

Resilience And Resistance : Cultural Trauma In Nadia Murad's The Last Girl

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1. INTRODUCTION

Nadia Murad is a Yazidi activist and writer who has written extensively about her experiences as a survivor of ISIS captivity and worked to raise awareness about the plight of the Yazidi people. Her book *The Last Girl: My Story of Captivity, and My Fight Against the Islamic State* was published in 2017 and became a bestseller. It is very different from the memoirs written by the veterans of the literary world for fame and glory. It is a heart-breaking memoir of loss, pain, helplessness and perseverance which is capable of instilling hope in the minds of the readers. The work is set in the Iraqi city of Kocho inhabited by Yazidis. It takes the reader back in time through the life, persecution and survival of Nadia Murad, the author-narrator of the work. It is an autobiographical work co-authored by American writer Jenna Krajeski. She narrates the harrowing story of how her community was deemed evil and outcast, how she was kidnapped by ISIS in 2014, tortured, and sold as sex slave, how her brothers and family were killed, and, finally, how she escaped from the hell she was dragged into. Murad has also written numerous articles and essays on the Yazidi genocide which highlights the ongoing suffering of the Yazidi people and calls for greater international action to address the crisis. The Nobel committee recognised her bravery and work as an activist, particularly in raising awareness of the plight of Yazidi women and girls.

2. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Nadia Murad's work is similar to Malala Yousafzai's *I Am Malala* in that both are stories of non-White women reaching the world in book form through the curation of white, Western journalists. Nadia is only one of many Yazidi women Daesh forced to endure abuse and torture. As she herself admits, many suffered worse than her. Nevertheless, she stands out as a leader for her personal resolve and the strength of character she displays in the telling and continual re-telling of her story. The international attention and critical acclaim the narrative built around her personal story attracted was never something she sought out or desired, "but it just got bigger and bigger...and the bigger it gets, the more tired I become" (Science Monitor). The "getting bigger" she talks about signifies the steady fading away of the human protagonist in the true story, and her substitution by the narrator-persona of the literary text. Her "tiredness" is the point from where the sufferer is overcome by the storyteller – the point from which objective biography shades off into literary narration. It is here that her work qualifies as the subject of a literary study and critical analysis in terms of the poignancy of its narrativity. By taking it upon herself to speak for her fellow survivors, she is forced to relive the horror and delay her own healing.

3. CHARACTERISTICS

In a 2016 interview, Nadia calmly recounted her harrowing ordeal until the interview finished, but broke down shortly afterward, saying that it was really exhausting. Even before her international exposure, her willingness to be a leader and stand up for truth and justice was evident. As Daesh led her village to execution, she couldn't contain her indignation and ran up as close as she could to a militant to spit on him. Later, after her escape, she back-talked to the Kurdish farmer she and other refugees were working for, unafraid to blame the withdrawing Peshmerga he was praising for leaving the Yazidis at Daesh's mercy. Though it cost all the Yazidis their jobs on the farm, the fact that she was honest "from the beginning" reflected well on her in the camp.

Nadia is the leader and founder of her own non-profit organisation, *Nadia's Initiative*. The organisation's mission is to advocate the cause of vulnerable women and minorities, and to assist in stabilising and rehabilitating communities in crisis. Starting at home with the Sinjar Action Fund project, Nadia's Initiative plays a crucial role in helping Yazidis return to their ancestral homes as soon as possible.

As she travels the world relating her story, Nadia's message reflects the advancement of her intended goals: justice and dignity for victims, and peace and security for survivors. She says in her Nobel Peace Prize statement, "We must remain committed to rebuilding communities ravaged by genocide. Survivors deserve a safe and secure pathway home or safe passage elsewhere" (Bacchi). Her message echoes that of the wider Yazidi community, addressed both to international political bodies and those back home in Iraq. "Either we get protection and we get our rights back, or we will become refugees and immigrate" (Science Monitor). Justice is an essential first step, since with justice Yazidis can return to their homes with trust. While her immediate concern is her own community, Nadia's messages of justice and peace extend further. Her statement upon winning the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize appeals to a long-term commitment to better the lives of the vulnerable. She argued that one must work consistently for a better future for women, children and persecuted communities.

