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Traumatized Womanhood and Ethnicity in the Memoirs of Nadia Murad and Farida Khalaf

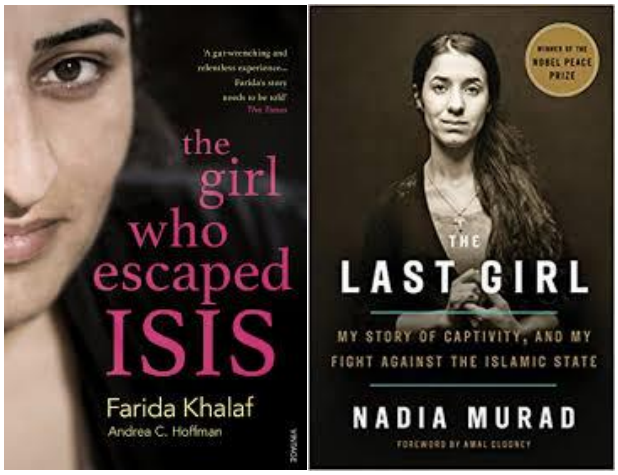
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Abstract

Autobiography is an art that combines in itself the elements of both literature and history and presents an image of the autobiographer's self but simultaneously they present a creative history of the period through which he/she has lived. It brings an increased awareness of the author's self and the human condition, helping them to find an order and a meaning in life, thus essaying the truth and story of an experiment in being combining philosophy, psychology and history. ISIS widely known as a jihadist group see violent struggle as necessary to eradicate obstacles to restore God's rule on earth and defend the Muslim community against what they consider to be infidels and apostates. For the present study I selected the autobiographies of Nadia and Farida. Nadia is a symbol of survival for a minority threatened with examination and Farida's narrative is traumatic, not a story of redemption, but of survival. This paper attempts to examine the memoirs on ethnic genocide of the community and the harrowing experiences of the women bought international attention and help to the Yazidis, and at the same time helped in the empowerment of the victims.

Key Words: *trauma, terrorism, ISIS, torture, fear and shame*



Trauma is a disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates gaps in existence. It is a poignant response to any atrocious incident, in the vein of accident, civil war, rape or natural hazards. Judith Herman in her book, *Trauma and Recovery*, puts experience in a broader political frame, arguing that psychological trauma can be understood only in a social content. The autobiographies of the Yezidies, Nadia Murad and Farida Khalaf presented the ethnic issues and the lacerated self of the woman who were taken as captives by the ISIS.

Barros argues that, "autobiography is more than the story of the 'I', the 'auto' of autobiography; it is the story of the changes undergone by the self . . ." (*Autobiography* 201). An autobiography lays great emphasis on introspection, and gives an account of the writer's external life and in a larger sense the account of the

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inner turmoil of his/her life bringing out the ideas and emotions that travails through the conscious and subconscious self. The journey of a self through time is central to autobiographies than is the self who is making the journey.

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The memoir of Nadia Murad and Farida Khalaf is a testimony of the Yezidi women who were abducted by ISIS and sold into slavery. The autobiographies mainly focus on the life of the Yazidis in Syria, their life, how they differ from the other communities and the attacks of ISIS on them. The Yazidi population and their religion are ancient and trace back to the 12th century. Kurdish is their religious language and their belief is that all kurds originally were Yazidis before they were forced under pressure to abandon Yazidism and convert to Islam. Their supreme being is known as Yasdan, who cannot to be worshipped directly, and is believed that seven great spirits emanated from him of whom the greatest is the Peacock Angel known as Melek Tawusi, the alter ego of God, to the extent Yazidism is monotheistic. Yazidis pray to Melek Tawusi five times a day, whose other name is shaytan, which in Arabic means devil, and this has led to the Yazidis being mislabelled as "devil worshippers". Conversion of religion is, therefore, out of the question. In their book, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, Stern and Berger presents the horrendous experience of terrorism and defines it as:

> Terrorism is psychological warfare. Its most immediate goals are to bolster the morale of its supporters and demoralize and frighten its victims and their sympathizers. For instance, the radius of fear dwarfs that of injury and death . . . . While they don't always get what they want, terrorists often succeed at these two vital goals: spreading fear and provoking reactive policies. (199)

