



Oppression of Women in Nadia Murad's Memoir *The Last Girl*

Sruthy Prakash

Guest Lecturer CMS College Kottayam Kerala, India

Email: sruthyprakash357@gmail.com

Received: 06 May 2022; Received in revised form: 01 Jun 2022; Accepted: 06 Jun 2022; Available online: 12 Jun 2022

©2022 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— *The project is entitled Oppression of women in Nadia Murad's memoir The Last Girl. The work is published in November 2017. In the book, she describes how she was captured and enslaved by Islamic state militants during the Second Iraqi civil war. The project tries to analyze the oppression of Iraqi women, especially Yazidi women in the backdrop of terrorism with feminist theory. The analysis is undertaken in three chapters. The first session is a brief introduction into the work, the author and the situation of Yazidi women portrayed in the work. The second session gives an overview of feminism and to give the indicators of women's oppression, discrimination and sexual objectification in the work to prove that oppression of women still persists. And the third session is the conclusion.*

Keywords— *Feminism, Objectification, Patriarchy, Rape.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Nadia Murad Basee Taha, a renowned human rights activist was born in 1993 in the small Yazidi village of Kocho in Sinjar District in northern Iraq as the youngest of a big family. There were about two hundred Yazidi families in the village. Yazidis are an ethnic minority group and Yazidism, according to Murad, is “an ancient tree with thousands of rings, each telling a story in the long history of Yazidis”(6). They were primarily farmers. They lived by cattle rearing and cultivation. She vividly portrays the close association of her people with nature and also the mystic culture of Yazidi community. Sinjar Mountain is said to be the protector of Yazidis for a long time. Being born and raised as a Yazidi, she grew up hearing the stories of many genocides her people faced throughout history, but she never imagined she would witness one. She enjoyed a peaceful life in her childhood, in her small village, loving family and tight knit Yazidi community. From her childhood, she wanted to become a history teacher or start a parlor. But all her dreams shattered in August 2014, when the Islamic State began to take control of northern Iraq. After their village leader

clearly announced that they would not convert to Islam, they surrounded the Yazidi community in the village. They degraded their religion claiming that they worshipped the devil, are dirty and so have to renounce their faith. Kochos men were rounded up, shot and buried in mass graves, while their mothers, sisters, wives and young sons helplessly watched them from a schoolhouse window before being transported to a more terrible situation. They killed around 600 people. Older women were later murdered, young boys were forced into IS, the younger women were kidnapped by these militants and were sold as sex slaves, who are called as *sabayyas*, they were held captive, tortured and raped by several militants. Six of her brothers were killed by the militants. Later her mother was also murdered and their bodies swept into mass graves.

These men considered Yazidis to be kuffar, unbelievers worth of killing. In the same year, she was kidnapped by ISIS, held for three months, traded from one ISIS fighter to another. She was barely 21 years old, but militants showed no mercy. There she was forced to convert to Islam. She was kept as a slave in the city of Mosul and brutally raped several times. She was sold

repeatedly for sex as part of IS slave trade. When she was in Al- Hamdaniya District, she made an unsuccessful attempt to escape. She was brutally raped by several men and relocated to an ISIS checkpoint. Later, she managed to escape from them with the help of a Muslim family, who showed enormous courage to save her life by risking their own lives. She successfully entered into Iraqi Kurdistan and found refuge in camps with other Yazidis. In early 2015, Murad went as a refugee to Germany and later that year, she began to campaign, to raise voice against human trafficking. She continued to work for thousands of women, who are still in the hands of ISIS. She has openly spoke about every unpleasant situation in her life to the public, especially the sexual and physical assault and represent herself as a strong pillar against the oppressors.

Since 2015, along with Yazda, a Yazidi rights organization, she is currently working to bring the Islamic State before the International Criminal Court, on charges of genocide and crimes against humanity. She has also founded an organization named Nadia's Initiative, to help the victims of sexual abuse and human trafficking to get back to a normal life. She has been honoured with Vaclav Havel Human Rights Prize by the Council of Europe in 2016 and awarded Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought by the European Parliament. She is the UN's Ambassador for the Dignity of Survivors of Human Trafficking. In 2018, she received the Nobel Peace Prize for her efforts to end the use of sexual enslavement as a weapon of war. She is the first Iraqi as well as Yazidi to be awarded a Nobel Prize. She has also won the Clinton Global Citizen Award, Peace Prize from the United Nations Association of Spain, and was selected as 2016 Woman of the Year by Glamour Magazine. Her life story has been made into a movie named "On Her Shoulders" by Alexandria Bombach, a famous cinematographer and director from Sante Fe, New Mexico. The film was screened at the 2018 Sundance Film Festival, where she won the Best Director Award in US Documentary Competition.

