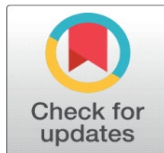


UNBROKEN SPIRIT: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF NADIA MURAD'S THE LAST GIRL AND ITS PORTRAYAL OF TRAUMA AND RESILIENCE

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ABSTRACT

The paper engages trauma as an unrepresented phenomenon in the classic model; hence, it tries to illustrate the pervasive impact it exerts on literary criticism and cultural discourse. Grounding on Cathy Caruth's notion of trauma as an unreceived experience that surfaces and haunts the survivor, the paper identifies intricacies surrounding the dynamic relations of violence, memory, and representation. Through the eyes of Nadia Murad's memoir, *The Last Girl: My Story of Captivity and My Fight Against the Islamic State*, the conversation digs into the Yazidi genocide and Murad's personal testimony as a survivor of sexual slavery and forced conversion under ISIS. The memoir is analyzed both as an individual narrative of survival and as a broader commentary on the human condition amidst collective suffering. This is further complemented by the entwinement of personal and communal trauma, making it easier to understand the interplay of victim, executioner, and see to approach psychological and sociocultural implications of violence. The research also focuses on how storytelling could become a vital function of keeping memory, creating resilience, and demanding justice after an atrocity.

Keywords: Trauma, Cultural Discourse, Violence, Memory, Representation, Resilience, Justice, Atrocity

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper critically examines trauma as an unrepresented phenomenon within the classic model of trauma theory, emphasizing its pervasive impact on literary criticism and cultural discourse. Drawing from Cathy Caruth's conceptualization of trauma as an unreceived experience that returns to haunt the survivor, the paper delves into the complex interrelationships between violence, memory, and representation. Using Nadia Murad's memoir, *The Last Girl: My Story of Captivity and My Fight Against the Islamic State*, as a primary text, the analysis engages with Murad's personal testimony as a Yazidi survivor of sexual slavery and forced conversion under ISIS, with broader implications for understanding the traumatic experiences of individuals and communities. The research highlights the interplay

between personal and communal trauma, exploring the psychological and sociocultural consequences of violence. It also examines how storytelling functions as a means of preserving memory, fostering resilience, and demanding justice in the wake of atrocity.

Trauma, particularly in the context of war and violence, has emerged as a significant focus in both literary criticism and psychological discourse, challenging traditional models of understanding the human experience. In this framework, trauma is not merely an event or a discrete phenomenon but rather an unassimilated experience that resists easy comprehension. As Cathy Caruth asserts, trauma is “not locatable in the simple violent or original events in an individual's past, but rather in the way that it is unassimilated—the way it is precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on” (Caruth 4). This definition underscores the complexity of trauma as a lingering, disruptive force that continues to haunt individuals long after the initial event.

Nadia Murad's *The Last Girl* offers a harrowing and unflinching account of the Yazidi genocide, as well as a deeply personal testimony of survival and resistance under ISIS. Murad's experiences as a victim of sexual slavery, forced conversion, and extreme violence under the hands of ISIS militants serve as a powerful microcosm for broader societal themes, including war, gender violence, resilience, and justice. In this paper, Murad's memoir is analyzed as both an individual narrative of survival and a broader commentary on the human condition amidst collective suffering, specifically focusing on the ways in which trauma, memory, and representation function as intertwined forces in the aftermath of violence.

Through an analysis of *The Last Girl*, this paper investigates the dynamic relationship between violence and memory, demonstrating how personal and communal trauma shape the psyche and the identity of survivors. Moreover, it emphasizes the importance of storytelling as a means of preserving collective memory, generating resilience, and mobilizing justice in the aftermath of violence.

The traumatic effects of war are far-reaching, affecting not only the physical bodies of those involved but also their psychological and emotional well-being. As Murad's memoir attests, the devastation caused by war is not limited to the battlefield; it extends to the mental and emotional lives of its victims, leaving scars that may never fully heal. The paper explores the dual aspects of trauma that are evident in Murad's experience: war trauma and rape trauma, each of which manifests in distinct yet interconnected ways.

War trauma, particularly in conflict zones such as those affected by ISIS, can be understood as a response to catastrophic events that overwhelm an individual's capacity for comprehension or coping. The American Psychiatric Association's definition of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) includes symptoms such as intrusive memories, nightmares, and hyperarousal in response to overwhelming events (Caruth 4). These psychological symptoms often persist long after the traumatic events themselves, leaving victims in a constant state of vigilance, anxiety, and emotional numbness. In Murad's case, the emotional and psychological toll of her captivity and forced conversion is evident throughout her narrative. She recalls, “I went crazy. I screamed with my entire body and I could barely stand up. I cried for my mother, whose fate I didn't know yet” (Murad 269), a moment that illustrates the visceral and uncontrollable nature of trauma as it manifests in the body.