Iraq has been one of the most dangerous countries of the world since 2003, suffering from terrorism, fugitiveness, civil war and political instability. After the fall of the regime of Saddam Hussein and Ba'ath in 2003, the political system of Iraq experienced an alteration from a single- party dictatorship to a democratic federation. Jihadi Salafism with interpretation of Islamic concepts (like monotheism) and historical events try to rule out Shiites from Islamic society and advocates violence to defeat them. Propagation of Jihadi Salafi ideas, has socially led to deep religious conflicts and violence between Sunni and Shiite Muslims. Several national and religious factors played important roles in the growth of Iraqi Jihadi Salafism. The restless war against Shiite and Kurd rebels, and with the United States and its alliances over Kuwait, as well as war of attrition with Iran for over eight years, attenuated the Iraqi military and economic foundations.

Sectarianism and Iraqi people's interactions based on tribal, religious, and political affinity affected the policies of Iraqi government on a large scale and prohibited any national planning to solve the problems. In absence of national values and common interests agreed by all Iraqis, a reverse form of sectarianism, accompanied by revenge in some cases, continued. The sectarian, ethnic, religious, and social differences interacted with each other to pave the way for terrorist exploitation of these differences. Dissolution of Ba'ath party and depriving its members from political activities encouraged them to use violent terroristic actions against Shiite government in Baghdad. The inability of the Government to secure and

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stabilize the country, and counteracts of Shiite militia in response to anti-Shiite sectarianism actions of Ba'ath party and Jihadi Salafists intensified terrorism and sectarianism in Iraq.

ISIS widely known as a jihadist group see violent struggle as necessary to eradicate obstacles to restore God's rule on earth and defend the Muslim community against what they consider to be infidels and apostates. IS wanted to establish a "Caliphate", a state governed in accordance with Islamic law, or sharia, by God's deputy on earth (caliph) extends across the Islamic world. IS grown out of al-Qaeda in Iraq was formed by Sunni Muslim militants after the US-led invasion in 2003. In 2011, Islamic State in Iraq joined the rebellion against president Bashar Al-Assad in Syria, where it found a safe haven.

The Yazidis, a civilian population that was not taking part in hostilities, were the primary object of the August 2014 ISIS attack on Sinjar merely because ISIS considered them to be infidels. They committed genocide as well as multiple crimes against humanity and against the Yazidis, thousands of whom are held captive in the Syrian Arab Republic and were subjected to almost unimaginable horrors. They vowed to destroy the Yazidis through killings, sexual slavery, enslavement, torture and inhuman and degrading treatment and forcible displacements causing irreversible mutilation to body and mind. They were imposing a slow death and adopted measures to prevent Yazidi children from being born, including forced conversions, the separation of Yazidi population, and the transfer of Yazidi children from their own families and enrolling them with ISIS fighters, thereby secluding them off from beliefs and practices of their religious community, thus erasing their identity as Yazidis.

Both Nadia and Farida were born and raised in Koch. Both the narratives describes the journey from being held captive by the ISIS as their 'Sabaya'(sex slave) to the ordeal of escaping from the persecutors. Iraq was in a state of war for a long period, first with the Americans in 2003, then with itself, and later with the Islamic State. The autobiographies contain open wounds and painful lessons. Nadia Murad, winner of the 2018 Nobel Peace prize, is a Yazidi human rights activist and survivor of sexual slavery at the hands of ISIS in Iraq. Her ordeal began in 2014, when the extremist took over her village and her mother and six of her nine brothers and step-brothers were executed, and many of the unmarried women in the village were taken as sex slaves and passed around among the militants.

