



Through the Broken Looking-Glass: False Borders and Faltering Identities in Farida Khalaf's *The Girl Who Escaped*

ISIS

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Abstract

The socio-political environment in the context of a military invasion helps create a situation that deliberately permits violence propelled by an ideology which, in most cases, becomes an intersection of race, religion, and gender. Further, it shrinks individuals to merely a part of a biomass called 'population', who, left without a choice, find themselves either victims or perpetrators, trapped within a labyrinth of superficial borders and impassable boundaries. Yazidi survivor Farida Khalaf's memoir *The Girl Who Escaped ISIS: This Is My Story* (2017), co-authored by Andrea C. Hoffmann, makes the reader come to terms with this very reality. While analysing the memoir from an intersectional perspective, this article will try to elucidate how, in highly terrorised zones of conflict, perceptions of identities shatter both within and beyond the politico-geographic borders that become predominantly elusive. Besides, it will also attempt to show how the implementation of some biased biopolitical policies as a prelude to the impending war produces politically unwanted populations whose ethnic, religious, and political identities are summarily nullified as a means to justify the tortures inflicted on them and how these very policies successfully effectuate the displacement and forced migration of these populations, thus stripping them off their authenticity and their sense of belongingness. Within such a complex framework of intersectional biopolitics, gender plays a crucial role and the marginalised human body itself is constructed as a site for projecting the dominant power's anxieties of the 'Other' as threatening, repulsive, provocative, or otherwise essentially different. Women, already the subordinate population in a strictly patriarchal society, are further subjugated when the ethnic and/or religious community they belong to are under the threat of extinction during an armed conflict and various forms of gendered violence are normalised as a direct consequence of it. It will be the aim of this article to throw some light on how specific conjectures on race and gender create a lenient atmosphere for policies of systematic sexual violence during war and how this torture tactic to degrade and weaken the enemy's self-esteem culminates in a wide-scale exodus from a particular region.

Keywords: intersectional biopolitics, military invasion, gendered violence, elusive borders, shattered identities



About 25 girls and women aged 14 to 24 were systematically raped during the occupation in the basement of one house in Bucha. ...Russian soldiers told them they would rape them to the point where they wouldn't want sexual contact with any man, to prevent them from having Ukrainian children.

- Lyudmyla Denisova, Ombudsman for Human Rights in Ukraine¹

The United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner reports that conflict-related sexual violence in Ukraine, perpetrated by the Russian forces, is rampant in the context of increased military presence in populated areas. And, in most of these cases, intense racial hatred has exacerbated these incidents of sexual violence. Besides, each act of sexual violence is reported to be aggravated by a genocidal intent, since, as the last few portions of the quotation above show, Ukrainian women are perceived as epitomising their ethnicity and their entire nation which Russian invaders aspire to exterminate. This is but only one instance of how, within the context of a military invasion, the socio-political environment helps create a situation that deliberately permits violence propelled by an ideology that, in most cases, becomes an intersection of race and gender. This very ideology further generates a labyrinth of superficial borders and impassable boundaries within which individuals are deliberately shrunk to merely a part of a biomass called 'population' while losing their distinctive identities. *The Girl Who Escaped ISIS*, Farida Khalaf's brutally honest account of the torture inflicted on the Yazidi people during the ISIS insurgency in Iraq, makes the reader come to terms with this very reality. While analysing the memoir from a perspective that entails intersectional biopolitics, this article will try to elucidate how, in highly terrorised zones of conflict, perceptions of identities shatter both within and beyond the politico-geographic borders that become predominantly elusive.

The concept of biopolitics refers to the mechanism which is used to regulate human life processes. The execution of biopolitical power often results in the disruption of significant facets of human life to vindicate administrations of authority over knowledge. It can also be understood as the methods through which individuals construct and interpellate subjectivities between a sense of self and collective. Within the context of war, the expansion of biopolitical forms of power is invariably concerned with the regulation of populations. And, as Foucault says in the final chapter of *Society Must Be Defended*, unobstructed materialisation of biopower inserts racism in the systems of governance. As a consequence, wars are waged not between races, but, they are instigated by a race that holds power to define the norm, and against those who fail to conform to that norm.²



