

**The Trauma of War: Representation of Violence and Vulnerability in Nadia Murad's
*The Last Girl: My Story of Captivity and my Fight against the Islamic State***

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Abstract

Trauma theory has much significance in the contemporary world where the modern man confronts fragmentation and frustration. Having enduring a tormented life the human self undergoes traumatic experiences. Life is a continuous struggle and it is part of every individual to face dangers and threats of dangers. Life writing, the reflections of real life, is the proper medium through which the exact state of mind of the writers is revealing. Nadia Murad, the Nobel laureate, is thrust into limelight with her penetrating analysis of the traumatized life of Yazidis in Iraq. *The Last Girl: My Story of Captivity, and my Fight against the Islamic State* is the truthful account of survival of Nadia who was captured and enslaved by ISIS in the second Iraqi Civil War. The paper seeks to analyse the trauma of violence and the dynamics of vulnerability effected largely by the dominant hegemony.

Keywords: Trauma, life writing, ethnic minority, violence and vulnerability

Full paper

Life writing, the literary genre written out of life, deals with a truthful record of the course of the writers' life. It is a powerful tool with which the writers could express their lived experiences, feelings and emotions. Unlike the other literary genres which give an account of the fictitious and fabricated life of a character, life writing springs from the actual events that happened in the life of the writer. Those who have been deeply wounded physically, psychologically, and spiritually often lose their voice. Being already mute within a given society, coupled with the burden of experiencing psychological trauma, creates a strong conflict in which the challenge to express trauma becomes central. Finding a way to communicate the experience of trauma is therefore of vital importance to those who have sustained traumatic events. For these voiceless, writing the self is a way to reclaim their voice. This personal and intimate act of narrative thus becomes a form of identity.

The war torn country of Iraq witnessed the horrors of war and the trauma of violence. Iraq continues to confront severe challenges as it has been ravaged in recent years by series of warfare. War time experiences formed the crux of much of the Iraqi writing. But, unfortunately little attention has been given to Iraqi writers who have been treating the subject of political and ethnic violence. The understanding of war writings is essential to know more about the production and complexities of the political and the territorial hegemony. The prolonged experience of war, both implicitly and explicitly, dominates Iraqi articulations of self and place. As Iraq immersed into more brutal battles, the writers wrote more about this experience and its effect on the people around them. Some emerge with their own narratives which realistically depict the harsh everyday life in the war ravaged country. In the face of traumatic experiences, they write about what they witness and experience.

The literary output of women is comparatively low in Iraq. Many factors conspire to exacerbate the situation. The status of women in Iraq is deteriorating. Even though the constitution guarantees all rights to them they are still in darkness. The particularly serious issue of female illiteracy adversely affects the overall development of the country and the literature is no exception. Iraqi women's movement to uplift the pitiable condition of women remains on the shaky grounds. Iraqi literature, as a result, underscores the experiences of men and eclipsed those of women who are doubly oppressed. But the horrible traumatic situation of war prompts some women writers to mouth their personal experiences. Haifa Zangana, Nadia Murad, Dunya Mikhail, Alia Mamdouh, Inaam

Kachachi, and Zainab Salbi are the few who enriched the literature with their presence. These writers express both their personal experiences and the collective Iraqi experience as well.

Among the dominant voices of Iraq, Nadia Murads' sounds more striking and confident. Nadia Murad is a Yazidi woman activist from northern Iraq. She is a courageous young woman of twenty six who has endured the trauma of unimaginable cruelty and humiliation through sexual enslavement to ISIS. She encapsulates the atrocities of war and paints a disturbing picture of what is in many ways a Civil War. She explicitly states the horrors in her own native country. She is awarded the coveted Nobel Peace Prize along with Denis Mukwege Mukengere for her efforts to end the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war and armed conflict in Iraq.

Iraq is home to diverse ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups. Yazidi, one of the oldest minority communities in Iraq, has been trampled down by the complicated legacy of demographic manipulation and being eventually lost in the conflict between major forces competing for space, power and fortune. Yazidi survived generations of attacks that were intended to wipe them out, forcing them to convert, or simply pushing them from their own land and taking everything they owned. They were forced to flee to the remote place of Mount Sinjar in the Iraqi north-west region, and were trapped and slaughtered by an encircling group of Islamic State militants. The confrontational and hostile challenges they face target not just their freedoms and rights but their very existence and sustainability in a land they have survived for centuries.

