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Fighting the Monster: Nadia Murad's Account of Resistance in *The Last Girl**

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Abstract

In the present paper, Murad's memoir, *The Last Girl*, is scrutinized through the lens of Resistance Literature theories. First introduced by Kanafani (1966) and adapted by scholars such as Harlow (1987) and Sangari (1389 [2010 A. D.]), Resistance Literature has come to constitute pieces of writing that are written during or after a conflict by people experiencing life under the oppressive power. For Harlow and Sangari, what is of utmost importance is the accounts of war experience pictured by civilians from all walks of life. With the Syrian war with the ISIS escalating in 2011 and its consequent overflow into Iraq, the extremist terrorists brought the war to the doorsteps of ordinary people, massacring men and leaving women to deal with the aftermath. *The Last Girl* is Nadia Murad's retelling of life under the ISIS as a Yazidi-Iraqi woman. At first glance, Murad pictures a sad, yet vivid image of the Yazidi genocide by the ISIS. However, in a deeper analysis of the text, one finds how being ripped apart from family, utterly displaced, terrorized and raped can also shape a rather stronger, resistant person. By applying Harlow and Sangari's theories of Resistance to Murad's memoir, what is manifested is the way in which being appointed to various kinds of terror in war-time can create a more resistant self in someone.

Keywords: Barbra Harlow, ISIS, Mohammad Reza Sangari, Resistance, *The Last Girl*, War-time Terror, Yazidi

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1. Introduction

War and resistance have always been the two sides of the same coin. Where there is war, there is always resistance. However, resistance might have different meanings to varied forces. The Westerns colonists, starting from Christopher Columbus with his ‘discovery’ of America, to Bush and Obama and their ‘holy mission’ of bestowing ‘democracy’ on Middle East, saw the native’s resistance as savagery and pronounced it ‘illegitimate,’ whilst considering their own conducts (in other countries no less) as just and humane (Draper, 2020).

One main difference between war literature and resistance literature is that the latter deals specifically with what is told and written by the suppressed people living in the occupied territories and not by those occupying a region. Harlow, in her *Resistance Literature*, acknowledges the fact that the term ‘resistance literature’ was first applied to the Palestinian situation by Kanafani in his *Literature of Resistance in Occupied Palestine’: 1948-1966*, and agrees with the idea that this kind of literature “comes from the lips of the people located inside the occupied lands” (Kanafani, 1966, p. 12; Harlow, 1987, p. 5). For her, writing resistance narratives is as much political as it is cultural. Harlow believes that it is a form of “historical challenge” for the resistance writer, “a demand for an access to history” which is drastically different to the “Western historiographical version of the past” (Harlow, 1987, p. 86), suggesting that resistance literature challenges the codes and canons of theory and practice of literature . . . developed in the West” (Harlow, 1987, p. xvi). Harlow defines resistance literature as the one:

presupposing an occupying power that has subjugated a given population and has significantly intervened in the social and

cultural development of the people [therefore] resistance literature continues to wage a struggle for liberation on many levels [especially] political and cultural agenda. (Harlow, 1987, pp. xviii-2)

Brosman (1992), also believes that writings of war should talk about the war as it is, not as it is supposed to be, not only focusing on the heroic parts, but also on its gall and horrors (Brosman, 1992, p. 89). She believes what distinguishes war literature from other forms of writing, such as history or chronicles, is its “emphasis upon the experiential dimension . . . [its] mark of authenticity and truth” (Brosman, 1992, p. 85). Unlike history and chronicles, which are concerned with causes, results and data of war, literature written on war deals with how one feels, lives and transforms through war, or in other words how one works out “personal and social problems, especially those of identity within the national context” (Brosman, 1992, pp. 86-88). Brosman further mentions that writings on war – in a critical light – by the people who have experienced it in person, becomes a form of catharsis, as they relive, reexamine and finally accept the trauma that has happened (Brosman, 1992, p. 90; McLoughlin, 2011, p. 7).

Sylvester in her *‘Experiencing War’* (2011) goes a step further, arguing for a female narrative of war. She claims that history and narratives written by men tend to see women as only ‘collateral damages,’ while in the new wars where the cities and streets become the battlefield, women also find agency to voice their concerns and experiences of life in war zones. She acknowledges that for years, women had been studied in domestic violence, whereas in the contemporary world order, she strongly believes, it is time to study women in world-changing violence.

In their book *'Critical Methods in Terrorism Studies'*, Dixit and Stump (2016, pp. 3-4) argue that in Western Europe and the U.S, there is an "invisible college of experts" who are generating the knowledge about terrorism, advising government officials and speaking in media and with doing that shape the knowledge and opinion of the public and mask the States' violence in other countries. This is also mentioned by Herman & O'Sullivan (1989). Dixit and Stump (2016), follow Said's (1981) belief in the idea that the Western knowledge on the Middle East is filtered through colonialism "where one party exerts power over those being depicted" and sets the terms, defining what is counted as terrorism (Said, 1981, p. 13). Hence, they too, urge the Middle Eastern scholars and writers to expose the Western 'regime of truth' and resist the dominant modes of knowledge-production by their own accounts of history (Said, 1981, p. 14).