The Last Girl is all about the brutality of Islamic State militants over the Yazidis and their efforts to erase Yazidism from the surface of earth. It is a painful story, of a life shattered all on a sudden that left Murad with little hope of freedom. But it inspired her to visualize a change in the world—with the powerful weapon of her own story, to fight against the militants. It is the story of a woman, who has showed enormous courage to openly speak about the most painful incidents that has happened in her life to the world. Murad as a survivor of genocide and human trafficking, tries to be the voice of every Yazidi women, who were mentally and physically tortured. She stands as a spokesperson for the rights of women. Though she has to face a lot of atrocities in her life, she overcomes it and

wishes to spread the light of hope among the oppressed ones. She wishes to be the last girl on earth to be exposed to extreme cruelty. With vivid detail and heartbreaking emotion, she portrays not only her own unimaginable tragedy but also the plight of an entire community, whose plight is ignored by the rest of the world. Murad hopes that her book will reach a wider audience than her speech before the UN.

Jenna Krajesky, a journalist based in New York is the co-author of the book. The work is published in 2017 with the help of Amal Clooney, the human rights lawyer and humanitarian activist who has penned the foreword to this work. She made the comment that "Those who thought that by their cruelty, they could 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" (Murad2). This heart touching memoir depicts, how Islamic States use sexual violence as a weapon of war. It also talks about how Yazidi women were ill-treated and sold like commodities in market. The incidents in her life reveals, how sexually slavery curtailed freedom of women society. Many people in the world have showed the courage to speak against powerful forces that oppresses people belonging to the lower strata of the society. Murad has showed immense courage to openly express the physical and sexual assault, she has to face in her life. This is a testimony that is able to make changes in the society.

II. A FEMINIST READING OF THE LAST GIRL

Though women constitute almost half of the population of the world, their issues are centuries old. Oppression of women can be seen everywhere in various forms. Oppression means treating people in a cruel and unfair way. Feminism evolves as a revolt against the injustice-social, economic and political to women. Feminists began to find out new ways to analyze this oppression of women and often comes to a conclusion, that there were both insidious and overt forces in the society that oppressed women. These writers relies on the works of earlier authors who had analyzed the oppression including Simon de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) and Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). There were also many male writers, who addressed the issues of women in their works like John Start Mill in *The Subjection of Women* and Frederick Engels in *The Origin of Women's Oppression*.

The term "feminism" was derived from The Latin word "femina" meaning "woman" and was used with regard to the issues of equality and Women's Rights

Movement. It is a movement which began in West and later spread to other parts of the world. "The women's movement of 1960s was not, of course the start of feminism. Rather, it was a renewal of an old tradition of thought and action already possessing its classic books which had diagnosed the problem of women's inequality in society" (Barry 121). It's a movement influenced by the ideas postulated and popularized by thinkers and authors like Alice Walker, Naomi Little bear, Judith Felterbey, Michele Wallace, Lillian Smith, Elaine Showalter, Simon de Beauvoir, Kate Millet and others.

Feminism is a set of ideologies as well as a collection of movements that aimed at defending and establishing equal social, economic and political rights for women. These rights include women's access to education, employment etc. There is a long history about the struggles that the women have undergone to realize their dreams. Feminist history can be split into three waves. The first wave feminism occurring in the late 19th and early 20th century, was mainly concerned with women's voting rights, marital rights, property rights, abortion rights, education and employment. The second wave feminism began in the early 1960s and lasted till the late 1980s. The second wave at its height in the 1960s and 1970s were devoted to the formulation and dissemination of an ideology that would place feminism in the context of dominant discourses. Consciousness raising was also a significant part of this phase. Betty Friedan is a key player in second wave feminism. In her book, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), she criticizes the idea that women could find only through childbearing and homemaking" (Drucker, *The three waves of feminism*). The third wave, beginning in 1990s, is a continuation or reaction to the second wave. A post structuralist interpretation of gender and sexuality is central too much of third waves ideology. This ideology seeks to challenge the second wave overemphasized experiences of upper middle class white women.

"Feminist theory argues that the representation of women as weak, docile, innocent, seductive or irrational-sentimental is rooted in and influences actual social conditions, where she does not have power, is treated as a sex object or a procreating machine, has fewer financial and political rights and is abused" (Nayar83). Feminist theory helps to identify all the cultural structures that helps in the retention of this inequality between men and women. This theory aims to understand gender inequality and focuses on gender politics, power relations and sexuality.