Telling her story, rather, narrating her biography as story, is part of her message. Nadia says with conviction that her story told honestly is the best weapon she has against terrorism, and that she plans on using it until those terrorists are put on trial. Nadia's story and her message has a much broader aspect that embraces a community, religion and a common issue faced by minorities across the world. The book reflects and re-reflects the aspect of culture, its destruction, survival, evolution and origins. Nadia's story might seem to be exclusive to her or her community. It is not the first of its kind and won't be the last. The persecution the Yazidi community faced in Iraq is a repetition of history itself. Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonassohn, define genocide as "a form of one-sided mass killing in which a state or other authority intends to destroy a group defined by the perpetrator". The Yazidis might not be the last of the minorities tortured, killed and left homeless by the powerful majority. However, Nadia's work has succeeded to bring out the extreme realities of the grim situation to the limelight. Like the most celebrated and discussed Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl*, Nadia has also found a place in the history of literature and stands as a strong living example and flagbearer for the oppressed. Using religious practices as a motive and justification, ISIS has done the same with the Yazidi community. In the foreword to the book Amal Clooney says: "What Nadia was telling me about is Genocide. And Genocide doesn't happen by accident. You have to plan it". The Yazidis were considered as non-believers, and their enslavement and systematic rape, and the destruction of their religion were deemed essential and justified. Throughout her ordeal, ISIS militants would call her a "dirty unbeliever" and brag about conquering Yazidi women and wiping their religion from the earth.

The systemic silence of nations who propose themselves as global peacekeepers, international organisations and treaties for the welfare of women and minorities was troubling. Dan Brown writes in *Inferno* that "The darkest places in hell are reserved for those who maintain their silence at times of crisis" (221). Despite the suffering and spirit of Nadia to bring out her misery and loss, not much has been done till today. The ones responsible are not prosecuted and brought to justice. Nadia is only one among the thousands of Yazidi women and lakhs of helpless people across the world who are continually denied systemic support. The humanitarian aspect we view in her story is the most excruciating and painful one – to be ripped off from one's home, all the loved ones killed without mercy, tortured, raped and sold off. Nadia's descriptions of her ordeal and survival are reminiscent of Dante's description of hell in *Inferno*. In an age when nations and individuals brag and endorse freedom, liberty and equality, Nadia's story might initially seem out of this world, happening on some alien planet. But she is as human as we are and she used to live like anyone else on earth, in a little village called Kocho, in Iraq, having her fair share of pain and joy until the heartless and blind militants and their evil agendas turned her life upside down. International organisations and nations only stood witness as thousands were killed, raped and robbed of their very existence and identities. Nadia was among the few who managed to escape. The stories of thousands are still unheard and will remain unheard. It is impossible for any reader with a heart and soul to not read through her story without shedding a tear and empathising with her.

The Last Girl also poses the question of identity. A twenty six year old girl in a foreign nation, away from her homeland, tortured and raped for months, her mother and brothers killed, community and religion destroyed, even amidst all the fame and glory for being a fighter and Nobel Laureate, the crisis of identity strikes her as hard as anyone else. Her culture and religion have undergone irreparable damage. The religion was rooted in the demographic landscape of their motherland. Most of it is destroyed. What remains is scattered and will struggle to remain as it was. Evolution is inevitable. The questions of who we are and whether we belong here are likely to haunt the 'survivors' till their last breath.

The Personal/Political in the Yazidi Memoir

Nadia's story is not an isolated case. Her story, suffering and status quo are synonymous with those of thousands of Yazidi women of Kocho and Iraq. The inhuman genocide by ISIS reshaped, transformed and, to a point, demolished the culture, identity and ethnic existence of the Yazidi community. Nadia, her family and her village Kocho in Iraq are part of the Yazidi community. Kocho had about two hundred families, all of them Yazidi, and they were so close, as if they were one big family. Nadia says about her religion, "Yazidism is an ancient monotheistic religion, spread orally by holy men entrusted with our stories. I think of my religion as being an ancient tree with thousands of rings, each telling a story in the long history of Yazidis. Many of the stories, sadly, are tragedies" (Murad and Krajeski 6).

The Yazidi community was persecuted and attacked throughout their history, and the persecution by ISIS, which Nadia and her village faced, was the worst of them all. Nadia says,

Today there are only about one million Yazidis in the world. For as long as I have been alive – our religion is what defined us and held us together as a community. But it also made us targets of persecution by larger groups, from the Ottomans to Saddam's Baathists, who attacked us or tried to coerce us into pledging our loyalty to them. They degraded our religion, saying that we worshipped the devil or that we were dirty, and demanded that we renounce our faith. Yazidis survived generations of attacks that were intended to wipe us out, whether by killing us, forcing us to convert, or simply by pushing us from our land and taking everything we owned. Before 2014, outside powers had tried to destroy us seventy three times. We used to call the attacks against Yazidis *firman*, an Ottoman word, before we learned the word *genocide*. (6)

Nadia lived with her mother, brothers, sisters, half brothers, half sisters, in-laws, their children and other relatives in Kocho. Yazidis were one of the poorest communities in Iraq. They lived a poor life, struggling to meet ends and toiling in their farmland. However, their religion and love held them together and strong. However, they were burdened by centuries of distrust. The Muslim wedding guest from a nearby Muslim village refused to eat their food, no matter how politely they asked. This is one of the painful experiences of being estranged Nadia had growing up.

