

Exploring the Memory, Trauma and Survival of a Yazidi Girl in Nadia Murad's *The Last Girl*

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Abstract: The people of Iraq have witnessed the horrors of war and the trauma of violence. Trauma reverberates throughout life on both the body and the mind. Witnessing multiple traumatic events such as genocide, disappearance and loss of family members, abduction, torture, humiliation, rape, and human trafficking leaves un-healing wounds on the human psyche. Nadia Murad, the winner of the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize for her book *The Last Girl: My Story of Captivity and My Fight against the Islamic State*, grapples with the physical and mental aftershocks of extreme trauma. This autobiography is not just a story of a single woman who suffers as a sex slave at the hands of the ISIS militants but is evidence of the incessant difficulties that the Yazidi people have faced for ages. Published in 2017, the text reveals the atrocities that the perpetrators of ISIS fundamentalists leashed upon the people belonging to the Yazidi community. Forced into the human trafficking system, Murad experiences inhuman treatment when she is “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” (Murad 161). The objective of this paper is to unravel the trauma of the protagonist by using relevant trauma theories.

Keywords: Abduction, Rape, Sex Slave, Survival, Trauma, Violence

The word ‘trauma’ has its origin in the ancient Greek language, implying ‘wound’. The Greeks used this term only to point towards physical wounds; however, nowadays, this term has evolved, and it means psychological as well as emotional wounds. Herbert Page (1862-1927) and John Ericksen (1818-1896) first described the effects of trauma on humans. Initially, the consequences of trauma were mainly associated with the victims of railway accidents and were called “railway spines” (Keller

1597). The concept of trauma as physical injury (or wound) then extended its scope and included mental ailments resulting from the experiences of fear. Three different types of traumas have been identified since the Victorian age. Psychic trauma during the Victorian age, war trauma after the First World War and sexual trauma in the modern age were experienced by people.

Bonnie Burstow (1945-2020), in the paper titled “Towards a Radical Understanding of Trauma and Trauma Work”, says that “Trauma is not a disorder but a reaction to a kind of wound. It is a reaction to profoundly injurious events and situations in the real world and, indeed, to a world in which people are routinely wounded” (1293). It is caused due to any accident that a person finds emotionally or physically harmful, threatening and debilitating. Trauma can be a result of an unhappy childhood, exile, terror, war, sexual abuse, abduction, rape, or even death of somebody. Experiences of trauma can initiate strong physical and emotional reactions, which can have a long-lasting effect after the event. Ruth Leys (b. 1939), in her book *Trauma: A Genealogy* (2000), defines trauma as “an experience that immersed the victim in the traumatic scene so profoundly that it precluded the kind of specular distance necessary for cognitive knowledge of what happened” (9).

Trauma, according to Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), is seen as an incursion of excitations. It is a kind of breach or puncture. Freud states that the word trauma refers mainly to a mental injury rather than a physical injury. Trauma acts as a double wound (physical and psychological). In his book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1961), Freud describes trauma as:

any excitations from the outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield. There is no longer any possibility of preventing the mental apparatus from being flooded with large amounts of stimulus, and another problem arises instead— the problem of mastering the amounts of stimulus which have broken in and of binding them, in the psychical sense, so that they can then be disposed of. (23-24)

Freud believes that the ego acts as a shield or a layer that protects the psyche from external stimuli. When this protective layer breaks, there is an inflow of many excitations, which results in the circulation of energy that needs to be reduced to restore the pleasure principle. This breaking of the

protective layer results in a strong feeling of fear, and this fear is termed 'neurosis' by Freud. When a person cannot deal with these feelings of fear and worry, the ego develops a pathological defence, which is called 'repression.' For Freud, trauma acts as a triggering factor in neurosis, and he terms it as "traumatic neurosis." Traumatic neurosis is a psychological disturbance which arises after an intense emotional shock. Siegfried Zepf and Florian D. Zepf, in their paper titled "Trauma and Traumatic Neurosis: Freud's Concepts Revisited" (2008), define traumatic neurosis as "the psychological consequences of an immediate reaction to the shock and/or somatic disturbance such as railway collisions, landslides and similar events" (89).

Freud also argues that trauma is connected to "repetition compulsion." He opines that, basically, people suffer from trauma due to reminiscences or memories of traumatic events. It is the memory which makes an event hysterical. He views trauma as a supporting factor for neurosis. Even in his *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), he points out that the victims of trauma unconsciously tend to recreate scenes or conditions of their trauma. This happens only because the person cannot respond to the traumatic events because of their intensity. Freud further states that "the dreams occurring during traumatic neurosis have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright" (7).