Furthermore, Fanon in his *'Wretched of the Earth'* (1982, p. 169), describes Western Knowledge-production in a different light, stating that colonialism does not merely empty the mind of the colonized from forms or concepts, rather "by a kind of perverted logic it turns to the past of the oppressed people and distorts, disfigures and destroys it". If the 'third world,' as Debray (1977, p. 35) puts it, is the grand trick of the century constructed by the Western colonizer, to work as a "shapeless bag in which we jumble together, to hasten on their disappearance, nations, classes, races and civilizations" (Debray, 1977, p. 35) and if, according to Worsley (1984, p. 4) "history is the story of what the white man did", then there must be some force that would rub the West from its liberty to define what it wants in any way it wishes and stand up in the face of these regimes of dishonesty to fight for its own half of the truth.

With colonialism giving its way to so-called 'just wars' and 'legitimate invasions' of different countries in the Middle East – namely Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria – in the past few decades, it was time for the scholars in the region to define resistance literature more thoroughly. Taking this matter up, Sangari (1389 [2010 A.D.]) in his book *Literature of the Holy Defense*, gives a comprehensive definition of resistance literature, arguing that it is written specifically by the oppressed in order to challenge the Western knowledge formation. He, too, believes it is time to let the oppressed define the terms rather than promoting the Western model of the concept, and goes a step further by introducing the following twelve characteristics for resistance literature.

1) signs and symbols, 2) praise for the martyrs, 3) description of the enemy's crimes, 4) depicting the suffering faces of the suppressed people, 5) invitation for resistance, 6) praise of the land, 7) mentions of past honors, 8) humiliation of the enemy, 9) instillation of hope for the future, 10) praise of freedom, 11) condemning those who have neglected the war or are hypocritical or analgesic towards it, and finally 12) longing for the martyrs and feeling guilty and ashamed for being alive after their loved ones (Sangari, 1389 [2010 A. D.], pp. 54-81)

Resistance literature as a theoretical field, claims that it is time to go back to, talk about and study the silenced roots and history of the oppressed and understand that as Thiong'o (1981, p. 100) points out, this is "not a personal affair between the writer and few individuals but a social, political, historical [and cultural] phenomenon". The invaded, the colonized, the suppressed and the subjugated must reach a collective opposition to the conventional Western categories of literature, and believe that they come short of representing the truth as what it really has been, and form, instead,

a kind of literature that would express their side of the story, their personalities, feelings, voice and resistance.

In the present cultural arena, where the historical knowledge of different populations is being exploited by Western hegemonic powers to form a distorted form of history for the 'third world' and specially the Middle East, this research will apply and internationalize new definitions for the concepts of resistance literature introduced by scholars from the region. The aim of this paper therefor, is firstly, to scrutinize Murad's *The Last Girl* (2017) in the light of Harlow's (1987) 'narrative as resistance' theory, claiming that writing one's experience of war in the midst of terror, by an ordinary young woman no less, is in fact a resistance act in itself. Secondly, this paper will apply Sangari's (1389 [2010 A. D.]) new approach on resistance with his twelve concepts of resistance literature on Murad's memoir to maintain that her narrative and experience of war must be considered in the growing resistance literature of the Middle East. What follows, is an introduction of Murad's memoir and later on an analysis of how writing memoirs and narrative can itself be an act of resistance.

2. Nadia Murad's *The Last Girl* (2017)

Murad, born and raised in Kocho, a village near Sinjar, is a Yazidi-Iraqi young girl who spends her days happily with her mom, her eight brothers, and two sisters in a little house with sheep and hens while working on the farm. Although they do not have many possessions, she is grown to be a happy, energetic woman, in love with being educated, and with being a makeup artist. However, her dreams do not last long: In August 2014, the ISIS hits Iraq and progresses in its cities and towns little by little. The village is soon taken over by ISIS militants. The Yazidi men refuse to convert and

are killed instantly and women and children are taken as sex slaves. Nadia, then, is handed from one high ranked ISIS soldier to another, and when she tries to run away, she is raped by a gang of guards and then left at a checkpoint. Another man buys her but this time she manages to run away successfully with the help of a Sunni neighbor and her brother. She later finds out that six of her brothers, her mother, her niece, whom she was very close to, have all been killed by the ISIS and one of her younger nephews has joined it.

