

ISSN 0976 - 8165



THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

11th Year of Open Access

**Bi-Monthly Refereed and Peer-Reviewed
Open Access e-Journal**

Vol. XI, Issue -4 (August 2020)

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ISSN 2278-9529
Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Tracing the Antiquated Methodology of Oppression, the Gendered Endanger and Ethnic Enclaves in Nadia Murad's *The Last Girl: My Story of Captivity, and Fight against the Islamic State*

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Article History: Submitted-20/07/2020, Revised-17/08/2020, Accepted-19/08/2020, Published-31/08/2020.

Abstract:

The paper entitled “Tracing the Antiquated Methodology of Oppression, the Gendered Endanger and Ethnic Enclaves in Nadia Murad’s *The Last Girl: My Story of Captivity, and Fight against the Islamic State*” tries to explore the great divides- patriarchy, gender and ethnicity in human realm. Gender inequality is prevalent in Yazidi community. When Islamic State terrorists invaded their villages and towns, women faced double discrimination- discrimination based on their gender and ethnicity. Gender discrimination is founded upon the deep- rooted patriarchy in the society. The Yazidi community follows several patriarchal notions. These patriarchal notions are endorsed even more fiercely by the Islamic State terrorists who completely restrict and controls women. Iraq is home to many ethnicities which compete with each other to become the dominant religious and political majority in the country. The minority groups in Iraq face different kinds of violence from the majority groups. They are exterminated, they are forced to flee from their land, their land and property is seized and their women are kidnapped and turned into sex slaves. The paper underscores the patriarchal exploitation, the gendered discrimination of Yasidi women. It investigates the infringement of Yasidi community based on their ethnicity and advocates the need for diverse movements and practices for rejuvenating the life of Yasidi people.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Gender, Ethnicity, Oppression, Feminism, Survival.

In the heroic chronicles of civilizations, genocide, war, terrorist attack, communal riots and all kinds of atrocities created by man against man is portrayed as a blemish. Although history records the pain, misery, sufferings, agony and helplessness of humanity in the face of such disastrous events, it is the survivors who can unfold genuine reflections of their experience. Hence survival narratives are pertinent in the context. The survival narratives are powerful in terms of its potential to provide intellectual nourishment to the

present and future generations. The survivors are minority but they represent the ordeal of the majority victims who were denied of justice. Their voice echoes manifold adduces of cruelty, violence, inhumanness and cold heartedness which have been hidden by the perpetrators of violence.

Women become one of the most vulnerable groups in such disastrous circumstances. Women are already forced to the rigid social roles set by patriarchy. Women are subjected to abduction, repeated rapes, imprisonment or even forced prostitution. There is no extent to the suffering of women as they can be rejected by their communities for destroying honour even though it wasn't their fault. Crimes against women are widely used as weapons of war to destroy communities. Being a woman survivor definitely needs courage, determination, inner strength and an aspiration towards life. Nadia Murad, the Iraqi human rights activist who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2018 depicts the harshness of the calamity fell upon her life in the guise of ISIS terrorists in her memoir, *The Last Girl: My Story of Captivity, and Fight against the Islamic State*. The present paper explores how the heinous divides namely patriarchy, gender and ethnicity impacted Nadia's life and how she defeated the oddities.

Patriarchy, the evil system of domination stems from the family, strengthened by the society and enforced upon the lives of women. The literal meaning of patriarchy is 'the rule of father'. It is a social system rooted universally claiming the hegemonic position of men.

The domination of women by men over time immemorial in all walks of life, thereby making women a subordinated, deprived and submissive half of the world's population, deprived of her rights, entitlements, freedom and above all equality and equity, is briefly described as patriarchy. (Kaushik 1)

In the novel, the Yazidi community follows several patriarchal notions. Men dominate over women in their families and women are deprived of their rights, entitlements and freedom. Nadia's mother Shami was dominated by her father and her husband. She didn't have the entitlement of birth control, property rights, her husband married another woman and she had to compete for husband's attention, she had to raise her eleven children alone. The society, men and women imbibed patriarchal notions. No one in their community questioned Nadia's father when he married another woman without the consent of Shami.