Within such a biopolitical system of power, especially in the context of armed conflicts, conquered or forcefully subordinated people are subjected to various forms of oppression. This oppression becomes politically justified since these people have already been depoliticized for deviating from the status of the politically accepted and protected populace in that particular society, a situation that Giorgio Agamben explains as “bare life.”³ While further explicating this idea, Achille Mbembe hypothesised that in such a biopolitical setup, the conquered embodies ‘another form of animal life’ that does not share any human bond with the conqueror. He goes on to explain how biopower is put to work in systems of violence and domination, thus developing his notion of ‘necropolitics’ which he defines as the power and capacity to dictate who may live and who must die.⁴

Within such a multifarious framework of the execution of biopower, gender plays a crucial role. And the marginalised human body itself is constructed as a site for projecting the dominant power’s anxieties of the ‘Other’ as threatening, repulsive, provocative, or otherwise essentially different. Women, already the subordinate population in a strictly patriarchal society, are further subjugated when the ethnic and/or religious community they belong to is itself under the threat of extinction during an armed conflict and various forms of gendered violence are normalised as a direct consequence of it. In this context, any form of biopolitical oppression inflicted on women takes up an intersectional nature which elucidates the fact that these women are oppressed not only because they are females, but because of multiple sources of social identity markers like race, class, religious adherence, and, of course, gender which do not exist independently but rather collectively create a complex convergence of oppression⁵.

The practice of torture and carnage in Iraq during the Islamic State insurgency can be seen to exemplify these notions of biopolitical oppression. According to an article published in October 2014 in the IS online magazine *Dabiq*, the enslavement and rape of Yazidi women are politically (and religiously) justified since the Yazidis, as per beliefs of the IS members, do not conform to the status of *dhimmi* or *mu‘āhid* (non-Muslim population who receives political protection in an Islamic state) because they think that the Yazidis are devil-worshippers.⁶ Hence, from the perspective of IS ideology, Yazidi people are perceived as what Agamben described as *homo sacer*, or summarily depoliticised population who will not receive any legal protection, and thus any kind of oppression or discriminatory action meted out to them will be acceptable. The



following quotation from a report by Salma Abdelaziz shows how the practice of enslaving humans, especially women, belonging to some other religious groups is made legally justified:

One should remember that enslaving the families of the *kuffar* -- the infidels -- and taking their women as concubines is a firmly established aspect of the *Shariah*, or Islamic law⁷

Besides, the concept of borders in such a violently militarised zone gives birth to racialised, sexualised, criminalised, and customarily ‘Othered’ subjectivities which are imposed upon the bodies which have already been stripped of their authenticity and their sense of belongingness. For instance, before the IS attack, Yazidis in Kocho, a village in the Sinjar District of northern Iraq, enjoyed the identity of Iraqi citizens. During the attack, they were immediately reduced to the identity of religious and political Others or, in the IS terminology, *kuffar* in their self-proclaimed Caliphate. The women were further subjugated when they were sold at the slave market of Raqqa, Syria as sex slaves. When some of them managed to return to their homeland again, they were marginalised within their own community on the ground of ‘impurity’ (because they were violated by men from another religion). Finally, when some of them sought asylum in some European countries, they were branded as ‘refugees’.

As Helen M. Buss says in the *Encyclopedia of Life Writing: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms*, “Memoirs personalize history and historicize the personal.”⁸ Unlike a traditional autobiography, a memoir is more like a personal documentation that keeps records of contemporary events. Memoirs are historically important, too, because it is through memoirs that the world comes to know several minute details of a particular incident which would otherwise have never been brought to the fore. Besides, they are now being used as effective tools for testifying to events like genocide and ethnic cleansing.⁹ Yazidi survivor Farida Khalaf’s memoir *The Girl Who Escaped ISIS: This Is My Story* (2017), co-authored by Andrea C. Hoffmann is such a historically significant text that details how the very sense of identity collapses in the backdrop of military invasion and subsequent totalitarianism where biopolitical oppression prevails. The memoir begins with an elaborate illustration of the life Khalaf and her family had before the IS insurgency. The chapter titled ‘Our World As It Once Was’ presents before the readers a minutely detailed picture of a Yazidi family of seven members, happily surrounded by relatives, friends, and neighbors belonging to the same community. The chapter also mentions people belonging to the Muslim community who inhabited the adjacent villages and with whom the Yazidis maintained