Only a handful of Iraqi writers took initiation to amplify their own problems. It is a rarity that women step ahead to sketch the real picture of their life. *The Last Girl* is a vivid example of an ethnic minority writing which plainly sketch the trials and tribulations of a young Yazidi girl. Nadia, one of the towering personalities of modern Iraq, does an amazing job of writing the pangs and disillusionment of the ethnic minority. She dissects the exact condition of human life in the fragmented land of Iraq. She inadvertently emphasized the serious problems posed by ISIS in Iraq. ISIS is considered as the perpetrator of genocide of Yazidi's in Iraq. Nadia uses her writing to defend and protest for the extinct community. For Nadia, the act of writing is not only a medium to help her understand herself, but can also be an incredible mechanism for personal growth and transformation of life. Her account of life provides an emotional support for those who find themselves vulnerable, endangered, and at the mercy of the country.

The violence and the vulnerability of the body are hailed recently as object of study in all theoretical parlances. From time immemorial world has witnessed unprecedented violence as part of war. There has been a tremendous escalation in terrorist and extremist activities in the world over the

century. The resultant ethnic violence has caused immense loss of life and property in many parts of the world. Nadia, through the stark portrayal of her life, backlights the traumatic life and experience of Yazidi women in Iraq.

Trauma can be inflicted both on the body and on the mind. Any physical or mental injury can lead to trauma. In the words of Sigmund Freud trauma is a “breach” in the “protective barrier” (29). Confronting a constant stress, experiencing a physical and sexual assault, and getting exposed to threats of oppression and humiliation also leads to trauma. Nadia details: “Every Islamic State member treated me cruelly, but I remember a few small differences between the men who abused me.... Hajji Salman hit me if I tried to close my eyes. For him, it was not enough just to rape me- he humiliated me as often as he could, spreading honey on his toes and making me lick it off or forcing me to dress up for him” (185).

Nadia describes the stifling, violent and traumatic condition generated by the imposition of a brutal and savage rule over the Yazidis that prompts the minority to remain in seclusion and threat. She focuses on the terrorist activities of the ISIS and the atrocities that are perpetrated on men, women, and children in the Yazidi community. Nadia’s autobiography is a vivid and engaging story that reminds us how long the Yazidis of Iraq have struggled and are still endeavouring to triumph over the forces of violence. Nadia’s life turns upside down in 2014 when her family was attacked by the ISIS along with that of the other Yazidis. Nadia was only twenty four when she was taken into custody. She was forced to witness the brutal murder of her, brothers, half brothers, and nieces. Her life became more pathetic as she was traded from one terrorist to another.

Bodily fragmentation is effectively reflected in war narratives. The fragmented female body becomes the means through which women diagnose their homogeneous historical trauma and can thus potentially unite in order to resist oppressions caused by the hegemonic order. Female body is treated as a challenging locale, a combat zone for competing ideologies. Women’s bodies are used as instruments for sexual pleasure and gratification. As the famous Italian feminist thinker Adriana Cavarero rightly comments:

The center of the scene is occupied by a suffering body, a body reduced to a totally available object or, rather, a thing objectified by the reality of pain, on which violence is taking its time about doing its work. Death may come at the end, but it is not the end in view. The dead body, no matter how mutilated, is only a residue of the scene of torture. The special form of the horrorism of which the torturer is the featured protagonist actually prefers to consummate itself on the living body, to prolong the

suffering inscribed in the vulnus, bring the vulnerable one to the limit of bearability of pain and offense. As every torturer knows, the vulnerable is not the same as the killable. The latter stands poised between death and life, the former between the wound and healing care. (31)

Nadia narrates the individual experiences of psychological trauma she undergoes during the time of Civil War. Yazidis were taken prisoners. Yazidi men were shot in front of their dear ones. Women and children were kept in a separate room to be sold in the slave markets. They are considered as mere property which can be given as gifts and sold at the whim of the owners. Nadia was one of the multitudes who was sold and butchered in the slave markets. She, along with other Yazidi girls, was transported from her settlement and is destined to play the role of *sabiyya* or prostitute. Yazidi girls are considered infidels, and according to the militant's interpretation of the Koran, raping a slave is not a sin. Nafah, one of the militants shouted at Nadia, "you are an infidel, a *sabiyya*, and you belong to the Islamic State now, so get used to it" (127).