For Murad (2017), writing this memoir and talking about what has happened, “is a burden” (Murad, 2017, p. 282). But she does it in the hopes that she would “be the last girl in the world with a story like [hers]” (Murad, 2017, p. 308). Achebe (1988, p. 74) believes “. . . there are these others whose part is to wait and when the struggle is ended, to take over and recount the story”, because it is the telling and retelling of the history that can pass it from one generation to the next. The act of writing, although painful for Murad, becomes itself an act of resistance. By reliving the brutal experience of the war and writing her side of history, Murad manages to access history-formation and challenge and subvert the acknowledged Western history that saw the armed opposition in Syria and Iraq as the only “legitimate representative of the Syrian people” (Hetou, 2019, p. 81).

2. 1. Narratives as Resistance

Before the 1970s, the general belief was that resistance is “organized, armed sabotage, waged through the military or political parties with the aim of overthrowing the state” (Westerfield, 2004, p. 11). However, with the advancement of wars and the blurring of

boarders between home and battlefield, one can realize that resistance is no longer only about bombs, guns and soldiers. Rather, it has come to take many different forms that were previously neglected, such as demonstrations, strikes, forging false identifications, circulating messages and of course, writing.

On the surface level, writing about war and documenting what is going on, can be considered only from an aesthetic point of view; as an expression of the self, a way to communicate to the potential readers how the war was really experienced by ordinary people. At a time where many find themselves incapable of recording the events in the midst of chaos and war, a writer turns destruction to creativity and this “creating literature from violence is already a reversal”, a kind of resistance (Brosman, 1992, p. 93).

However, putting aside the aesthetic aspect of war narratives, in a broader sense they come to represent their stories as opposed to the history being told by the hegemonic states of the West. Preliminary, the task of narrating war was seen to be a man’s job. Men were considered to have agency in war as they were the soldiers fighting the enemy on the battlefield. Women, on the other hand, were confined to conversational tasks, either being a mother or a wife who had sent their man to war or a nurse who would help treat the injured away from the frontline. Therefore, a woman’s story of the war was not considered legitimate, as it was thought that she is not directly involved with the war.

However, the 21st century wars were no longer fought on distinct battlefields. The merging of home and frontline, the fact that the city streets, valleys, houses, all became the battlefield on their own, meant that women started to find agency in war. As they were directly involved in what was going on around them, their narratives of the war also, started to be acknowledged.

One distinct difference between the males' narratives of war with that of females' is that the former's major function was to express the heroic mode of war. Pictured in all black and white, a male narrative of war depicted an all-white hero standing in the face of all-black villain. A female's narrative of war, on the contrary, cuts in deeper, examining the psychological, political, moral, social dimensions of domination and repression, swinging between different feelings, ranging from fear to guilt to resistance (Sylvester & Parashar, 2009; Sylvester, 2011; Lamb, 2020; Yazdan Panah, 1400 [2021 A. D.]).

In her memoir, *The Last Girl*, Murad delves in the political aspect of the rise of fundamental Islamists and how they treated the ethnic minorities, tracing it back to Saddam's State curriculum which "was clear about who was important in Iraq and what religion they followed. Yazidis didn't exist in the Iraqi history books I read in school, and Kurds were depicted as threats against the state" (Murad, 2017, p. 40). Murad believes that the impact of the educational system on the social order was so severe that it constituted an Iraqi population which was indifferent to the plight of the Yazidis, "I later thought that those books must be one reason why our neighbors joined the ISIS or did nothing while the terrorists attacked Yazidis. No one who had been through an Iraqi school would think that we deserved to have our religion protected" (Murad, 2017, p. 40).

Murad (2017) not only criticizes the majority Sunni population of Iraq for detaching themselves from the ethnic minorities, she also condemns the Kurd peshmerga and their immoral conduct of leaving the people of Kocho to themselves. The Peshmerga, who had the responsibility of protecting the people and who continuously "assuring us they would keep us safe" (Murad, 2017,

p. 61) flee Kocho on the night of ISIS arrival, when the people are soundly sleep, to go and protect Erbil and its oil fields.

Because of analyzing these dimensions, “the personal” does in fact, as Carol Hanisch well-known paper (1969) declares, become “political” in female narratives of war and challenge what Lyotard (1984) calls the “grand narrative” of the West with its predetermined ending (Lyotard, 1984, p. xxiv). Harlow (1987, pp. 30, 79, 96) points out this emphasis on the political aspect of the resistance literature – especially the autobiographical genre – as opposed to the first world “correct political practice” and argues that it has the “power to change the world”, as it requires the readers to open their eyes on where they get their information from and to challenge their historical knowledge and ideological awareness.

The recent wars in the Middle East, particularly in Syria and Iraq with ISIS committing mass murders of the men and taking the women as slaves, became critical to the position of women, sweeping them of their domestic roles and throwing them, instead, in combat, torture, rape, siege and displacement. As a group previously denied access to history making and narrating, women in these countries suddenly underwent a drastic change and became an influential force in recollecting and “re-actualizing”¹ the war from their perspectives, confronting the distorted historical records of the hegemonic narratives.

