening our understanding of how Western women involved with IS have been represented. By focusing on these two women, we have sought to demonstrate how studies into representations of politically violent women need to take greater account of national contexts. (Re)producing national identity is a key part of the performative repertoire by which states discursively constitute themselves and relies on boundary-making practices that position a national

Self against an outside Other (Bogain 2019; Campbell 1998). Much united the representation of the two women discussed here, but the particular discourses employed cannot be understood without attention to contextually dependent narratives of what constitutes the ‘good’ citizen in each country. While Western societies may draw on very similar narratives, there remain important differences that are key to the production of Others within and that help us understand how nationally specific constructions of the ‘normal’ and the valued do their discursive work of abjection.

The national news discourses that have constructed the reality of IS women have far-reaching consequences. David Campbell (1998, 10) has argued that the media plays a significant role in shaping the discursive environment and the conditions of possibility in politics by legitimising certain dispositions while opposing and delegitimising others. This has implications for the political challenges of a post-IS world. The women analysed here may no longer be in the media spotlight (Rivière was jailed in 2018 and Jones was killed in a 2017 drone strike), but the narratives on these two have shaped the broader discourses on French and British IS-affiliated women (and their children) who remain in Syrian camps. While the United Nations maintains that repatriation of these women is a moral and legal duty, France and Britain have been resistant to bringing their nationals home.⁶ Former Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bert Koenders, argued that:

We keep referring to these people as foreign terrorist fighters. The uncomfortable truth is that they are not foreign at all. They may be foreigners in the countries where they are going to. But in reality, they are our compatriots, our acquaintances, the classmates of our kids, the guys and girls we see in our supermarkets. They are part of our societies. Perhaps the only thing that’s foreign to us is their mentality. (Quoted in Hoffman and Furlan 2020, 5).

The analysis presented here demonstrates that the media in both France and Britain *has* constituted IS women as foreign, through discursive strategies that placed them outside their societies as Others who had, despite appearances, never belonged to their nations at all. Repatriation will remain politically difficult as long as media discourses continue

⁶ At the time of writing around 80 French women and 100 French children remain in Al Hol and Al Roj camps. The British government has repatriated only one woman and 10 children since 2019 and approximately 20 British women and 30-60 British children remain detained (Al Jazeera 2023; Human Rights Watch 2023). These figures include those whose citizenship has been revoked.

to protect the national body from the abject Other within by producing such women as outsiders.

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