

## **Resilience of the Traumatized in Nadia Murad's *The Last Girl: My Story of Captivity and My Fight Against Islamic State***

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### **Abstract**

Annihilated body and lost memories are testimonies of any war victim. Body spaces, identities, hierarchies are mutilated, thus making survival a hard thing to exist. Moving from a generalized term of a war victim to a more concise and gendered identity - women and men experience it differently. Unfortunately, compliance is a feminine aspect that transhistorical women reconcile to the patriarchal authority with the burden of silence. Moving away from realizing one's identity and reclaiming the lost life is indeed a laborious task. With a resurrected psyche and a healed body, to walk out and confront the world; vociferously detailing the traumatic experiences to a sombre culture - where women's virtue is reckoned solely on the base of her marital status and virginity- Nadia Murad's memoir *The Last Girl: My Story of Captivity and My Fight Against Islamic State* boldly narrates her life as a "sabiyya" (sex slave) under the ISIS regiment in Iraq. The trajectory of her life is weighed in this study to show her resilience to all that she faced.

**Key words:** Trauma, Memoir, Resilience and Survival.

"Trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival": Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*

Human survival, when much is lost and destroyed because of nobody's fault, is a saga of pain and suffering that gets even worse when it is masterminded by mankind himself. This is evident in the narratives of slaves, captives and refugees, as the traumatic experiences are nothing but a wretched spool of malevolence, memories and agony. It is that delicate twine of hope which holds together the perforated and tattered life of the victim, which in an attempt to unknot bleeds as it is a real human experience. Fixating on the basic needs of humans, life is rather a rudimentary one; but religion, class, ideology and money alters the transparency of life. These play a wicked role in the life of every individual - so much that at times human lives are gauged and evaluated solely based on this. Religion is a mesh into which one is born and there is no rewinding of life from there on. The burden of religion in the cognitive conception of an individual is something which cannot be averted even with or without the consent of the self. Many numbers of captivity narratives speak of themes of redemption by faith as it is the only final shelter one can resort to. Even though in a skein, one will at times turn again to the same God to get untangled. Here it is not the existence of God that is being questioned, but is there any human being who is privileged enough to make another human being his/her slave and then blame the religion he/she belongs to?

The mapping and mining of the past is by itself asphyxiating, as no one will ever relish recollecting those harrowing moments, where the words “suffering” and “pain” will not justify or comprehend what they have gone through. American Psychiatric Associations, after evaluating the experiences of victims and witnesses of the Vietnam War, noted that “experience which is beyond the range of humans” (Caruth, 100), can be considered as a traumatic experience.

Conventional understanding of trauma embodies the worn out theories that describe the aforementioned quoted phrase as something beyond human experience. “Hysteria” was the cliché term which labelled “a dramatic medical metaphor for everything that men found mysterious or unmanageable in the opposite sex” (Herman, 10). From Jean Martin Charcot, many from the field of medicine and psychology took the concept of hysteria as an interesting area to explore. Pierre

Janet, William James, and Sigmund Freud were the followers of Charcot and new terms like neurosis, shell shock, abreaction, catharsis and psychoanalysis became popular. The study of psychological trauma was in vogue after the First World War as there were many who suffered this mental distress. Theoreticians were interested in this venture of unknown and most of them had to conclude that "... somatic symptoms of hysteria represented disguised representations of intensely distressing events which had been banished from memory" (12). Further, Freud recognized sexual neurosis as his women patients repeatedly reported sexual assault, incest and domestic violence to him. The study came to an abrupt end after the publication of *Aetiology of Hysteria* in 1906, which was built on the raw materials he compiled from the "talking cure". The study had to be ceased as the work conjectured that domestic violence, child abuse or incest as the causative factors for sexual trauma or the so called sexual neurosis in many of the women then.

Later with the famous case of Dora, Freud introduced the controversial topic of psychoanalysis, where he theorized that one of the reasons for sexual trauma is the fantasies of forbidden sexual desires in women. Intriguing into the life of many patients:

Freud suggests why women resort to hysteria while men manifest obsessional neuroses by distinguishing the kinds of infantile sexual abuse boys and girls receive (women receive it "passively," males "actively"). Yet he does not realize the implicit acceptance of prevailing concepts of gender in this statement. That is, Freud does not go on to ask how cultural, political, and social roles laid down for men and women produce different neuroses in the case of sexual trauma. Indeed, Freud and others of his time rarely ask if trauma impacts differently on males and females. When the war neuroses force attention to male hysteria, as we'll see, clinicians do not ask if hysteria in men and women is the same (Kaplan, 27).