In reality, patriarchy has asserted itself in all occasions and denied women the freedom to exercise her rights, her choices and the way she would like to set goals for her future. Women's choices are controlled, limited, erased or sacrificed in the interests of

family, children, culture and nation. Education, communication, etc improved in Kocho over the years after the Americans invaded Iraq and Saddam was forced to leave his power and position. But the patriarchal notions did not end. Women still had to give birth to many children (Jilan's wish of having a large family), look after all the needs of a huge family without getting any assistance from the male members (Nadia cooking for her brothers at her aunt's house), didn't have the rights to choose the religion they believed in and couldn't marry anyone outside their community (Du'a's honour killing). Women who violated tradition by converting into another religion or marrying a person from another religion were subjected to honour killings.

Masculinity and femininity are abstract concepts based on gender, with the expectation that males will be masculine and females will be feminine. Examples of stereotypical masculine attributes include independence, aggression, strength and competitiveness. Stereotypical feminine attributes include nurturing, caring, passivity and subordination. (Brara 5)

In the novel, there are several stereotypical depictions of both genders. Women are often described as nurturing, caring, passive and subordinate. Shami always made sure that her children were fed and hopeful. She often comforted her children when they were scared or miserable. "It's okay, Nadia, she would tell me, stroking my hair after I had a nightmare or if I was upset over a fight with one of my siblings" (Murad 113). Nadia's sister Dimal is described as mothering and quiet. Nadia broke down before a lady about her mother's age in Erbil and the woman comforted her and told to hope for the future. Nadia's father is described as a man who had a prominent voice in the village gathering. He was a person who fought against injustice and villagers close to him often told stories about his heroism. He was described as a man who always wanted to do what he considered right. "My father wasn't a bully but fought if he had to" (Murad 28). He is associated with independence, strength, aggressiveness and competition. The men in her village trained as fighters and took pride in their bravery and wanted to prove themselves as fighters. Women in the village did household jobs and took care of children while men financially provided for the family and engaged in guarding the village.

According to Susan Brownmiller, it is sexual violence, especially rape and rape threats, which make it possible for men to control women. In her view, rape stems, not from a momentary loss of individual control, but it is the act which links biological male-constructed

aggression and patriarchy. Once the basic truth that rape is a deliberate, hostile act of degradation and possession, designed to intimidate women and instil fear in them is accepted, the elements in the culture that promote these attitudes should be found out. Yazidi girls were considered infidels and according to the interpretation of Koran forged by the militants, raping a slave is not a sin. The girls were also used to attract new recruits and would also be passed around as a reward for loyalty and good behaviour. These motives reveal that rape was a deliberate, hostile weapon used by the terrorists to intimidate and instil fear among the women in Yazidi community. Hajji Salman, a terrorist who raped Nadia warned her, "Even if you make it home, your father or your uncle will kill you. You're no longer a virgin, and you are a Muslim" (Murad 176). They used the greatest fear of girls to prevent their escape. Later, when Nadia tried to escape and was caught in the act, the guards gang-raped her as punishment. When she got the chance to escape again, the memory of the horrible gang-rape made her hesitate for some time until she mustered up courage to use her opportunity. "No matter what choice I played in my head, it always ended with me being captured and punished as Hajji Salman had punished me" (Murad 213).

Increased vulnerability of women to sexual violence has been a feature of war. Such sexual violence has huge impact in the lives of women. In addition to physical and emotional harm, the trauma produced can linger for a long period if it results in pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases. Women's own fears of social stigma and rejection by spouses, families and communities, intimidation of women reporting violence and other obstacles can block the prosecution of wartime rapes and sexual violence. Rape has been used throughout the history as a weapon of war. Nadia says that she never thought that she would have something in common with the women of Rwanda, a country which she didn't hear of before. She was linked to them as another victim of war crime. Nadia was numb with pain and continued screaming inside her head when she was molested for the first time. "The rape was the worst part. It stripped us of our humanity and made thinking about the future- returning to Yazidi society, marrying, having children, being happy- impossible. We wished they would kill us instead" (Murad 176). After some time, there was only rape and the numbness which came with accepting that this is now her life. ISIS knew that it was devastating for a young Yazidi girl to lose her virginity and become converted into another religion. The terrorists used the greatest fear of Yazidi girls- being rejected and thrown out by the community and religious leaders. Nadia didn't mention the rape at first when she recounted her experiences to her

brothers. She first confided about the rape to her aunt whose warm response alleviated her fears of becoming ousted from the community.