a cordial relationship. However, because of the religious misinterpretation of the Yazidi beliefs by the Muslims, there was always an impression of hostility lurking beneath the surface. The memoirist presents herself as a lively and intelligent teenager who shared a great bond with her family and her friends and who aspired to become a mathematics teacher. This idyll began to rupture gradually when inputs of IS attacks from nearby areas kept pouring in and a strange sense of foreboding engulfed the entire village.¹⁰ Finally, the catastrophe takes place on 15 August, 2014 when, after having refused to convert to Islam, all the Yazidis of the village were taken as captives by IS terrorists. Then, “they were separated according to their gender and age”¹¹ and were subjected to different forms of biopolitical oppression. At this stage, they were not regarded as Iraqis anymore; instead, their religious identity becomes predominant on the basis of which they were either treated like a politically unwanted population (men were ruthlessly shot to death, were thrown into pits, and were buried when some were still alive), or politically unwanted, but otherwise profitable population (boys were taken as trainee terrorists and girls and women were used as sex slaves). Gender played a vital role in this entire regime of biopolitical control where women (including girls) were forced to abandon all the identities that had earlier connected them with the pre-war society (like Farida Khalaf, daughter of a soldier, well-trained not only in household chores but also in shooting and driving, academically bright with a special talent in mathematics) and were reduced merely to female bodies which they did not have any authority over. With the change of ‘borders’, as they were brought to the slave market in Syria, they were relegated to the identity of female war captives who can be sexually exploited according to the whims of their ‘owners’. Incidents of complete biological control were recorded where women were “forced to undergo hymen reconstruction before being resold”¹² and were compelled to abort if were found pregnant¹³. Any kind of protest was answered with inhuman atrocities, which is evident in the following excerpt:

Zeyad ... kept thrashing me ever more wildly. Sometimes he used the cable, then the pole with the hooks he'd brought with him. He abused my entire body, not sparing my legs or head either. He whacked my face with the pole, injuring my left eye so I couldn't see out of it anymore.¹⁴

Besides, it was her owner's right to decide whether the woman would need medical treatment¹⁵.

The women's identities were further eradicated when they, as properties of their owners, were coerced into embracing (or, at least, pretending to embrace) their torturers' religion.



Kneeling on their prayer mats, the men carried out the Islamic rituals in sync. Behind them and slightly to one side stood the group of girls, strictly covered in black veils. They too were praying in the Islamic fashion.¹⁶

However, this imposed conversion seems to be equivocal when these very women are verbally abused with the use of offensive religious slurs hurled at them:

“You devilish whore!” he berated me. “Did you think I’d let you play games with me? I’ll show you!” ... A group of about twenty men were standing watching. ... “Go on, show her!” they shouted. “Show her how we treat people who pray to Satan!”¹⁷

This forced change of identities did not only affect the enemy ‘Others’ but also some of those perpetrators who had to give in to the IS ideological indoctrination. Khalaf painstakingly describes how men, especially young boys were propagandized into believing that whatever they are doing is a service to God.

Some, especially the younger men among them, took the ISIS ideology very seriously. They really believed they’d joined a God-fearing outfit and were fighting for a just cause.¹⁸

In the ninth and final chapter of the memoir, ‘No Home, Not Anywhere’, the girls eventually succeeded in escaping the IS camp and making it to the refugee camp near the Kurdish city of Dohuk, Iraq. However, their identities were again stigmatised as ‘fallen’ or ‘tainted’ women:

“Those poor girls,” said one woman...“Our poor girls, defiled,” she lamented. “They’ll never be able to marry. No man will take them as their wife now. Their lives are ruined forever . . .” My heart was pounding like mad and I could barely hold back the tears....So that’s what they really thought of us.... I was a nothing, a nobody, a stranded girl, burdening my relatives. I had no future. Perhaps it would have been better not to return to this world.¹⁹

At this juncture, this demarcation of social boundaries and the sense of alienation that it produces become more agonising for the survivors than the trauma itself that brought about these. Returning inside the familiar national ‘borders’ is rendered to be futile as it fails to bring their earlier identities back to these survivors. To reestablish their ruined identities, they are now compelled to think about their future abroad, albeit with uncertainties.

I thought about it. ... I had to accept that I had absolutely no future here at the moment. I couldn’t even finish my schooling. Instead I was getting wary looks from people. Maybe new opportunities would open up for me in Germany.²⁰

However, this forced metamorphosis does not turn out to be easy as adapting to the culture of a foreign land becomes especially difficult for those with the title of ‘refugees’.