"Feminist literary criticism of today is actually the direct product of 'women's liberation movement' of the 1960s. This movement was literary from the start, in the

sense that it realized the significance of the images of women promulgated by literature, and saw it as vital to combat them and question their authority and coherence. The feminist criticism in 1970s, aimed at exposing the mechanisms of patriarchy, that is the cultural mind set in men and women, which perpetuated sexual inequality" (Barry 121-122). Patriarchy is responsible for constructing such a social system which ascribes a particular sexual status, role and temperament for each gender, hence ensuring the sex or gender hierarchy. As a result, masculine traits are attributed to dominant social roles, while "feminine" is associated with submission and dependency. As Simon de Beauvoir puts it,

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.... It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature... which is described as feminine. By this cultural process, the masculine in our culture has come to be widely identified as active, dominating, adventurous, rational, creative; the feminine by systemic opposition to such traits, has come to be identified as passive, acquiescent, timid" (qtd in Abrahams, Geoffrey 125).

Today, many people feel that feminism has won the war by achieving women equality with men in all walks of life- political, social, economic etc. But, the fact is that feminist movement is still going quiet strong all over the world which means that women are still oppressed. Nadia Murad's *The Last Girl* is a book that puts forth the oppression of Yazidi women in the light of terrorism. Gender based violence has increased in Iraq. Gender stereotypes has been reinforced and adopted strict border control rules. Thus life became most miserable for these women.

Sexual objectification of female body is actually a way of subordinating women, which is reflected in the work. Objectification is treating a person as an object for sexual desire. It is actually a kind of dehumanization. Murad tells that militants treated the young girls like objects. They were taken in large buses. Even while travelling, they could not feel relaxed. Their bodies were places where these barbarians can visit as they wish. A militant named Abu Batat used it as an opportunity to find pleasure. He came towards Murad and puts his hand down the front of her dress and grabbed her breast hard to hurt her. They were threatened that if they would scream and try to resist them, they will be killed. For them, every moment under ISIS was part of a slow death. She says that she started dying at the moment at which Abu Batat abused her inside the bus. This was the fate of all the girls in the bus. When she could not bear the insult any longer, she screamed and all the other girls screamed.

Just as there is an exchange of objects, there is an exchange of women also. This led to the subordination of women. Thousands of Yazidis were kidnapped from their homes and transported to different parts of Iraq and Syria. They were gifted to the high ranking officials and sheiks. Their identity was lost. "They were not even considered as human beings. They were only regarded as *sabayya*, who could be sold and bought as sex slaves." Women were asked to wax themselves, made to wear provocative dresses and apply proper make-up, as they appeared before men. She speaks about her own experience with Haji Salman. Silencing of women is another way of oppression. They were threatened to be killed or molested if they speak against them. In this memoir, we can see that the young girls were forced to suppress their emotions. There are many instances where women are silenced. There is a situation where a woman screams and expresses her rage towards the militants. Then, a militant came towards her and said, "Stop crying or else I will kill you" (112). Another instance is when Murad screams when Abu Batat grabbed her breast. When she complained about Abu's actions to Nafah, another militant, he told her that "But you have no choice. You are here to be *sabayya* and you will do exactly what we say" (122). He threatened them that if any of them would scream, the situation would be much worse. As they reached the destination, they started torturing the helpless women.

They use physical violence to silence women and to establish their power and authority. Nafah lit a cigarette into her shoulder and pressed it down her dress until she was severely hurt. She tried not to scream because she knows that if she screams, she would be punished. Women were mentally and physically assaulted. Murad writes about the physical violence she was subjected to. "He hit me when he was displeased with the way I cleaned the house, when he was angry about something from the work. If I cried or kept my eyes closed while he raped me". Men were not powerful without these kinds of violence. They were protected and supported by law. These laws enabled them to have supremacy over their women and children. These innocent women tried to save themselves by smearing ashes on their faces to appear less attractive to the male captors. Many girls scratched their bodies in order to make themselves unattractive that they could escape from the lustful eyes. Here, we could see the helplessness of women in the hands of men who does not have a voice in their life

Women are deprived of freedom and power. Freedom is the birthright of every human being. Freedom is the source of many other rights including right to protect, control and determine the disposition of one's

body and self in relation, for example, to work, sexuality; to practice one's religion; to express one's opinion and so on. Sexual slavery stands as an antithesis of freedom of women. Sexual slavery is actually, attaching the right of authority over one or two persons with the intention of utilizing for the owner's personal benefits. They have no freedom to take decisions in their life. The girls were forced to be part of ISIS slave trade. They were forced to obey the orders of the militants and not to question them. "How many days will I be here?" I asked the man. "I have family members in the other center. Can I be with them?" They barely looked at me, and Abu Muawaya answered, "He said calmly". You are a *sabayya*. You don't give orders—you take them? " (183). Their religion was also snatched away from them and were forcefully converted to Islam.