She led a normal life as any girl with a family living in any part of the world. However, on the 3rd of August, 2014, ISIS captured the town of Sinjar in Northern Iraq. Thereafter, Nadia's entire village lived in constant fear of ISIS and did not even venture out of their houses. However, everything changed on the 15th of August, 2014. Nadia was twenty one, and she herself did not even have the faintest idea what life had in store for her. She saw six of her brothers and her mother being murdered and buried in mass graves. The young women of her village were transported to ISIS-controlled cities as sex slaves, sold, bought and used like objects.

The Iraqi Kurdish fighters called *Peshmerga*, who they thought would protect Kocho, abandoned them without warning. Neighbouring villages sheltered extremists and denounced Christians and non-Sunni Muslims, and considered Yazidis to be *kuffar*, unbelievers worthy of killing. They were helpless and had nothing to do but abide. Their identity as Yazidis and belief in Tawusi Melek made them victims and targets of ISIS violence and persecution. Nadia says,

People say that Yazidism isn't a "real" religion because we have no official book like the Bible or the Koran. Because some of us don't shower on Wednesdays, the day that Tawusi Melek first came to earth, and our day of rest and prayer they say we are dirty, Because we pray toward the sun, we are called pagans. Our belief in

reincarnation, which helps us cope with death and keep our community together, is rejected by Muslims because none of the Abrahamic faiths believe in it. Some Yazidis avoid certain foods, like lettuce, and are mocked for their strange habits. Others don't wear blue because they see it as the colour of Tawusi Melek and too holy for a human, and even that choice is ridiculed. (28)

During the times of capture, torture and persecution, the ISIS militants purposefully focussed on hurting and destroying the religious sentiments, beliefs and practices Yazidis saw as sacred and vowed not to be broken. There was no mention of Yazidis in any Constitution, they didn't exist in Iraqi history books. Nadia says, "No one who had been through an Iraqi school would think that we deserved to have our religion protected, or that there was anything wrong or strange about endless war" (31).

The Sinjar city and Sinjar mountains were sacred to Yazidis. Before capturing Kocho, ISIS swept through the Sinjar city, destroyed small temples that stood on the bottom of the mountain, slaughtered hundreds of men, kidnapped young women and later took them to Mosul and Syria, and rounded up and executed older women and filled them in mass unmarked graves. The same atrocities happened in Kocho, too.

The rituals after death were very important in Yazidism, because afterlife, according to them, was a demanding place, where the dead can suffer like humans. The ISIS made sure the ones who were bound to die as well as the living endured utmost pain physically, mentally and spiritually, to break them and destroy their beliefs and religion. "It's important that Yazidis were buried properly and prayed for. Without these rituals, our souls may never be reborn. And our bodies may never go home to where they belong" (81).

"Every second with ISIS was part of a slow, painful death – of the body and of the soul" (119). The women were taken as slaves and they called them *sabaya* (*sabiyya* is singular) referring to the young women they would buy and sell as sex slaves. They were considered infidels, and according to the militant's interpretation of the Koran, raping a slave is not a sin. Women including Nadia were sold in markets, bought by ISIS officials, raped, tortured and bonded to the owner in a ceremony they call "marriage". "We were no longer human beings – we were *sabaya*" (123).

Attacking Sinjar and taking the girls was not a spontaneous decision taken by a greedy soldier. ISIS had planned it all and had propaganda, they even discussed *sabaya* in their glossy propaganda magazine, *Dabiq*. The girls were considered as mere property to be sold, bought and used to the owner's whims. ISIS sought to get rid of the "non-believers" through their actions. "ISIS knew how devastating it was for an unmarried Yazidi girl to convert to Islam and lose virginity, and they used our worst fears – that our community and religious leaders won't welcome us back – against us" (161).

The militants made sure the girls were broken, physically and mentally. It was on such an instance, when a militant who was keeping Nadia left her in a house unlocked, believing she won't try to escape, that she escaped and found refuge with a generous family. She was handed over from one owner to another, raped, beaten up, forced to dress up, punished for trying to escape, before being given to this man from whom she escaped. The family helped her, endangering their own lives, to get her out of the ISIS-controlled region to her brother Hezni in Kurdistan. A few of her loved ones also managed to escape and reach the refugee camp as a result of the combined effort of family members, government, middlemen, smugglers, drivers and document forgers. She soon learned that her mother was killed with other older women. Her home was destroyed, family scattered and ruined, her culture and religion threatened, her very existence and identity questioned. On her way to Erbil with Nasser, the kind man who helped her to safety, she had to reveal her story to the Kurdish Peshmerga at checkpoints. They took videos which they promised not to publish. However they broadcasted it. Although his face was blurred, Nasser's life too was endangered. "I was quickly learning that my story, which I still thought of as a personal tragedy, could be someone else's political tool, particularly in a place like Iraq. Words mean different things to different people, and your story can easily become a weapon to be turned on you" (265).