Similarly, rape trauma, as a component of sexual violence, represents a profound violation of both the body and the psyche. Ann Wolbert Burgess's concept of “Rape Trauma Syndrome” provides a framework for understanding the emotional and physical consequences of sexual assault. Rape survivors often experience two

phases of trauma: an acute disruption of their sense of self and a long-term process of reconstruction (Burgess). Murad's narrative embodies this duality, as she recounts the immediate and overwhelming experience of sexual assault, as well as the long-term struggles of rebuilding her identity and sense of self-worth after such profound violation. Murad's journey of survival is shaped by both war trauma and rape trauma, and the complexities of these two intertwined experiences are central to understanding the depth of her suffering and her resilience.

Trauma, especially in the context of war and sexual violence, deeply impacts a survivor's ability to find rest and mental peace. Murad's account of her experiences illustrates the ways in which trauma disrupts the basic human need for sleep, as individuals living through or recovering from traumatic events often face disturbances in their ability to rest or sleep soundly. PTSD, a common response to trauma, is often marked by symptoms such as insomnia, nightmares, and hyperarousal, which contribute to a constant state of alertness, making it nearly impossible to achieve the relaxation needed for healing.

In her memoir, Murad describes her struggles with sleep, noting that her exhaustion from physical and emotional trauma does not guarantee peace: "I closed my eyes and tried to block out what was happening. Despite how terrified I was, my body was so exhausted that I quickly fell asleep. I couldn't rest, though, and every time sleep came, my head snapped back up, and I opened my eyes, startled" (Murad 119). This inability to rest is a manifestation of hypervigilance, a key symptom of PTSD, in which the individual's mind remains on high alert, anticipating danger even in moments of supposed safety.

Murad's description of her restless sleep is also indicative of the ongoing intrusion of traumatic memories, which continue to resurface even in moments of supposed peace. The body's reaction to trauma—manifesting in flashbacks, nightmares, and emotional numbing—illustrates how the mind is unable to fully process or let go of the violence it has witnessed and experienced. As Murad recounts, her trauma is not simply a past event but something that continues to haunt her, resurfacing in her dreams and waking moments. The trauma, in this sense, is both internal and external, persistently disrupting her sense of security and stability.

While Murad's memoir is deeply rooted in the traumatic experiences of violence and violation, it also serves as a powerful narrative of resilience and survival. Despite the overwhelming psychological effects of her captivity and the brutalities she endured, Murad's story is ultimately one of hope and action. Her efforts to regain agency, both over her body and her narrative, are central to her process of healing.

Murad's journey from victim to survivor—and eventually to advocate for justice—demonstrates the potential for reclaiming one's voice and power in the aftermath of violence. Through her testimony and activism, Murad has become a beacon of hope for others affected by the Yazidi genocide and sexual violence. Her decision to share her story publicly serves not only as a personal catharsis but also as a means of demanding justice for the countless other women and children who have suffered under ISIS. In a powerful moment of recovery, Murad recalls the first time she shared her story of rape with her aunt, noting that it was a relief to tell someone and stop worrying about societal rejection (Murad 278). This moment marks a turning point in her healing, where the burden of silence is lifted, and the path toward reconstruction begins.

Murad's resilience is also embodied in her unwavering commitment to bringing global attention to the atrocities committed by ISIS and to the plight of the Yazidi

people. Through her work as a UN Goodwill Ambassador, Murad continues to advocate for justice and recognition for the Yazidis, urging the international community to take action against the forces that perpetrated such horrific violence. In this sense, her narrative becomes not only a testament to personal survival but also a call to action for collective recognition and intervention in the face of systemic violence.

Nadia Murad's *The Last Girl* offers a profound meditation on the psychological, physical, and emotional toll of war and violence, providing a window into the traumatic experiences of the Yazidi people and the broader human condition in times of conflict. Through her personal narrative of survival and resistance, Murad underscores the importance of global awareness, intervention, and justice in the aftermath of atrocity. Her journey of resilience—marked by moments of despair, pain, and hope—demonstrates the enduring human spirit and the potential for healing and recovery even in the most dire of circumstances.

By shedding light on the enduring psychological consequences of war and sexual violence, *The Last Girl* challenges us to confront the systemic issues that perpetuate such suffering. Murad's advocacy for the Yazidi people and her call for justice serve as a poignant reminder that the fight against trauma, oppression, and injustice requires both individual bravery and collective solidarity. Her story urges us to remember the horrors of war and work toward a future where such atrocities are never repeated.

Through her courage and unwavering commitment to justice, Nadia Murad has become a symbol of survival, resilience, and hope in the face of unimaginable tragedy. As such, her memoir serves not only as a personal testimony but also as a powerful call to action for the global community to confront the consequences of war and violence and work toward a more just and compassionate world.

This paper presents an in-depth analysis of trauma theory through Nadia Murad's *The Last Girl*, exploring how trauma, resilience, and justice intersect in her narrative. By engaging with the complex psychological, cultural, and sociopolitical implications of war and violence, the paper contributes to the broader discourse on the enduring impact of trauma on individuals and communities in conflict zones.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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