1. Yerushalmi in his *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (1996) points out that the act of writing war cannot be mere recollection because recollection is only “explanation and chronicling of facts . . . preserving a sense of distance” (p. 44). For him, narrating war goes a step further and helps the writer to “re-actualize the events. . . to give a sense of full-fledged embodied physical and psychic identity” in order for the readers to become involved and identify with the text (p. 44).

On a similar note, Lamarra (2009, p. 145) states that the recent “total wars,” that is, wars that “intrude upon everyone’s daily lives”, put the ‘otherness’ of women aside and at least for the expand of the war bring women and men equality in a sense that their voice and their story of the war finds credibility in the face of official history. This is also mentioned by Stone-Mediatore (2009, p. 934). Jelinek (1980, pp. 7-8) however, digs deeper to distinguish a distinct difference between the third world female’s resistance narratives and that of Western woman’s. For her, the latter focuses on “personal life, domestic details, family difficulties and close friends” whilst the former engages with the public and historical struggle of her people, focusing on what has remained hidden from the official records.

With narrating the many dimensions of her experience of war, Murad (2017, p. 64) primarily manages to take the reader on her roller-coaster of feelings starting with anger toward the peshmerga, to the initial fear of ISIS militants, describing them as “just weapons, and they were aimed at my village” (Murad, 2017, p. 67), to the helplessness that took her soon after being “teared apart from her mother” and family members (Murad, 2017, p. 115) and the fright that seized her when the slave market opened up on her first night of captivity; “we moaned as though wounded, doubling over and vomiting on the floor, but none of it stopped the militants” (Murad, 2017, p. 149). Murad also manages to reveal the unknown, off the record, side of the Islamic State. ISIS had issued pamphlets by its Research and Fatwa Department, justifying their brutal captivation of the Yazidi girls “so matter-of-fact, like the law of any state, confident that what they are doing is sanctioned by the Koran¹” (Murad, 2017, p. 152). However, Nadia’s memoir

1. The Quran

dismantles the so-called righteousness of ISIS so much so that they start to “threaten [her] everyday” after voicing the plight of the Yazidis and the publication of her narrative (Murad, 2017, p. 290).

The importance of Murad’s memoir of war against the ISIS, like other female resistance narratives of the Middle East, is of two-fold. On the one hand, it represents a voice previously veiled on two grounds from the historical records of the wars. Being not only a woman but also an ethnic minority, Murad that had no agency and was not permitted even in the dominant knowledge paradigm of her own country. On the other hand, female resistance narratives, such as *The Last Girl*, open up the political space for “under-told and unauthorized experiences and knowledge” (Corbin, 2010, p. 384; Pitter, 2010, p. 185). By telling her experience of war, Nadia voices the plight of Yazidis and opens the international eye on the genocide addressing the Yazidi population, shedding critical light on the Western metanarrative.

Before moving on to the discussion of different characteristics of resistance literature, one must acknowledge that Murad’s displacement and its subsequent effect on her performance also played an important part in creating a more resistant self in Nadia. Hence the third part of the article would briefly deal with the concepts of displacement and performance in Nadia’s experience of war.

2. 2. Displacement and Performance in Nadia Murad’s *The Last Girl* (2017)

Writing about her life experience under the ISIS is not the only resistance act that Murad has done. Rather, her forced displacement after the fall of Kocho played an important role in establishing her

as a resistant individual. Wars and armed conflicts are known to be the main cause of reactive/forced displacement across the world (Jacques, 2012, p. 19; Chatty, 2010, p. 17). James (2004) introduces three types of forced migration. For him, derivative forced migration (DFM) or static migration occurs as a result of geographical rearrangement, also known as remapping. Responsive forced migration (RFM) is defined by James as a voluntary move from one place to another because of political reasons, warfare, or natural causes. Finally, purposive forced migration (PFM) describes the people who are forced to move without choice. These forces might be race-related, religiously motivated, or culture-oriented (James, 2004, pp. 40-41). Murad's displacement with her being ripped apart from her family members and her village is therefore a purposive forced migration/displacement.

Scudder (1973, p. 51) believes being moved forcefully from one's home results in "terrible defeat" because nothing is more impotent than forcibly removing people from their habitat. Colson (1989, p. 13) goes even further to say that forced displacement leads to "increased dependence;" she believes forced displacement "is a clear demonstration to a group of people that they have lost control over their destiny and are powerless". Cernea (2004, p. 13) believes that displacement is likely to result in "massive loss and destruction of assets including loss of life, unemployment, drop in welfare and standards of living, prolonged uprooting, alienation, culture and identity loss, and severe long-term stress" among other damages. For Kinnvall (2004, p. 747), a forced displaced person experiences powerlessness, dependence, anxiety, and a strong feeling of homelessness because she becomes marginalized.