Gender is a critical component in the configuration of trauma. Women are the most vulnerable class who have been traumatized ever since the day of creation. Women are particularly susceptible to marginalization, poverty and the violence engendered by armed conflict. Nadia opines, "Every second with ISIS was part of a slow, painful death- of the body and the soul" (119). Physical and psychological abuses are the specific problems that befall upon women. Refugee women are more affected by violence than any other population of women in the world. Violence against women is defined as "an act of gender based violence that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or sufferings to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty of her occurring in public or private life. Some important causes of violence against women are sexual harassment, forced marriage, victims of rape and son's preference" (Bishoy 74).

Nadia unhesitatingly narrates the events that happened in her life. Once they were captured, the Yazidi girls were got separated and were sent to the concerned places for the purpose of prostitution. Nadia, who vehemently opposes the sexual advances of the militants, has to pay a lot for her act. She ruminates those painful memories which everyone wants to forget. "Nafah pushed the lit cigarette into my shoulder, pressing it down through the fabric of the dresses and shirts I had layered on that morning, until it hit my skin and went out. The smell of burned fabric and skin was horrible, but I tried not to scream in pain. Screaming only got you into more trouble" (127).

Violence against bodies, especially women's bodies is a persistent and universal problem occurring in every culture and social group. With the growth of the public sphere, rape the mostly committed violence against women increasingly becomes a trope in cultural discourse. The discrepant distribution of power contributes immeasurably to rape and sexual violence in society. Rape usually did not arise out of a sexual need, but rather is primarily violent in order to dominate and degrade the victim. Thus rape, synonymous with male power, is the enshrinement of male power to control women through fear. The famous American feminist Susan Brownmills says, "Rape is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which *all men* keep *all women* in a state of fear" (6). Women's lack of control over their body and sexuality is also displayed through the rape. As the famous sociologist Allen Feldman says:

...the investment in bodily violence, body as object, seems at odd with the thesis of subjectivation. Yet new modes of subjectivation engender new object formations. The reverse can also occur. The politicized body traverses both subject and object poles. The body made into a political artifact by an embodied act of violence is no less a political agent than the author(s) of violence. The very act of violence invests the body with agency. The body, altered by violence, reenacts other altered bodies dispersed in time and space; it also reenacts political discourse and even the movement of history itself. (7)

Sexual assault is an extremely effective weapon of war and destruction. Both men and women are subjected to violence, but it is women and girls who are predominantly affected by sexual violence like rape, forced prostitution and sexual slavery. Sexual violence has also been used as a means of ethnically cleansing an area, of spreading fear and compelling people to leave an area, and through widespread and systematic rape and forced impregnation aimed at destroying the identity of an ethnic group. ISIS adopted this technique to unleash terror among the Yazidis. Rape, the by-product of war, is employed as a tool to silence the women.

The victim or the survivor responds in its own strange way to the traumatic experiences. Nadia has been able to address the impact of traumatic stress in relation to resilience. She has managed to overcome all the negative effects of physical and sexual assault. In the survival response to trauma- the fight or flight response- Nadia prefers the former whereas many of the Yazidi girls escapes from the atrocities by means of killing themselves and meekly succumbs to their tragic life. Nadia dares to wage a war against the horrific traumatic events. The need to acknowledge trauma can at once

simultaneously erase the impact of its effect. Nadia could escape from the clutches of the militants with her unending patience and perseverance.

Less is known to the world about the Islamic state. Those who want to understand more about the state, Nadia's book is a compulsory reading. Nadia refused to be silenced. She even dared to speak the unspeakable. Nadia has not only found her voice, but has become the voice of every Yazidi who is a victim of genocide, every woman who has been abused, every refugee who has been left behind. "Nadia Murad's spirit is not broken, and her voice will not be muted. Instead, through this book, her voice is louder than ever" (Clooney xi). She has endured emotional trauma, faced hardships, and overcome obstacles in life. But all these bitter experiences and bad challenges make her immune and mould her to become one of the strongest women in Iraq.

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