Cathy Caruth's (b. 1995) origination of the concept of trauma is drawn from Freud's psychoanalysis. In her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996), she focuses on the components of memory while defining trauma. For Caruth, trauma is a structural phenomenon. She describes it as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucination and other intrusive phenomena" (11). She delves deep into the symptoms of trauma and reaches the conclusion that the inseparability of trauma is tied to neurological function. She argues that trauma "is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature-the way it was precisely not known in the first instance-returns to haunt the survivor later on" (4).

Traumatic events are shocking and can emotionally affect an individual. In war zones, people get exposed to various traumatic events. Such exposure to traumatic events can result in mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. Both men and women suffer during wartime, but arguably, women and young girls are subjected to more cruel forms of sexual violence, such as rape, sexual slavery, and forced prostitution. Raping of women and gang rapes by the soldiers is a very common practice in the war zones. It is used as a weapon during the time of war. It is not an act arising out of sexual need, but a woman is raped in order to dominate or to show her lack of control over her body and sexuality. Moreover, the rape of a woman belonging to a different religion (as was the case during Partition) is seen as an attack on the community as she embodies honour. Her rape stigmatised the entire community. Rape results in devastating effects on familial, psychological, physical, and social space, including genital and non-genital injuries experienced by women. Victims of rape and forced prostitution suffer from long-term psychological effects. Rape, as Susan Brownmiller points “is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep women in the state of fear” (6). Sexual violence is used as a means by the ISIS militants to spread fear and to compel people to leave an area. They rape women to unleash terror and force them to convert into jihadists after embracing the extreme form of Islam. Most of the women who are raped suffer from Rape Trauma Syndrome. This term was coined by Lynde Lytle Holmstrom and Ann Wolbert Burgess in 1974 to describe the behavioural and psychological reactions of rape. The stress disorder that these victims undergo manifests itself in multiple ways. Paul Giannelli, in his article “Rape Trauma Syndrome” (1997), defines these disorders as “fear and anxiety, depression, social maladjustment, and sexual dysfunction” (272).

Nadia Murad (b.1993), an Iraqi human rights activist who received the Nobel Peace Prize for her autobiographical novel *The Last Girl: My Story of Captivity and My Fight against the Islamic States* (2018), is a victim of abduction, rape, forced prostitution and sex slavery. She shares her personal and collective experience of the Iraqi Yazidi women. She is a young woman who has

witnessed and endured the trauma of unbelievable humiliation, embarrassment, and cruelty because of her enslavement by ISIS. She describes the psychological trauma which she undergoes during the three months of her capture. Her life turns upside down as she is forced to witness the brutal murder of her brothers. Her life becomes even more traumatic as she is traded from one terrorist to another. She writes, “Every second with the ISIS was part of slow, painful death...of the body and the soul” (119).

Belonging to a small ethnic, religious minority group known as Yazidi, Nadia and other women of her community are considered as infidels. These women are oppressed and marginalized in different ways; they are not respected in their families as well as society. Even before the attack by the militants, the Yazidi women did not lead a good life. They are denied equal rights even in their own families and in the Yazidi society. Women are not supposed to say anything against their husbands. Nadia’s mother was her father’s second wife, as his first wife had died, and he wanted to have another woman to take care of his children. Later, her father marries for the third time, and her mother has no other choice but to accept her co-wife. Even in *The Pakistani Bride* (1990), Bapsi Sidhwa, through the portrayal of Zaitoon, shows that women in Islamic society are considered the property of men. When her husband Sakhi touches Zaitoon on their wedding night, she feels uncomfortable and hesitates; Sakhi at this point says, “You are my lady. I will explain you to follow me!” (172-173).

Nadia Murad also underscores the fact that women in Islamic societies do not even have any rights to their children. She writes, “Divorce took my sister Dimal’s children away. In Yazidi society, as in the rest of the Iraq, women have fewer rights when a marriage ends, no matter what happened to end it” (230). Women are restricted to the households, and men hold the powerful position in society. Murad continues, “Any woman in Iraq, no matter her religion, had to struggle for everything. Seats in parliament, reproductive rights, and positions at these were the results of battles. Men were content to stay in power, so power had to be taken from them by strong women” (168). Looking at texts such as *Stoning of Soraya M.* (1990) by Freidoune Sahebjam, *Daughters of Arabia* (2004) by

Jean Sasson, and *For the Love of a Son* (2010) by Jean Sasson, it is clear that men completely control the lives of women in Islam. Women's lack of control over their own bodies and sexuality is displayed when they are raped by men.