Nadia was sold in Mosul to a skinny judge, and was forced to recite verses from the Koran in a ceremony at an Islamic court in Mosul to convert to Islam. She says, "In my heart I said, May God forgive me –I was born with this faith, I don't want you to misjudge me," (*Last Girl* 159). She was repeatedly raped, beaten, humiliated, tortured, and passed on from one militant to another. In her time in captivity, she saw and heard of "a lot of women" who took their own lives. The responsibility she felt for her two nieces-"the first time I ever had such responsibility", she says. In her autobiography, she writes:

> At some point, there was rape and nothing else. This becomes your normal day. You don't know who is going to open the door next to attack you, just that it will happen and that tomorrow might be worse. You stop thinking about escaping or seeing your family again. Your past life becomes a distant memory, like a dream. Your body doesn't belong to you, and there's no energy to talk or to fight or to think about the world outside. There is only rape and the numbness that comes with accepting that this is now your life. Fear was better. With fear, there is assumption that what is happening isn't normal. Sure, you feel like your heart will explode and will throw up, you cling desperately to your family and friends and your grovel in front

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> of the terrorists, you cry until you go blind, but at least you do something. Hopelessness is close to death. (*Last Girl* 164)

Later, an unlocked door gave her an opportunity to flee. Her memoir is a tale of a victim-turned-survivor-turned-fighter who chose to raise her voice against the injustices meted out to her community by a group of terrorists. She describes the political turmoil in Iraq after the ousting of Saddam Hussein and the rise of Islamic State and traces the journey of the militant's group's rise to power through terrorism.

Farida Khalaf was a schoolgirl when the ISIS fighters descended on her village on Aug. 15, 2013. They killed the men, took the women away, to be bought, appallingly abused and sold. Khalaf lost her father, brother, friends, and herself. She was under the custody of the ISIS where several ISIS operatives took her to Raqqa, Syria. She was sold as a slave and raped repeatedly. She often refused the demands of her buyers and suffered for it. Once she was beaten so badly that she lost sight in one eye and could not walk for two months:

> Zeyad flogged my back until the blood started to flow beneath my blue dress. A group of twenty men were standing watching . . . . 'Go on, show her!' they shouted. 'Show her how we treat people who pray to Satan!' He kept thrashing me ever more wildly . . . . He abused my entire body, sparing my legs or head either. He whacked my face with the pole, injuring my left eye so I couldn't see out of it any more. . . . I still bear the scars today of his inconceivably brutal actions. (*ISIS* 120)

Another book that tells about Yazidi community and ISIS is Cathy Otten's *With Ash on Their Faces: Yazidi Women and The Islamic State*. She narrates the ISIS attacks, the mass enslavements of Yazidi women and the fallout of the disaster. She challenges common perceptions of Yazidi female victimhood by focusing on stories of resistance passed down by generations and is dedicated to the immediate and the long-lasting consequences of Daesh's assault. Like Nadia murad, Otten's work deals with the women's' experiences of captivity in Daesh's prisons.

The aftermath lives of Yazidis were unimaginable because of the fear and terror that was injected into them. Female survivors of sexual slavery have been shattered, with many experiencing suicidal thoughts, and intense feelings of rage interspersed with periods of deep depression. With hundreds of Yazidi men missing or dead, Yazidi women faced a precarious existence in a society that has not encouraged their independence. The on-going attack by ISIS on the Yazidis is viewed by the community not as a stand-alone event, but as part of a long history of historical oppression and violence, and is described by psychologist as intergenerational trauma.

Trauma is a stressful event or incident of a threatening nature, which is likely to have a pervasive impact on anyone experiencing it, and includes event like accidents, rape, crime, natural and man-made disasters, witnessing a violent death, etc. Trauma has a powerful capacity to shape human's physical, emotional and intellectual development. War and atrocities in the context of genocide have negative effects for the survivors at both individual and collective levels resulting in multiple layers of traumatic events that occur during periods of genocide. These includes witnessing extreme violence, the disappearance and loss of family members, rape and sexual humiliation, torture, imprisonment and kidnapping leading to psychological consequences.

Traumatic experience is understood as a fixed, unpresentable and timeless photographic negative stored in an unloadable place of the brain, but it maintains the ability to interrupt consciousness and maintains the ability to be transferred to non-

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traumatized individuals and groups. This supports the notion of trauma as a transhistorical and intergenerational making several important claims about trauma, stating that traumatic experience is repetitious, timeless, and unspeakable, it is also a literal, contagious, and mummified event.