Feminism is a social force. Feminist ideas and feminist politics depend on the idea that women are less valued than men in all societies which separate the sexes into differing cultural, economic or political spheres. Feminism is a belief in sexual equality combined with a commitment to eradicate sexist domination and transform society. In the novel, a terrorist's mother was informed that Nadia was converted. She knew that Nadia was detained by force and that she was separated from her family and that the men in her family were killed. But, she didn't show a bit of compassion or sympathy to Nadia. She was only happy that a Yazidi was converted into Islam, and that reduced the number of Yazidis. "It's not your fault that you were born a Yazidi, she said to me, it is the fault of your parents and you will be happy now" (Murad 167). Nadia hated her not only for letting Mosul being taken over by ISIS, but also for letting it be taken over by 'men'. Women were removed from public space under the rule of ISIS. She couldn't understand why a woman would join the terrorists in celebrating the enslavement of girls.

Any woman in Iraq, no matter her religion, had to struggle for everything. Seats in Parliament, reproductive rights, positions at universities- all these were the results of long battles. Men were content to stay in power, so power had to be taken from them by strong women. Even Adkee's insistence on driving our tractor was a gesture of equality and challenge to those men. And yet, when ISIS came to Mosul, women like Morteja's mother welcomed them and celebrated the vicious policies that would hide women like her and exploit women like me, just as she had stood by while the terrorists killed or pushed out the city's Christians or Shiites, people the Sunnis had lived with for over a thousand years. She chose to stay and watch and live under ISIS. (Murad 168)

Nadia believed in the feminist ideology. She knew that in her community, women were valued less and they were largely suppressed under patriarchy. She knew that women were dominated in all spheres of the society by men and women had to fight for attaining equality. She took the example of her sister Adkee challenging the gender norms imposed on women by the society by insisting to drive their tractor. She believed in fighting for sexual equality by eradicating the sexist domination in all spheres of the society and hoped for bringing forth a transformation in society through which women enjoyed equal rights along

with men. She scorned the women like Morteja's mother who supported patriarchy and enjoyed the degradation and intimidation of other women. Women who blindly supported patriarchy often made the lives of other women who challenged patriarchy miserable. They should open their eyes and see how they are exploited by religion, politics and other social systems which supported patriarchy.

A guard in charge taking pride in the virginity of the captive women is described as a shopkeeper taking pride in his product. The militants touched them anywhere they wanted, as if the women were animals. "Sabaya can be given as gifts and sold at the whim of the owner for they are merely property" (Murad 154). For the militants, the function of the captive women was nothing more than being sex slaves. They didn't have any qualms in raping or forcing them into prostitution as it was considered to be their natural function. Nafah, a commander silenced Nadia's screams of protest by telling her, "But you have no choice. You are here to be sabaya, and you will do exactly what we say" (Murad 138). It is clear from these instances that the women were only considered and treated as objects or animals which the militants could use for whatever they want.

"Ethnicity is a term that describes shared culture- the practices, values, and beliefs of a group. This might include shared language, religion, and traditions among other commonalities" (Little 32). Race is the superficial physical differences considered significant by a society, while ethnicity is a term that describes shared culture.

In the novel, mainly the ethnicity of the Yazidis is discussed. The Yazidis share a common culture- the same language, religion, traditions, beliefs, practices and customs. The Yazidis believe that Tawusi Melek, an angel is God's connection to earth and man's link to heavens. "When we pray, we often pray to Tawusi Melek, and our new year celebrates the day he descended to earth" (Murad 39). They spoke the Kurdish language. Prayers are often accompanied by some gestures, like kissing the red and white bracelet worn around the wrists by many Yazidi people and for a man, kissing the collar of his traditional undershirt. They had a tradition of baptizing their children in Lalish, the holy valley of the Yazidis. "I knew that on Yazidi New Year, we colour eggs, visit the graves of family, and light candles in our temples" (Murad 41). In December, they fasted for three days to atone for their sins. Marriage outside the faith and conversion are not allowed.