Sexual humiliation and mutilation, forced prostitution, rape or forced pregnancy are among the gender specific violence occurring during wars. Historically, rape has been the most widespread form of gender specific violence. They used rape as a weapon of war. They can easily unnerve them because they were taught not to have sexual intercourse before marriage. They are held as captives in prisons and hotels and systematically raped. Yazidi girls were considered as infidels according to the militant's interpretation of Quran, raping a slave is not a sin at all (123)". "One girl has her hands and legs tied when her captor raped her and another was raped for the first time while she slept (195)". Another woman, who was raped inside a car. When the victimizer this woman to his house, he made her dye her hair blond and pluck her eyebrows and behave as if she was his wife. One night, Nadia was raped brutally abused by a group of men until she was unconscious.

Women were oppressed to the ground level. They were sexually abused and threatened that their religion would outcast them. Murad gives heart touching depiction of her life with Haji Salman. She stayed with him four or five nights. He rape her every day, whenever he got time. He ordered her to cook food, clean the house, wear dress, and put make up, to pray and so on. He also commands her to behave like his wife. She went into all the actions with him as a wife, but he never calls her his wife, but *sabayya*. He humiliated as often as he could, spreading honey on his toes and making her lick it off. She was valuable to them as a *sabayya*. They would not let her devoid of food. She was given food so that they can use her to satisfy their sexual desires. She also gives her niece's experiences to bring out militants domination over women. Her niece, Katherine was taken over by Dr. Islam. He forced her to take photos with him. He insists her to be happy and always appear with a pleasant smile. She tried

to smile because of her fear.

Strict restrictions were imposed on them. In ISIS controlled places, women were forced to follow a 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). This was a way of inferiorising women. When they go out, they were always guarded by men. They banned cigarettes, television, and radio and so on.

The forced marriages were also a practice that enabled them to establish their authority over women. These marriages curtailed the freedom and dignity of women. Through these marriages, they were able to bring women completely under their control. In the book, we get the image of a courthouse, where women were declared as the possession of men without their consent. The young girls were lined up, made to fill up the documents that would help them to know which women were owned by which militants. Later, a judge would declare each one of them as the property of man. In her own case the judge told Haji Salman "She is your *sabayya* now. Do with her what you like" (151). "This was actually a contract for rape which they called as marriage" (150). "*Sabayyas* can be given as gifts and sold at the whim of the owner, "for they are merely property, "The Islamic State pamphlet reads (140)".

Psychological torture is more cruel form of oppression than physical torture. The militants want to hurt the sentiments of mothers and daughters and to unnerve them mentally. For this, the militants started separating young girls from their mothers which Murad painfully brings out in the work. She describes how inhumanly she and her niece Katherine was separated from her mother. She writes, "come one he said, but I didn't respond. He pulled harder and I looked away. He shoved his hands under my armpits and picked me off the floor, tearing me away from my mother and pushing me forward the garden wall. I screamed" (113). These were tactics to mentally oppress them. Wives of the militants had to force to tolerate their husbands' actions. The wives of militants who have to witness young girls raped by them. The wife of a militant named Jilan offers help to a Yazidi girl named Hazni as she become weary of her husband's abuse of Yazidi girl. She and Hezni escaped to Kurdistan after murdering him. He behaved very badly to her that she was ready to kill him for saving their lives.

Women were denied equal rights even in families. The family, which is the basic unit of society, can be considered as the most patriarchal. Women are expected to do their wifely responsibilities and remain faithful to

their husband. They were considered as the possession of the men whom they marry. Her mother is her father's second wife. His first wife had died and he needs a woman to look after his children. Later, her father abandoned her and married another woman whom her mother is suppose to accept. No one questions her father. Women donot have any claim over their children. "Divorce took my sister Dimal's children away. In Yazidi society, as in the rest of Iraq, women have fewer rights when a marriage ends, no matter what happened to end it" (23).

Women were marginalised in all walks of life. Men do not allow women to be in high positions and tried to be remain in powerful positions. "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".