Reading *'The Last Girl'*, Murad's initial vulnerability and powerlessness upon her purposive forced displacement is

detectable. The ISIS, which had promised the civilians to take them to Sinjar Mountain, gathers the Yazidis in the school and murders all the men: “We were pulled apart and loaded unto the first truck” for an unknown destination (Murad, 2017, p. 111). When all the hopes of going to Sinjar Mountain are perished away and the truck leaves for God knows where, the feelings of anxiety and powerlessness overtake Nadia. Murad brings out the holy bread they had just baked and “tosses it over the side of the truck, and watches it bounce off the road into a pile of trash;” “It was supposed to protect me and my family, and it hadn’t” (Murad, 2017, p. 112). For a moment she loses faith in Tawusi Malek and God. She also gets dependent on her mother and sisters and terrified, especially when the guard barks at her mother to get away from the girls “I shook my head leaning in closer to my mother” (Murad, 2017, p. 115). Nonetheless, she is separated from her sisters, her niece, and her mother and put on a bus. The powerlessness and stress reach its peak when Abu Batat starts molesting Nadia on the bus: “I was too scared to talk. I began crying, and my tears fell on his hand, but still, he didn’t stop” (Murad, 2017, p. 133). Not knowing what to do she “closed [her] eyes and tries to block out what was happening” (Murad, 2017, p. 132).

According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC, 2006, p. 17) “forced displacement is increasingly used as a tactic of war, civilians are deliberately displaced as a strategy to weaken the adversary”. Hence, to rob the Yazidi women of all they had, the ISIS also chooses to play the displacing card. The changes in Kocho are so sudden, so abrupt that no one could foresee the catastrophe that was thrust on its people. Not only did the ISIS separate men from women, ordering men to stay in the school yard

and women to get into the building, it also separated the unmarried from the married women “tearing me from my mother” (Murad, 2017, p. 115) in order to further weaken the innocent scared girls. With their normal support system dispersed to ashes, women become vulnerable to sexual exploitation, domestic violence, and rape. This is why Mertus sees displacement as gendered (Mertus, 2003, p. 260).

It is when Murad (2017) loses hope in the Sunni Muslims of Sinjar (Murad, 2017, p. 111), or the girl to swap places with her on the bus (Murad, 2017, p. 134), or Nafah (the ISIS general) to take care of them and free them from the grabbing hands of Abu Batat (Murad, 2017, p. 136), and when finally, they understand that they are to be “sabayas” – sex slaves – (Murad, 2017, p. 136) that she starts to rely on herself.

When displaced and decentered, one needs to find new coping strategies. Brown and Perkin (1992, p. 279) believe that “the loss of normal attachments creates a stressful period of disruption followed by a post-disruption phase of coping with lost attachments and creating new ones”. In addition, according to Weiss and Korn (2006, p. 1), physical displacement brings about vulnerability because “people who are deprived of their homes and communities and means of livelihood are unable to resort to traditional coping capacities”. In a war-affected community with no sponsor to take care of the war-stricken people, they all become what is known as “orphans of conflict” (Weiss & Korn, 2006, p. 2). No amount of the old strategies of coping will heal the bright new wounds, therefore each “orphan” has to find her way out. Without her mother and her encouraging, calming speeches that let her take refuge in them when she was hurt, lost or distressed; and with the woman in the first Mosul house who “didn’t tell [her] not to worry or that

everything was going to be fine” (Weiss & Korn, 2006, p. 142) Nadia soon understands that in order to cope with the new devastating situation she has to find other ways.

Finding new coping techniques requires a new way of performance. In a life standing on its head, one cannot act and live her ordinary life. However, under the surface of each new act and performance, there lies just a small bit of identity change. It is said that identity is not what we have but what we do; it is not something fixed, but something that evolves in time, in a reactive process as one experience the world (Cutcher, 2015, p. 121). Radhakrishnan (1996, p. 68, in Cutcher, 2015, p. 131) also thinks identities are the products of several contextualizations. Hence our reactions to our surroundings and our performances in any given context bring about a new self.

Murad is the only girl on the bus who reacts to Abu Batat and SCREAMS – igniting an uprising however faint and short (Murad, 2017, p. 135)– even though she is shushed by Nafah, with a pistol at her head (Murad, 2017, p. 136). Later, she shrinks from answering the guards with whom she is there, scared that “they wanted to hurt Kathrine and the others just for being related to [her]” (Murad, 2017, p. 140), and when Nafah pushes the lit cigarette on her shoulder, she tries so hard not to scream, knowing it would “only get [her] in more trouble” (Murad, 2017, p. 140). And when Nadia thinks about committing suicide, she instantly remembers her mother telling her: “nothing in life would be bad enough to justify suicide” (Murad, 2017, p. 144).