Other ethnicities like Sunni Muslims, Sunni Kurds, Shiites, Christians, and Turkmen are also mentioned in the novel frequently. Shabak, Roma, Mandaean, Africans, Marsh

Arabs, Iraqi Jews were mentioned. The interaction between these ethnicities resulting in major consequences is also depicted. The north of Iraq was the home of Kurds who longed for independence. The south was home mostly to Shiite Muslims, who constituted the country's religious and political majority after the American invasion and the fall of Saddam's government. In the middle, Sunni Arabs who were the religious and political majority of Iraq under the rule of Saddam Hussein were situated and they fought against the land they once dominated. All other ethnicities are marked 'Others', as they are powerless minority groups.

Sociologist Louis Wirth defined a minority group as

any group of people who, because of their physical or cultural characteristics, are singled out from others in the society in which they live for differential and unequal treatment, and who therefore regard themselves as objects of collective discrimination. (1945)

There are many minority groups in Iraq. The novel mainly deals with the life of Yazidis. They often faced discrimination under the Iraqi government and by other ethnicities. Yazidis were deliberately not mentioned in the history books provided to children at school. "There was no mention of Yazidis in the constitution, and any sign of rebellion was quickly punished" (Murad 45). When Saddam was ruling Iraq, he hoped to erase the identity of the Yazidis through the state education offered to them. "Although most Yazidis grew up speaking Kurdish, our lessons were in Arabic. Kurdish was the language of rebellion, and Kurdish spoken by Yazidis could be seen as even more threatening to the State" (Murad 46).

Genocide is not a historical practice as it is practiced even today.

Genocide, the deliberate annihilation of a targeted (usually subordinate) group, is the most toxic intergroup relationship. Historically, we can see that genocide has included both the intent to exterminate a group and the function of exterminating of a group, intentional or not. (Little 43)

It seems that ISIS forces and commanders have committed most of the underlying acts for genocide. These acts were carried out on specific minority groups in Northern Iraq, apparently based on their religious identity. It is evidenced by the requirement that either individuals become converted into Islam or be deported or executed. Yazidis passed on stories about seventy-three past firmans or genocides against the community and they were so

intertwined with their identity that they became similar to holy stories. They grew up hearing about past massacres like folk tales. Many of them thought that firmans happened in the past and that the world was too modern and civilized to allow the killing of an entire group just because of their religion. But they were sadly mistaken. Islamic State captured Sinjar easily and the few families who tried to escape were captured, killed or kidnapped. They murdered all the men old enough to defend themselves in the Yazidi villages. “Thousands of Yazidis had already been killed, their bodies swept into mass graves that ISIS would try – and fail- to keep hidden” (Murad 80). In Kocho, majority of men were killed with the exception of very few who managed to escape. All the old women in the village were taken to a centre in Solagh and killed.

Under the rule of ISIS, every other ethnicity had to abandon their villages and go away.

After the fall of Mosul in June 2014, a large number of people were abducted and deported while trying to escape or hide. Young women and children were the preferred targets. Most abducted girls and young women became sex slaves for ISIS members or they were sold for profit. Young boys were sent to Islamic schools where they were brainwashed with ISIS propaganda. Nadia's nephews, Malik and Hani were kidnapped and forced to become ISIS fighters. Even, though Hani was rescued, Malik was brainwashed with ISIS ideology and went on to become an ISIS fighter. “They were taken at an impressionable age, and as I'd eventually learn, the lessons worked on some of them” (Murad 233).

Future research can make use of the gender inequality elements in Yazidi society to compare with other minority communities. The patriarchal system existing in both Yazidi community and under the rule of Islamic State is open to further analysis and findings. The consequences of violence, sex slavery in women can also be taken for further research. The situation of the ethnic minorities in Iraq after the retreat of ISIS also requires further investigation. The power relation between different minorities in the Iraqi history and in the present is also a field which requires deeper analysis. The ways in which minorities can be rehabilitated is a topic which requires urgent attention.

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