Rape continues to be used as a tactic not only of war, but, of genocide, ISIS has used gender-based violence as a weapon of their war and tool of horror. Yazidi women and girls have been through a lot of psychological traumas and violence. The atrocities committed by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria have vast psychological effects around the world. Sexual violence against women has commonly been systematically used during wars and genocide, with the aim of traumatizing the civilian population and elimination of the targeted group through the desecration of individual group members. Repeated rape and sexual violence have devastating effects on social, psychological and physical health, including genital and non-genital injuries experienced by the survivors.

Unmarried women and girls were separated from older women and those with children from the outset. They focused on the young pretty girls and they were the first ones to be taken away. Some girls pretended to be married and produced their younger siblings or nephews or nieces as their own children, to escape the fate of sex slavery. Married woman who had no children to provide evidence of marriage did likewise. In some cases, ISIS did not identify this subterfuge. But, many a time, they would bring a doctor to examine them and those who were virgin and had lied about being married would be punished. To speak about the experiences in sexual or domestic life was to invite public humiliation, ridicule, and disbelief. Women were silenced by fear and shame, and the silence of the women gave license to every form of sexual and domestic exploitation.

Women and children were forcibly displaced from place to place to make them available for the ISIS fighters. These holding sites represent a type of prison because there is no way for them to escape. They were fully controlled, and caged. Prolonged captivity disrupted all human relationships and amplified the dialectic of trauma and produced profound alterations in the victim's identity. From the moment the Yazidi women and girls entered the holding sites, ISIS fighters came into the rooms in order to select women and girls they wished. In interviews, they described feelings of abject terror on hearing footsteps in the corridor. The selection of any girl was accompanied by screaming as she was forcibly pulled from the room and those who tried to keep hold of her was brutally beaten by fighters.

Yazidi women and girls began to disfigure themselves in order to make themselves unattractive to potential buyers, as they were selected on the basis of their beauty, breast size, attractiveness and their virginity. Some of them tried to commit suicide by cutting their wrists or throats, while others hanged themselves using their headscarves. They threatened them by saying that any resistance on their part would be punished by gang rape. Fighters ordered and supervised these gang rapes, and the experience turns out to be a life – threatening event, and in the aftermath of rape, victims complained of insomnia, nausea, startle responses, and nightmares, as well as dissociative or numbing symptoms. Women and girls were forced to take birth control, in the form of pills and injections. There was, unsurprisingly, a profound reluctance to discuss pregnancies that resulted from rapes by ISIS men. Some women gave birth in captivity or upon release but many appear to have given the infants away in circumstances that remain unclear. None of the birth control methods forced upon the women and girls protected them from sexually transmitted diseases. They denied adequate food to the women and were starved as punishments for escape attempts or for resisting rapes. Aside from the physical and psychological suffering, they now find themselves forcibly displaced from their

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homes and forced to live as guests in the shelters of distant relatives or with NGO organisations.

The autobiographies of Nadia and Farida are not their individual story, but the story of the entire Yazidi community across the world. They describe the history of their people, their culture and religion. The Yazidis' state of being is associated with trauma, displacement, fear and constant threat to their existence. The grotesque scenes of violence evoked by religious sentiments were witnessed with shock and bewilderment. The memoirs on ethnic genocide of the community and the harrowing experiences of the women bought international attention and help to the Yazidis, and at the same time helped in the empowerment of the victims.

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Biosketch



Dr. Harsha Viswanath, Assistant Professor of English, MSM College, Kayamkulam. She is a recipient of the prestigious Dr. Ambedkar Distinguished National Award for Social Work and Navodhana Sanskriti Award for Educational contributions. She has twenty-six paper presentation in various National and International Seminars. She has published four books *Mirror of Life*, *English Language Teaching: Approaches and Skills*, *Revisiting Classics and Literature*, *Accosting the Communicative Conundrum*. She has nine paper publications and two chapters in Edited Books. Her area of interest is Psychoanalytic theories and ELT