The suffering of the Yazidi women doubles after the ISIS militants attack them. On the one hand, they are subjugated on the basis of gender; on the other, they are discriminated against on the basis of their identity as Yazidis. They are not even treated as human beings. The ISIS militants have their own interpretation of the 'Koran' according to which they could rape Yazidi women as raping a slave woman is not a sin. Nadia recalls and narrates how one of the militants shouted at her, "You are an infidel, a sabiyya, and you belong to the Islamic State now, so get used to it now" (127). Nadia remembers how she turned numb with pain when she was raped for the first time. She says, "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 could kill us" (176). These incidents of rape and sexual slavery are buried deep down in Nadia's memory. This relationship between memory and mind becomes very important when it comes to discussing sexual violence against women. Laurence defines memory in the context of trauma as "anything but a photographic record of experience; it is a roadway full of potholes, badly in need of repair worked day and night by revisionist crews. What is registered is highly selective and thoroughly transformed by interpretation and semantic encoding at the moment of experience" (Kirmayar 167). Traumatic memories are thus open to reconstruction of events.

Another traumatic event that is stored in Nadia's memory is that women are not only raped but are also considered commodities or property and are sold and gifted to the militants. Women are sexually objectified and treated as objects to be valued for their use by others. Sandra Lee Bartky (1935-2016), in her book *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (1990), explains that "Sexual objectification occurs when a woman's body or body parts are singled out and separated from her as a person and she is viewed primarily as a physical object of male sexual desire" (36). They are swapped among these militants. Nadia captures the pain in the following words:

“We would be bought at the market, or given as a gift to a new recruit or a high . . . we were desirable enough and not yet dead” (161).

The ISIS militants use female bodies to gratify their lust. Adriana Cavarero (b.1947), an Italian philosopher and feminist thinker, comments, “A suffering body occupies the centre of the scene, a body reduced to a totally available object... and life, the former between the wound and healing care” (31). Women are tortured to such an extent that they are forced to bear their pain silently. When the militants rape them brutally, they lie down like senseless objects. They are subjected to even more brutal behaviour if they shout or if they resist against the militants.

Nadia details the way she is treated while enslaved. She says, “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 to just 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). She portrays how young girls are treated as objects by the militants. The girls are forcefully taken in the large buses. Even while travelling, they cannot feel relaxed. Nadia shares how “the militants touched [them] anywhere they wanted, running their hands over [their] breasts and legs as if they were animals” (137). A militant named Abu Batat abuses the girls in the bus and threatens that if they shout or scream, then he will kill them. Nadia reveals how the lives of women and young girls turn into a living nightmare after being abducted. She narrates, “It was clear by now that I didn’t belong to the skinny militant Hajji Salman or to any particular man . . . This was my life now” (192).

Yazidi girls and young women lose their identity as they are transported and sold to different parts of Iraq and Syria. They are even gifted to rich sheikhs and high-ranking officials. The militants use physical violence as a means to silence these women. She shares one of her several travails where Nafah, an ISIS militant, tortures her. “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).

Nadia reveals the mental and physical assault that the women are subjected to. She narrates an incident where “One girl has her hands and legs tied when her captor raped her and another was raped when she slept” (195). Women used to smear ash on their faces so that they looked ugly and men do not get attracted towards them. They scratch their bodies to make themselves unattractive to the male captors. The girls even “penetrate [themselves] with the bottle to no longer be a virgin” (162) as the captors prefer raping virgin girls. Women become very helpless in the hands of the militants as they do not have the voice of their own in their lives. After being raped, women become so traumatised that they start blaming themselves and start looking down upon themselves for whatever is going on in their lives. Such self-castigating tendencies belittle them in their own eyes, thus giving a strong jolt to their dignity as humans. They are even scared of looking at themselves in the mirror. “Inside the bathroom, I splashed some water on my face and arms. A mirror hung over the sink, but I kept my gaze downward. I couldn’t look at myself. I suspected that I already wouldn’t recognise the girl who looked back” (132-133). They are forced to obey the orders of the militants and are not allowed to question them. These militants even forced the slave women to convert their religion.

Nadia gives a heart-touching depiction of her life while she was living with Haji Salman. He orders her to stay with him as his wife, cook for him, clean his house, put on dresses, and wear makeup. She follows all his instructions, but he never calls her his wife instead, he calls her a ‘sabayya’ (a sex slave). She even records the experiences of her niece Katherine, who is also tortured by the militants. Katherine is taken over by Dr. Islam and is forced to take pictures with him and she always has a pleasant smile on her face. The militants even restricted women, and they had to follow a particular dress code. “All the women were completely covered in black abayas and niqabs. ISIS had made it illegal for a woman to leave home uncovered or alone, so they floated through the streets, almost invisible” (133).