After the First World War, complete focus got transferred to men and war neurosis and the word "sexual trauma" had to retreat to give way to war trauma. After the Vietnam War the Post Traumatic Disorder Syndrome (PTSD) considered men as the crest of traumatic studies because war is a playground only for men. War memoirs of

witnesses and soldiers were the best sellers and like the domestic abuse which was covered in bourgeois society, the life of women during the war was not a matter to be mentioned. It is only in the late twentieth century that trauma and the experiences which lead to psychological trauma attracted researchers and critics. Even in this, the diagnostic manuals were based on the dominant groups. Feminine perspective of the same is much a young addition to trauma studies. The lived in experiences of man and women varies that both cannot be tugged under the same category:

Meanwhile, feminist psychologists, like Judith Herman and Laura S. Brown, began to confront what they ironically saw as the implicit male bias in defining PTSD (ironic because traumatic hysteria was first diagnosed as a female disorder, only belatedly being applied to males) (Kaplan, 33).

The interference of feminist thinkers and their perspectives in trauma studies heralded a new facet with new dimensions that was epitomized in the works viz. *Unclaimed Experience* (1986) and *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) by Cathy Caruth, *Trauma and Recovery- The Aftermath of Violence From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (1992) by Judith.L Herman, *Against our will- Men, Women and Rape* by Susan Brownmiller, *Betrayal Trauma: The Logic of Forgetting Childhood Abuse* (1996) by Janet Freyd, *Hystories* (1997) by Elaine Showalter and *Trauma: A Genealogy* (2000) by Ruth Leys. These works clearly stated a new approach in the field of traumatic studies that gender oriented approach and the pliancy of each to regenerate to normalcy was hypothesized.

In spite of all the advancements in the field of trauma studies, psychology, gender studies and various other discourses, war memoirs often unmask the animalistic and chauvinistic side of man and the victimized condition of woman. The cannibalistic remorselessness and brutality exhibited by man cannot be evaluated at times because it goes beyond the rational sense of punishment or a sensible act of violence. For instance, the atrocities against women are consciously another phase, as it is acceptable and justifiable for the patriarchal ideology. Women's life and struggles cannot even become a part of war histories or records as they are either treated as non- existing

beings or as irrelevant experiences that need not even be referred to. Skimpy records can be seen about the inflicted sexual violence and brutal gang rapes on women from the history of any war or conflicts around the world.

But the sufferance in silence is no more, as the Philomelas have started to scream out the abuses and atrocities that they had to endure from the hands of the malefactors- Nadia Murad and Farida Khalaf from Iraq being the youngest of them. Being women survivors of ISIS attack on Northern Iraq, these women narrate a life too poignant and distressing even to hear. A life forced to live, an experience which fears to be described, a loss which is irretrievable and a body that has been marauded - are the concerns that are narrated in war memoirs, one such being Nadia Murad's *The Last Girl: My Story of Captivity and My Fight Against Islamic State*.

More than a memoir, this can be considered as a life narrative or a captivity narrative. As the title suggests, it is a battle for survival: survive not to live happily ever after but to expose to the world that the Yazidi Community too has the right to live on this planet. The work is a testimony to the fact that holding on to one's faith and obstinate belief in oneself will aid anyone to surmount any inhuman treatment. War memoirs and narratives recount the horror of witnessing a war zone or the shock of shells and bombs that explode in front of them. Witnessing this itself depresses a human or rather in psychiatric terms-traumatizes the individual. But the lives narrated in these expresses not what they had witnessed; rather they are the victims themselves, As Maurice E. Stevens in *Trauma Is as Trauma Does: The Politics of Affect in Catastrophic Times* states:

“Trauma” allows us to register these traces, appearing as they do in the form of scars, or symptoms, or lapses, or repetitions; and it does so upon “bodies” of various types: corporeal entities, psychic projections, narratives of selfhood, informational archives, and so on. Indeed, beginning with “marks” like the bloodied body, the ruptured mind, the incomplete narrative, or the riddled archive, the idea of trauma provides explanatory narratives that, by offering one telling of how the subject achieved its ruination, support fantasies of an originary time before the fall; a time of whole,

coherent, innocent selfhood, and uncorrupted, clean, and proper subjectivity. (Casper, 29)