As a displaced person who is forcibly moved from the place where she was considered a majority, to a place where she is going to be seen as a minority “a place of not belonging, of alienation”, one has two ways to deal with her situation and build a life –

although, in both “her identity, her sense of self is transformed utterly” (Cutcher, 2015, p. 126). One might choose to assimilate, which requires discarding one’s ethnic identity, so that she can be “absorbed into the dominant culture” as is the case in the melting pot theory – “all diversities are cast together into a harmonized whole” (Cutcher, 2015, p. 126) or one can resist and be what she chooses.

From the early stages of Murad’s captivity, one understands that for her there is no ‘melting in’ or even becoming ‘hybridized’: “We were scared but we weren’t giving up” (Murad, 2017, p. 103) becomes her motto. Little acts of performance such as wearing Yazidi dress as much as possible, even under her abayas (Murad, 2017, p. 173), speaking in Kurdish with other sabaya even when banned to do so (Murad, 2017, p. 181) and making a pact with other Yazidis “to take the first opportunity to scape” (Murad, 2017, p. 144) clearly suggest that she had no hope for absorbing into the dominant culture. Her acts of defiance reach their climax when Murad is ordered to hand over her ID and birth certificate. She mocks ISIS militants who thought by burning their documents they are “erasing the existence of Yazidis from Iraq” (Murad, 2017, p. 145), already having realized that to be strong and to be able to cope with the present situation, she does not need much but herself, telling herself “no matter what happened, I thought I could survive” (Murad, 2017, p. 145).

2. 3. Characteristics of Resistance Literature in Nadia Murad’s *The Last Girl* (2017)

Sangari, in his book *Literature of the Holy Defense* (1389 [2010 A.D.]), introduces twelve characteristics for resistant literary

writings. For him any literature written about resistance around the world is made up of:

1) signs and symbols, 2) praise for the martyrs, 3) description of the enemy's crimes, 4) depicting the suffering faces of the suppressed people, 5) invitation for resistance, 6) praise of the land, 7) mentions of past honors, 8) humiliation of the enemy, 9) instillation of hope for the future, 10) praise of freedom, 11) condemning those who have neglected the war or are hypocritic or analgesic towards it, and finally 12) longing for the martyrs and feeling guilty and ashamed for being alive after their loved ones (Sangari, (1389 [2010 A. D.]), pp. 54-81).

After the siege of Kocho, Nadia mostly revolves around the description of the enemy's crimes, which reach their climax with the slaughter of the Yazidi men: "almost all the men had been killed right there, their bodies falling on one another like trees all hit at once by lightening" (Murad, 2017, p. 104). Causing the Yazidi women, who were so dependent on their men, to lose their symbol of refuge and protection and be left to fend for themselves. Nadia who "couldn't imagine home without any of [her] brothers" (Murad, 2017, p. 58), loses six of them in the massacre and forever longs for them.

However, the brutality of the ISIS does not end here. They separate the virgin girls from the rest of the women and put them on a bus to Mosul. Not knowing where they are going or to what purpose, Murad even stands up to the grabbing hands of Abu Batat only to realize later, in the first Mosul house, why ISIS has brought and gathered them there. With the first night of her captivity creeping on, the first Mosul house becomes a slave market. Pittaway and Bartolomei (2001, p. 24) argue that although displacement puts everyone at risk, women are more at risk

because during arm conflict, women become the target gender-specific forms of violence as they are thought to be the “bearers of the cultures and values” and for that, they are faced with sexual assaults and other acts of aggression, which is almost always handled with silence.

Murad who has been slapped, spitted on, and burnt already, faces yet another brutality. It is time for her and the other girls to be touched by the militants: “anywhere they wanted, running their hands over our breasts and our legs as if we were animals” (Murad, 2017, p. 149). The girls scream and beg, and the militants laugh and tell one another to hand them the girls when they are over with them. Hell has broken down in that room and Nadia finds herself losing all control “If it was inevitable that a militant would take me, I wouldn’t make it easy for him. I howled and screamed, slapping away hands that reached out to grope me . . . wondered whether we could provoke them into killing us” (Murad, 2017, p. 150).

Murad who was initially stressed and vulnerable, realizes that she only has herself to rely on and that is why she moves on to another characteristic introduced by Sangari (1389 [2010 A. D.]) and starts urging other girls to resist. In the dark hours when the thought of suicide crosses many of the girls’ minds, Murad invites a group of girls to make a pact that “we wouldn’t kill ourselves; we would help one another as much as we could and take the first opportunity to escape” (Murad, 2017, p. 144). This invitation to resist persists when later the girls are told to take a bath because “you Yazidis always stink” (Murad, 2017, p. 147) and they choose not to take a bath, feeling that the “Filth was armor, protecting us from the hands of men like Abu Batat” (Murad, 2017, p. 147).