Patricia A. Weitsman, in her paper “The Politics of Identity and Sexual Violence: A Review of Bosnia and Rwanda” says:

In most militarized conflicts, rape serves as a tactic to intimidate, degrade, humiliate, and torture the enemy....[it] may entail the desire to drive the enemy out of a particular geographic region of a country in order to assert ethnic and political dominance. This tactic has often been labeled rape as “ethnic cleansing.”...

Rape becomes a particularly potent form of torture in patriarchal societies in which a woman’s standing derives from her relationship to the men in her family.... In essence, a woman’s identity never really stands alone; it is always juxtaposed by her sexual relationships to men, whether coercive or consensual.²¹

The impact of war and genocide on women becomes more severe when the war atrocities they are subjected to become an intersection of several social categorizations including race, ethnicity, and gender. Besides, it deliberately obliterates their identities while foisting discriminatory boundaries on them both within and outside the geographical and political borders. Farida Khalaf’s memoir voices the collective agony, struggle, and resilience of all those women who share the same experiences of depoliticisation and dehumanisation. It also shows how the highly gendered iconography of war and distorted interpretations of religious texts incite men into acts of violence during armed conflicts. And that is how it becomes a manifesto for all war crime survivors, delineating how identities undergo a profound transformation in zones of armed conflicts where the idea of borders becomes insubstantial, and discriminatory and segregating boundaries further complicate the situation. And, as Margot Wallström noted, the use of sexual violence is not an inevitable consequence of war and that it needs to be stopped²², this memoir acts as a textual protest against this heinous crime by letting the world know about the torture being inflicted on civilians in the name of religious wars.

Notes

¹ Yogita Limaye, “Ukraine conflict: ‘Russian soldiers raped me and killed my husband’”, the *BBC News*, April 11, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-61071243>



² Stephen Morton and Stephen Bygrave, Introduction, *Foucault in an Age of Terror: Essays on Biopolitics and the Defence of Society* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 5.

³ In the 1998 book *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Closely associated with Agamben's idea of *homo sacer*, 'bare life' refers to the kind of life which is not anymore protected under law and thus is exposed to all forms of oppression and discrimination

⁴ Morton and Bygrave, 11

⁵ The term 'intersectionality' was coined by Professor Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989. It refers to the interconnected nature of the social categorizations like race, class, gender, etc as applied to a specific group or a particular individual, while creating an overlapping and interdependent network of discrimination and oppression.

⁶ The Yazidis worship Melek Taus or the Peacock Angel who is believed to be Lucifer or Satan by some radical Islamists

⁷ Salma Abdelaziz, "ISIS states its justification for the enslavement of women", *CNN*, October 13, 2014, <https://edition.cnn.com/2014/10/12/world/meast/isis-justification-slavery/>

⁸ Helen M. Buss, 'Memoirs', in *Encyclopedia of Life Writing: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms*, ed. by Margaretta Jolly (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2001), 595.

⁹ Survivors of war crime like Jan Ruff O'Herne, Nadia Murad, Halima Bashir, and others have used their memoirs as testimonies to the oppression they were subjected to

¹⁰ Farida Khalaf and Andrea C. Hoffmann, *The Girl Who Escaped ISIS: This Is My Story* (New York: Atria Books, 2016), 36-37

¹¹ Peter Nicolaus and Serkan Yuce, "Sex-Slavery: One Aspect of the Yezidi Genocide," *Iran and the Caucasus* 21 (2017) 198, DOI: 10.1163/1573384X-20170205

¹² Nicolaus and Yuce, 200

¹³ Ibid, 205

¹⁴ Khalaf and Hoffmann, 107

¹⁵ Ibid, Chapter 7 (In the Military Camp), 110-132

¹⁶ Ibid, 113

¹⁷ Ibid, 107

¹⁸ Ibid, 123

¹⁹ Ibid, 160-161

²⁰ Ibid, 167

²¹ Patricia A. Weitsman, "The Politics of Identity and Sexual Violence: A Review of Bosnia and Rwanda," *Human Rights Quarterly*, Volume 30, Number 3 (August 2008), 562-564, DOI: 10.1353/hrq.0.0024

²² Barbara Crossette, "A New UN Voice Calls for Criminalizing Conflict Rape", *The Nation*, September 10, 2010, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/new-un-voice-calls-criminalizing-conflict-rape/>

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