Yazidi women are not only ill-treated by the Islamic State militants but are also emotionally abused, starved and beaten by the ‘true wives’ of the militants as they are jealous of these ‘sabayas’. Murad calls these ‘true wives’ as “female terrorists” (154) as they are responsible for “taking starring

roles” in the physical and mental abuse of the innocent Yazidi women. Yazidi women have such traumatic experiences that they wish to die. Some of them attempt to “light themselves on fire” (129), and some even try to commit suicide “by cutting through their veins in their wrists” (162).

All the victims and the survivors react differently to the traumatic incidents that they experience. Unlike other Yazidi women, Nadia wages a war against the horrific traumatic events and manages to overcome all the negative effects of physical and sexual assault. The Yazidi women are silenced as the militants instill fear in them that even if they escape and return to their own people, they won't be accepted there as well. Hajji Salman warns Nadia, “Even if you make it home, your father or your uncle will kill you. You are no longer a virgin, and you are a Muslim” (176). Despite so many threats from the militants, Nadia makes an attempt to escape but unfortunately is caught by the guards and is then gang raped until she becomes unconscious. According to Michel Foucault (1926-1984), memory is considered as an act of resistance and Nadia here is an example who uses her memory to act against the militants. Foucault points out that “Memory is a very important factor in struggle. If one controls people's memory, one controls their dynamism, experiences and their knowledge of previous struggle” (22). Even after enduring so much, she does not give up and gathers courage when she gets a chance to escape again. Naseer, a Sunni man helps Nadia flee to Kurdistan. Both of them start off with a heart stopping journey full of life threats but finally enter into a safe territory. After making a successful attempt to escape, Nadia chooses not to remain silent and dares to speak the unspeakable.

Nadia struggles for her existence and becomes an example of what Charles Darwin (1809-1882) terms as ‘the survival of the fittest’ in his book titled *On the Origin of Species* (1859). Narrating the incidents from the attack by the ISIS, followed by regular rapes and torture, Nadia shows how she gradually adapts to her new living conditions during enslavement and the obstacles that she overcomes until she manages to escape. Kenneth Kalmer (b. 1947) in his book *Surviving the Extremes: A Doctor's Journey to the Limits of Human Endurance* (2004) points out that the “the tools of survival lie in a person's brain” (275). Hope of surviving while accepting the reality of the situation

helps Nadia come out of the clutches of the militants. Her tenacity and resilience result into her safe escape.

In her book *Trauma and Recovery* (1995), Judith Hermann (b.1970) discusses about three different stages of the recovery of the traumatic patients. “The central task of the first stage is the establishment of safety; the central task of the second stage is the remembrance and mourning. The central part of the third stage is reconnection with the ordinary life” (155). Nadia is fortunate enough that she experiences social safety when Baba Sheikh commands the Yazidis not to blame the women for being raped and asks them to behave with kindness and empathy with the returning victims. Secondly, Nadia also mourns over the death of her loved ones and on her own tragedy which according to Herman is the second stage of the recovery of a patient from trauma. Following this, Nadia also tries to reconnect with her ordinary life.

Nadia does not only find her voice but she becomes the voice of every woman who has been abused, every Yazidi who is a victim of genocide and every refugee who is left behind. Nadia’s story is what Milan Kundera calls “The struggle of [wo]man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting” (3) in his book titled *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1980). She faces all the hardships, endures emotional trauma, and ultimately overcomes all the obstacles in her life. “Nadia’s spirit is not broken, and her voice will not be muted. Instead, through this book, her voice is louder than ever” (Clooney xi). Being the victim of abduction, repeated rapes, and sexual slavery, the writer has an authentic voice. Being displaced, traumatised, motherless, and migrant, Nadia becomes a representative of encouragement and emancipation for the girls and women who have been raped, abused, and imprisoned by the IS militants. Nadia proves Angela Saini is right when she writes: “Beneath our skin, women bubble with the source of power that even science has yet to fully understand. We are better survivors than men” (web. n,pag). Women are more powerful than men when it comes to life expectancy, longevity, and fighting trauma. Murad in a public speech in Geneva says that “I want to be the Last Girl in the world with a story like mine” (306). She is an extraordinary woman who rises like a phoenix and refuses to accept her circumstances.

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