Nonetheless, “in a world where all paths led to the same terrible

place” (Murad, 2017, p. 153), Murad is ripped away from her circle of support by another militant who was also an ISIS judge, Hajji Salman, and is forced to convert to Islam and then become Hajji Salman’s official “sabaya” or sex slave. Seifert (1993, pp. 3-7) introduces five characteristics of wartime rape:

- 1) rape is the rule of war, 2) it is part of male communication 3) Rape is also a result of the construction of masculinity that armies offer their soldiers 4) is aimed at destroying the adversary’s culture 5) Orgies of rape originate in a culturally ingrained hatred of woman that is acted out in extreme situations.

ISIS militants use a distorted way of communication to warn the Yazidis of what will come of them. Prior to ISIS’s siege of Kocho, some strange incidents happened around the village. Two farmers, while working on their fields, got kidnapped along with “a hen and a handful of her chicks” (Murad, 2017, p. 3). Soon after, Nadia’s family’s shepherd got kidnapped along with “an old, slow-moving ram and a young female lamb” (Murad, 2017, p. 7). Although the men got to flee and return home, the question for the random animals taken away confused the villagers: “maybe they were just hungry?!” (Murad, 2017, p. 3). However, later on an ISIS militant explains the kidnapping as such:

You say we came out of nowhere, but we sent you messages . . . 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 (Murad, 2017, p. 14).

Following a brutal conversation with her captor, Hajji Salman,

which crushes Nadi's soul, Salman explicitly claims that the ISIS aim for taking over Sinjar and Kocho was to destroy the adversary's culture because they were considered "infidels and God wanted us to convert you" (Murad, 2017, p. 159) arguing that "We came to Sinjar to kill all the men, and to take the women and the children, all of them. Unfortunately, some made it to the mountain" (Murad, 2017, p. 159).

Later on, Nadia becomes aware of the existence of a pamphlet called *Dabiq*, which would advertise "sabaya in an attempt to draw new recruits" (Murad, 2017, p. 152) and boost their masculinity. Murad (2017, p. 136) learns that for the ISIS:

Yazidi girls were considered infidels, and according to the militants' interpretation of the Koran, raping a slave is not a sin. We be passed around as a reward for loyalty and good behavior. We were no longer human beings—we were sabaya.

By going through the many fatwas of the *Dabiq* magazine, which depicted the slaves as mere property with no say in their fate, Nadia soon reaches Seifert's conclusion that rape is "a weapon of war" (Murad, 2017, p. 153). Although the ISIS tries to sugarcoat their attempt to rape the Yazidi girls by telling them it is a form of marriage, Murad (2017, p. 163) describes the act as a crime, believing that:

with these "marriages" ISIS continued their slow murder of Yazidi girls. First, they took us from our homes and killed our men. Then they separated us from our mothers and sisters. Wherever we were, they reminded us that we were just property, there to be touched and abused.

Another characteristic that is observable during the course of the

memoir is the condemnation of the people who have neglected the Yazidi community. Starting with the peshmerga who left their posts just before the arrival of the ISIS “without warning us or taking us with them or helping us to get to safety” (Murad, 2017, p. 57); to the Sunni neighboring villages who did nothing to prevent the ISIS from attacking Kocho with the excuse that “we want to help you but there is nothing we can do” (Murad, 2017, p. 87); to all those people who saw the trucks and buses filled with Yazidi girls “stuffed into the backs of trucks, crying and holding on to one another” (Murad, 2017, p. 110); and the neighboring houses who heard the girls screaming on top of their lungs in the different sabaya houses in Mosul, causing Murad (2017, p. 156) to think “about the families in the houses on those streets. Were they sitting down to dinner? Putting their children to bed? There was no way they couldn’t hear what was going on in the house” and yet they did nothing to help. Murad’s anger with all these groups does not subside until the end of her narrative.

Yet with all that is going on around her, Murad manages to keep an open mind and hope for a brighter future. It is true that Murad does not fight her captors physically, and admits that “something inside her [had] died” (Murad, 2017, p. 176), still she keeps on hoping for a way to escape. She believes that the fact that the Islamic state women are all dressed in an “abaya” makes it easy for her to run away and get lost among the crowd on the street. However, when she puts her thoughts in action she is caught, whipped and gang raped by six of Hajji Salman’s guards.

Murad (2017, p. 197) confesses that “after what happened with the guards at Hajji Salman’s, I lost all fear of the ISIS and of rape. I was just numb”. For the traumatized Nadia, “hopelessness is closer to death” (Murad, 2017, p. 197), leaving her to feel like a dead

person, and give up all fight and “accepting that this is now [her] life” (Murad, 2017, p. 197). Soon, however, she gathers her thoughts and tells herself that fearing the ISIS is not bad. The fear means you would fight them in hope of reuniting with your loved ones. Hence, we find her asking her rapists if she can wear a pink Yazidi dress, emphasizing the fact that no matter what, she is not going to lose her touch with her past or her love for her homeland.