Embarking on to a world where the scar, disfigurement and stains no more matters is not a facile one. The social stigma of confronting a world where women's virtue is evaluated on the basis of her vagina and hymen is onerous. Like any other religion Yazidies too valued this and standing as a victim of war, residue of rapes and slavery, Nadia is even risking her regained life. This article attempts to find the trajectory along which Nadia's life has travelled - from an innocent village girl to a captivated sex slave and then to the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2018. Nadia Murad is now a human rights activist and the recipient of the Vaclav Havel Human Rights Prize and the Sakharov Prize, and is the UN's first Goodwill Ambassador for the Dignity of Survivors of Human Trafficking. She dedicates herself for rehabilitation of survivors of genocide and human trafficking to alleviate and heal their physical and psychological wounds and to recapitulate their lost life.

***The Last Girl: My Story of Captivity and My Fight Against the Islamic State - A Study***

Survivance and resilience of those who are meant to perish - after being victims of masochism, brutal gang rapes, psychological annihilation, ostracization from culture, religion and family; fractured identity- is what is narrated as the life of Nadia Murad, a young woman of Yazidi community from Iraq. Captured and captivated in the name of religion and suffering under the stigmatization of sexual subjection is what the memoir *The Last Girl: My Story of Captivity and My Fight Against Islamic State* is about. Narrating a life which is not even comprehensible to oneself is what we can read in these memoirs. Reflecting upon one's past which could never be redeemed- living a life which lacks the vigour of culture and carrying a body that exposes the residues of horror- is the life of each victim.

The latter half of the twentieth century has witnessed many war narratives and memoirs written by soldiers who had seen death passing nearby and the traumatic and inhuman experience they had to face in the war field. War is a historical reality for many of us until the bloodiness behind the same unravels in front of us. And it is a

testament for the humankind in which many fail or give up. The Kurdish speaking Yazidis in Iraq is a race, according to ISIS, which should be annihilated from the earth as they are non-believers who do not have a holy book to follow. The Yazidi Myth of Tawsi Melek (God's Chief Angel) and God's creation of Earth and Adam, has several resemblances to the Islamic notions of Angel Iblis. But the sanctified portrayal of this otherwise castigated angel brands the Yazidis as devil worshippers in the eyes of ISIS. Religion and myths are part of a belief system which no devotee would ever like to challenge. For their captors, these myths and beliefs are damnable and thus the Yazidis turn out to be deplorable beings that have no right to live:

Tawusi Melek, they say, is God's chief Angel, like Iblis, the devil figure of the Koran. They claim that our Angel defied Adam and therefore God. Some cite texts - usually written by outside scholars in the early twentieth century who were unfamiliar with the Yazidi oral tradition- that say that Tawusi Melek was sent to Hell for refusing to bow to Adam, which is not true. This is misinterpretation, and it has had terrible consequences. The story we use to explain the core of our faith and everything we think of as good about the Yazidi religion is the same story others use to justify genocide against us. (28).

And it is "one of the world's most complicated and intractable conflicts" (Sunday Business Post) which the Yazidis faced in Iraq.

The memoir then moves as a fictional account of her life with turns and twists that a young girl of her age will never be able to withstand. But the truth is that this is an archetypal phenomenon - something that befalls to most of the women across the world. Susan Brownmiller in *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* notes that even from the beginning of social order in order to retaliate any perceived injustice, physical power is needed and genetically women are weaker in this. So it is always men the predator and women the prey:

From the humblest beginnings of the social order based on a primitive system of retaliatory force—the *lex talionis*: an eye for an eye—woman was unequal before the law. By anatomical fiat—the inescapable construction of their genital organs—the human

male was a natural predator and the human female served as his natural prey. Not only might the female be subjected at will to a thoroughly detestable physical conquest from which there could be no retaliation in kind—a rape for a rape—but the consequences of such a brutal struggle might be death or injury, not to mention impregnation and the birth of a dependent child(16).