The militants succeeded to make the captives believe that they were not powerful enough to fight against the oppressors. They made these women feel inferior to them. "I am telling you, there is no way I am going to Syria!" I was angry now, his voice never rising. "Think about it. Where were you yesterday? And where are you today? (199)". The militants treated like doormat over which they can do whatever they like. They tried to make them feel inferior. "Abu Muawaya laid out breakfast on a floor mat and told me to come eat. Even though it meant sitting in the kitchen and sharing a meal with two men who had raped me, I rushed to the food (187)".

Yazidi women were oppressed in these different ways. They were oppressed in their family and in society. They were not allowed to take up respectable positions in the society. They were gifted to the high ranking officials and forced to have sexual intercourse with them. Gang rape was also common. They were considered as inferior also to the ISIS militants. Their religion was taken away from them and restrictions were imposed on clothing. The various incidents depicted in this work shows the unbearable pain inflicted upon them by the militants. These instances show that women are still oppressed in society.

III. CONCLUSION

Analyzing Nadia Murad's *The Last Girl* from a feminist perspective, we can understand the different levels at which women are oppressed and subjugated in the backdrop of terrorism. Women rights have been violated in different ways. There are various oppressive forces within and outside the society that put women in apposition inferior to men. Women lose their identity and dignity as a result of the constant wars and conflicts. They are subjected to extreme torture and

injustice in various forms.

Men use violence as a weapon to physically and mentally oppress women. Rape, forced marriages, forced prostitution are different forms of gender based violence. Girls and women are forced into sexual slavery. During war and armed conflict, rape is used as a means of psychological torture, in order to humiliate the enemy. Forced marriages, with the aid of law, enabled the militants to have complete control over these women. They are forced to be the sabayya of several men. They have to obey their orders and they were gang raped if they tried to escape.

In the book, Murad, through her own experiences vividly brings out the oppression faced by the Yazidi women in the wake of terrorism. They were enslaved by these militants and they exploited them to the fullest. They do not have any freedom of expression and restrictions were imposed on practicing their religion. They were forced to pray, forced to dress up and put makeup on in preparation for rape.

Yazidi women, are subjected to double marginalization. The first thing is discrimination based on gender and the second one is marginalization based on their identity as a Yazidi. They were not given any consideration as human beings. They were only considered as objects to satiate the sexual desires of the terrorists or the militants. They were exchanged from militants to militants and transported to various places. They were forced to wax themselves, put makeup and asked to behave like the wives of militants.

Women were not allowed to raise their voice against the oppressors. They cannot fight against the injustice towards them. The wives of the militants were also voiceless. They have to bear the insults and subjugation and remain silent. These women and children were completely under their control. Strict rules were imposed on them. Women are forced to cover themselves completely in abayas and niqabs. Women in ISIS controlled areas were afraid to go outside their houses. They were guarded by men, when they go out. Women lost their husbands and children. Yazidi men and boys whom had reached puberty were separated from the women and often shot dead at road sides. Women were supposed to remain submissive to the excruciating pain in the ISIS camps. Their sons had been taught to hate their mothers for being born as a Yazidi. These women were extremely tortured because they belong minority community that is Yazidis.

The oppression of women stems largely from men's desires for power and control. Since they need to game complete authority over women, they tried to grab

power from women. Women irrespective of their religion has struggle for everything. They were excluded from the public sphere. Seats in parliament and positions were laid in the hands of men. They made them believe that they are inferior to men. They were subjected to discrimination within families too. Women are meant to look after the husband and the children and have no claim over their children. Thus it is evident that even in the twenty first century, women do not enjoy equal rights like men. They suffer oppression, discrimination and segregation in different levels. Their rights are not protected and their grievances are not addressed.

REFERENCES

- [1] Abrahams, M.H. and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. "Feminist Criticism". *A Glossary Literary Terms*, Cengage Learning, 2014.
- [2] Barry, Peter. "Feminist Criticism". *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, Viva Books Private Limited, 2008.
- [3] Drucker, Saly Ann. "Betty Friedan: The Three Waves of Feminism". OH Blog and News, 27 April 2018, www.ohiohumanities.org/betty-friedan-the-three-waves_of_feminism/
- [4] Keralavarma, B. "The Feminist Movement". *Cross Currents: The Evolution of Literary Movements*, Current Books Thrissur, 2011.
- [5] Nadia and Jena, Krajesky. *The Last Girl: My Story of Captivity and Fight against Islamic State*. Virago, 2018.
- [6] Nayar K, Pramod. "Feminisms". *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*, Pearson, 2010.