Her love for her home and her loved ones is another resistance factor that is mentioned several times in Murad's narrative. She mocks the ISIS militants who think by burning the girls' IDs they are wiping the Yazidis off the face of the earth (Murad, 2017, p. 145) and when Hajji Salman describes the Yazidis as infidels, Nadia thinks “saying the name of my village hurt, it brought back memories of home and the people I loved, most vividly my mother” (Murad, 2017, p. 146). However, her love for home accelerates after she is left in a checkpoint to be raped by any man who comes around. Eventually, Hajji Amer buys her and takes her to his house and together with a friend rape Murad (2017, p. 209), while telling her she would be soon going to Syria: “The torture at the checkpoint and the promise that I was going to go to Syria had reignited the urgency to flee”. Nadia who had believed from the beginning of her displacement that “no matter what happened I thought I could survive as long as I stayed in my country” (Murad, 2017, p. 145) becomes intended to flee again, knowing that she would not survive Syria. She wears an abaya and leaves the house as soon as her captor goes out to run an errand. This time she succeeds and is forever out of the hands of ISIS: “They thought they had me forever. They are wrong” (Murad, 2017, p. 211).

However, the survivor's guilt and the longing for all those she has lost, especially for her mother and her niece, Kathrine, lingers

with Nadia until the end. She feels “happy and empty at the same time” (Murad, 2017, p. 257) thinking that although she has made it out, she “didn’t deserve to be so lucky” (Murad, 2017, p. 269). In the refugee camp in Kurdistan, Nadia and the rest of the survivors would start their days missing all those that were no longer with them: “We even missed the sound of family members squabbling over things: those fights would play in our heads like the most beautiful music. We had no way to find work or go to school, so mourning the dead and the missing became our job.

Murad (2017, p. 59) who believes “being forced to leave your home out of fear is one of the worst injustices a human being can face” acknowledges her time in captivity as part of her identity and when offered a revirginization surgery, refuses to undergo the procedure thinking “how could a ‘simple procedure’ erase the times Hajji Salman raped me, or when he had allowed his guards to rape me as punishment . . . The damage from those attacks wasn’t to one body part, or even just to my body, and it was nothing surgery could repair” (Murad, 2017, p. 297). Murad does not want to erase what has happened to her. Rather, she nurtures her misery, while letting it help her soar. In Cutcher’s (2015, p. 132) words, we are made from “both our past memories and the anticipation of our future which is linked to the changing present” hence making different experiences and their consequent effect worthy in constructing the new self. The new Nadia is no more scared of the ISIS. Rather, she “defies them by not letting their crimes go unanswered” (Murad, 2017, p. 303). Circling back to the first point mentioned in this research, narrating becomes resistance in itself, so every time she tells her story, she feels she is “taking some power away from the terrorists” (Murad, 2017, p. 303) even if telling is a burden, but she does that in the hope that she would be

“the last girl in the world with a story like mine” (Murad, 2017, p. 306)

3. Conclusion

Resistance literature has come to constitute any written work by the suppressed people describing their experiences of life under occupiers. These texts become valuable as they represent voices that have previously been silenced and denied and now try to dismantle the metanarrative of the world powers. In recent years, more attention has been given to female resistant narrative of war as they deal more with the multi-dimensional aspects of war ranging from political to social to moral and even psychological grounds. With every street and valley turning to a battlefield in the new wars that are taking place around the world women who had only been considered as collateral damage, also found agency and access to history making, telling the world of what has forever been off the records.

The Last Girl is a memoir centering on the different aspects of the outside world that created the monster of all monsters (ISIS), and how each of these affected the young Nadia Murad. While narrating war experiences is itself a form of resistance, Murad's memoir deals with concepts unthinkable to the 21st century population, such as captivation, sex-slave, and ethnic cleansing. *The Last Girl* follows the different characteristics of resistance literature introduced by Sangari (1389 [2010 A. D.]), that is, it describes the enemy's crime in vivid scenes, it hopes for a better future, it invites other repressed populations and individuals to resist, it praises home and the martyrs, and finally condemns the ignorant who had idled by as ISIS committed any form of genocide it desired.

Murad managed to escape the terrorist and come back to her – now very small – family to tell her side of the story to the world and by doing so, bringing the plight of all the Yazidis to the attention of the international community. With narrating her experience, not only did she stand up in the face of how the Western hegemony was depicting the ISIS, she also managed to show off her resilience and resistance to the ISIS, which thought by enslaving the Yazidi girls from whom it had taken away all agency.

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