Lack of women’s ability to defend herself from the potential attackers later introduced the institution of marriage as per the trans historical patriarchal heads. The historical burden of saving women by men against men went much deeper than, the objectification of the female body still lingered. This can be seen in any war front that abducting women, raping and impregnating women is a much easier way to destroy the purity of culture they belong to. The callous tragedy which Nadia and other young women faced in the hands of ISIS is nothing but the same philosophy of destroying their culture by using their own women:

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. (186)

Michel Foucault in his *History of Sexuality* suggests that “power is tolerable only on condition that it masks a substantial part of itself” (86). The subjects insert themselves into roles and subject positions which are available to them. In this work, the subjects are forced to hold on to the positions which are given to them by power holding agents. But instead of holding on to the given role as a sex slave, Nadia Murad fights to live- not just to live but also to adhere to one’s religion and culture; facing the enormity of cold-blooded captors. To ascend from the repressed self and to shift through subject positions i.e. from a young familial girl to a sex slave, from forceful wifehood and a refugee to a source of power and light to the refugees – the

journey of Nadia Murad is not an easy one. As Murad puts it “I want to be the last girl in the world with a story like mine (306).” This study focuses on the traumatic experiences and the resilience of Nadia, the human.

The memoir begins in Nadia’s native village “Kocho, a small Yazidi village in northern Iraq” (3) where she believes that she will spend the rest of her life like any other Yazidi girl. The religion to which one is born is not that person’s fault and one thing is very clear that the moment you are born to a particular religion, a particular class then you cannot actually be liberated from that bond and sometimes servitude. Yazidis have been suffering for their religious belief for centuries but Kocho the small village was not that affected until it was taken over by ISIS.

At first, the villagers started losing chickens and cattle and later their own kids, wives, husbands, brothers and what not. Things started getting worse with the passage of each year. The news which they listened to and watched on TV soon strides to their own village. They receive an ultimatum of three days to either convert to Islam or to suffer the consequences.

“You say we came out of nowhere, but we sent you messages,” he said, his rifle swinging at his side. “When we took the hen and the chicks, it was to tell you we were going to take your women and children. When we took the ram, it was like taking your tribal leaders, and when we killed the ram, it meant we planned on killing those leaders. And the young lamb; she was your girls (87).”

Within no time the whole village gets categorised into men, young women, old women, girls and children:

No one understood yet what was happening. From that moment on, every thought I had and every step I took was an appeal to God. The militants pointed their guns at us. “Women and children on the second floor”, they shouted. “Men, stay down here.” (99).

Soon different subcategories like teenage girls, young women, married women, and middle-aged mothers were packed into different

trucks. Protesting or defending them was out of point, obeying like a well tamed animal was what they could do. Almost all of the men were shot dead and the women were not even allowed to scream. Teenage girls and young women were transported to be sold in the market as ‘sabiyya’ (a sex slave). From there on Nadia realized that for the captors a young Yazidi girl is just a piece of flesh which is priced for her size, shape and age. For them, they are objects for sexual gratification and therefore can be traded - the trade value being based on the virginity or the submissiveness of the sabiyya. The identity of Nadia as a “sabiyya” is different from others. Who bought her as a “sabiyya” is not at all a matter of discussion because all members of the Islamic state treated “sabiyya” alike. The only objective of their owners is to make them suffer for what they are. And the best tool is to rape her.

We would be bought at the market, or given as a gift to a new recruit or a high ranking commander, and then taken back to his home, where we would be raped and humiliated, most of us beaten as well. Then we would be sold or given as a gift again, and again raped and beaten, then sold or given to another militant, and raped and beaten by him, and sold or given, and raped and beaten, and it went this way for long as we were desirable enough and not yet dead. If we tried to escape, we would be punished severely. (161)

This is what all the girls who were abducted will have to say. The names of those owners to which a sabiyya belongs to is not even a matter of concern. Whatever their names be, their attitude towards their slave was the same. Still many of them protested by their own means; “At least I didn’t let him do whatever he wanted” (162). Most women do this to make the men realise that they will never truly own them. Yet Nadia confesses that “I only cried. I am not brave like them.”(162). Though dead inside, Nadia did not embrace submissiveness but instead amassed the daringness to escape whenever she got a chance. The courage and the bravery with which she fought and how she held on to life carrying her own ‘dead body’ is a kind of audacity which no one can ever think of:

I looked in a mirror for the first time since leaving Kocho. Before, when I had put on makeup, I always felt that when I finished, I looked like another person, and I had loved that, the possibility of transforming. (164).