Unlike what the persecuted girls feared, the religious leaders welcomed them back to the community and wrote a dictum telling them that what happened to them was not their fault and they would be welcomed back to the community with open arms. “Still, nothing the Baba Sheikh said or did could make us feel normal again. We all felt broken” (295). Soon, Nadia was offered a chance to move to Germany. Her sister Dimal moved with her, but her other sister Adkee refused and stayed in Iraq. “Germany promised safety, school, a new life. But Iraq would always be home” (297). Nadia, and her family and community faced the crisis faced by refugees across the world, the question of identity and survival. With what made them who they were, and what destroyed them to dust, with no address to support their name, survival seemed like a torture in many ways. She envied the dead at times. The genocide, refugee situations, the emigrations, all led to a cultural shift in their lives and psyche. When countries like Germany and Canada opened up their borders to receive the Yazidis, they knew their lives would not be the same as in Iraq. They would no longer be the same Yazidis of Sinjar. They were bound to change, adapt and evolve to different cultural, ethnic and social backgrounds. “I was only one of hundreds of thousands of Yazidi victims. My community was scattered, living as refugees inside and outside of Iraq” (299). Survival was only in terms of continuing to be alive. ISIS did succeed to do what they plotted to do – to scatter and destabilise, to uproot Yazidis. Life in the new nations was not the same for all. While a few found it manageable to cope with the new life, others struggled in pain.

Germans had welcomed us to their country; I heard stories of ordinary citizens greeting the trains and airplanes carrying fleeing Syrians and Iraqis. In Germany, we were hopeful that we could become a part of society and not just live on the edge of it. It was harder for Yazidis in other countries. Some refugees arrived in places where it was clear they weren’t wanted, no matter what kind of horrors they were escaping. Other Yazidis were trapped in Iraq, desperate for the opportunity to leave, and that waiting was another kind of suffering. Some countries decided to keep refugees out altogether, which made me furious. (301)

The 2014 ISIS genocide marks the latest of the *firmons* against the Yazidis. It has reshaped and transformed how the world and they themselves view Yazidism. Nadia’s book brought out the pain and made the whole world aware of the Yazidi crisis. Life away from their homes, in strange lands, and in different conditions will change them, change their lives dramatically. The people around, nature, society and its setup, and governmental policies play a crucial role in shaping personal cultures and also that of a particular community. Now, being scattered in different parts, being homeless and refugees in their own country, the Yazidi community underwent a cultural shift which will involve changes in their state of being, that too differed and particular to each individual and their nation. The experiences of persecution, too, were not the same for all and how they perceived their suffering too was not the same. All this culminates in a major shift in culture in the Yazidi community and life.

Today, over 200,000 Yazidis are still internally displaced across Iraq’s northern Kurdistan region and more than 2,700 women and children remain in ISIS captivity. With so much happening to the people of their own, the Yazidis live an insecure life. Wherever they are, they are being questioned by themselves. Nadia says, “Every Yazidi tries to cope with the mental and physical trauma of what they have been through and works to keep our community intact” (304). Even with all the spirit and strength, the loss of home and the label of a refugee in a strange land haunts them. She says, “As lucky as I am to stay in Germany, I can’t help but envy those who stayed behind in Iraq. My siblings are closer to home, eating the Iraqi food I miss so much and living next to people they know, not strangers” (305). At the end of the day, no place ever feels like home.

4. OBSERVATIONS

In the foreword to the book, Amal Clooney says, “Those who thought that through their cruelty they would silence her were wrong. Nadia Murad’s spirit is not broken, and her voice will not be muted. Instead, through this book, her voice is louder than ever” (xi). Through her narrative, she brought out the persecutions her community has faced and is still facing. A change in their cultural landscape evolves parallel to her story and experience. Apart from being a strong voice against the atrocities the Yazidi community faced, the book marks a crucial point in the history of the community that will change them forever. Thousands are still in captivity, living an inhuman life as slaves. Not everyone was successful like Nadia in creating new and meaningful identities of

one's own. The Yazidi genocide remains a black mark in the history of mankind and humanity. Its effects are long drawn and are definite to an extent to future Yazidi generations scattered across the world.

5. SCOPE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Only one work has been chosen for the analysis of cultural trauma. There is scope for further studies by focusing on more works.

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