Transforming herself and her appearance did not help her this time as she now had the same face as any other slave. All those who are enslaved have only one face, the face of gloom, despair and death. Despite the repeated warnings given she tried to escape from her subjugators and for that she was gang-raped till an “unknown time” and in between, she lost her consciousness.

Passed on from one man to another Nadia didn't lose her hope and escaped the very moment she got another chance. It was not an easy escape as each moment and every single noise terrified her:

Fear was better. With fear, there is an assumption that what is happening isn't normal. Sure, you feel like your heart will explode and you will throw up, you cling desperately to your family and friends and your grovel in front of the terrorists, you cry until you go blind, but at least you do something. Hopelessness is close to death. (186)

Though in a repressed state it is her willpower and belief that made her escape possible. Fate too played its role as many girls like Nadia tried their escape, only to be recaptured. With the help of a Sunni family in Mosul, a plan is charted to help Nadia escape to Kirkuk. Nasser, the family member, assisted her risking his own life. Now she is a powerful voice in front of those who thought that she could be silenced, her spirits be shattered and her body be crushed using the brute force of power. Nadia could escape only after many attempts to escape and had to face severe punishments each time she was recaptured. Those brutal rapes could only rip her body, but not her soul or will power.

Nadia was constantly reminded by her captors that she is no longer a Yazidi, nor a virgin and that her community will not accept her anymore. The patriarchal concepts of women's virtue in her virginity and the collective consciousness of her community could not resist her as she could realize that it is not her fault. She is not the one who should be blamed or ostracized for her loss but those who captured

her and other women. Thus Nadia, though is like any other “sabiyya” who resists the subject position which is imparted to her forcefully and with brutal power, succeeds in her attempt to free herself from the forced subjectivity.

This is not just Nadia, her sisters Dimal, Adkee, her brother’s wife Jilan and many others too could escape from their owners risking and clinging on to their feeble life. The gallantry with which they freed themselves shows their persistent belief in oneself and their unshaken faith. Each woman’s testimony here is an honest unveiling of their travails between life and death. They break the shells of burdened silence to speak out to the dumb and deaf world that, this is happening- even when UN is promising human rights for all. They outlive the stigma of opening up and as Nadia says “That was a terrifying idea. I knew that if my story were to have any impact, I would have to be as honest as I could stand to be.” (300)

Resistance is the antithesis of the victim identity which is not so often exhibited by women. The power which her captors hold and the power she achieves are two versions of the same coin. One is used for destruction and the other for perseverance. As noted in *Trauma and Recovery- The Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. “The first principle of recovery is the empowerment of the survivor. She must be the author and arbiter of her own recovery. Others may offer advice, support, assistance and care, but not cure” (Herman, 133). Here she is ultimately transformed from a sex slave to a Goodwill Ambassador for the Dignity of Survivors of Human Trafficking of UN and is now the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2018. She is now a source of power for many and she is striving to bring her captors before the International Criminal Court on charges of genocide and crimes against humanity. In the epilogue Nadia states that:

I wanted to tell them that so much more needed to be done. We needed to establish a safe zone for religious minorities in Iraq; to prosecute ISIS- from leaders down to the citizens who had supported their atrocities- for genocide and crimes against humanity; and to liberate all of Sinjar. Women and girls who escaped from ISIS needed

help to be added to the list of Islamic State War crimes. Yazidism should be taught in schools from Iraq to the United States, so that people understood the value of preserving an ancient religion and protecting the people who follow it, no matter how small the community. Yazidis, along with other religious and ethnic minorities, are what once made Iraq a great country (300).

This memoir is an ethical call and a reminder for world nations that the human rights, promised by the power holding constitutions, is not working righteously and instead is mocking the court of justice. The disparity between values espoused by the nations and reality are at further ends that justice and human rights play the picture in black and white. Renarrating those experiences where humanity is but farce, is what is affirmed through this memoir. Human rights smirk at the face of these victims where everything is well quoted in bundles of books for reference.

In the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* published by American Psychiatric Associations, trauma is diagnosed as an experience out of the range of human experience. But what is the measuring cup to measure the range of human experience? What Nadia Murad and others of her community faced cannot be measured or ranged as something which any human can bear. So survival and resilience of these women when they are not even expected to survive or have proven an impossible survival is an explicit testimony for the power and resilience of these humans. Coming back from their misfortunate life they have showcased their bravery to the blind world and announced loudly to the deaf world that they are howbeit Yazidis and moreover human beings.

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