

The Minoritized Yazidi Body as a Signifier

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This paper reads the testimonies of Yazidi women who survived their slavery at the hands of ISIS (DAESH) to understand how this *minoritized* body, a term coined by Arjun Appadurai, has become a worldwide signifier. These testimonies have become the only means that allows visibility; yet, the visibility of the violated minoritized body is a fact that still signifies power and instils worldwide horror.

The paper attempts to understand how the minoritized violated female body has become a body politic, onto which power relations are played out and where several discourses intersect.

Key words: Sex slaves, Minoritized body, Yazidi women, Testimony, Voice, Identity politics.

Rape as a Signifier

Raping women has always been a part and parcel of wars and conflicts. Systematic rape is often overlooked and regarded as an inevitable consequence faction of warfare, even normalized on the pretext of soldiers satisfying their sexual appetites. However, raping women has a very specific purpose; that of humiliating the body of the other opponent to whom the women belong. Anne McClintock has explained that usually women are “excluded from direct action as national citizens,” and so they are “subsumed symbolically into the national body politic as its boundary and metaphoric limit” (90). Women are typically constructed as the symbolic bearers of the nations – not to mention a minority – “but are denied any direct relation to national agency” (McClintock 90). Perceived as the cultural markers of national identities and boundaries, women are highly liable to experience physically, discursively, and symbolically all forms of violence related to the denial of agency and subjectivity. It is then understandable how women, in conflict zones, turn into not only a commoditised body but also a tool of retaliation and a means of achieving victory (on their bodies). This othered body has a highly peculiar utility during conflicts and wars, since it becomes the site of conflicting claims.

Deblina Hazra states that it is “a site where the symbolic extermination of an entire community or race can be carried out; it is also a site which bears the burden of honour” (112). The honour of the family, community and the whole race is subsumed in the individual honour of the woman. This is how victory in wars is always written on, and through, women’s bodies. Put differently, raping women becomes a signifier of victory.

On the other hand, wars and conflicts provide a space where the imbalance of gender relations appears starkly. Inger Skjelsbaek explains that, “The war-zone is a place where pre-existing gender relations become accentuated so that if women are perceived as men’s possession in times of peace, they will be perceived as such even more so in times of war” (217). In other words, wars and conflicts usually augment the paradigm of power, especially in instances where women’s positions are already fragile. In *Experiencing War*, Christine Sylvester argues that documenting individual experiences in war is essential for those who want to understand the core of the conflict, and so she calls for taking into consideration all those who “experience war in a myriad of ways possible (...). What unites them all is the human body, a sensing physical entity that can touch war, and an

emotional and thinking body that is touched by it in innumerable ways (1). Sylvester’s entreaty highlights the importance of listening to the voices of people who usually pay a dear price, and yet, unfortunately, typically go unnoticed. In this context, women’s voices and experiences are equally important as men’s in conflicts – since their bodies are targeted – to the extent that one can say that the rise of the Islamic State (Daesh) is synonymous with the waging of war on women, even if we are witnessing the demise of ISIS power.

The emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and more recently, the Islamic State (ISIS, ISIL and IS respectively) in the 21st century is a product of ISIS members’ absolute belief in the necessity of founding a *State* on a radical right-wing discourse. This discourse privileges sameness – of religion and ideology – over difference. Strangely enough, the global narrative around ISIS primarily revolved around its military powers and its appeal to huge numbers of men and women around the world, while no attention was directed to the atrocities being committed against women.

Hence, in this paper I argue that the emergence of the violated/raped/incarcerated female Yazidi body is the signified of the

Islamic State’s discourse. If the Islamic State is a sign of the failure of globalization (as will be explained below) then the Yazidi female body has come to signify the terror this *State* could inflict upon the body, which in turn has become a marketing tool of the Islamic State, to terrorize, demoralize, humiliate, and dehumanize a *minority*. The brutality which Yazidi people had to endure became a signifier of ISIS’s *majoritarian* identity, its ruthless power, and its position vis-à-vis the other. It should be mentioned that the use of the terms signifier and *signified* in this context does not correspond to the *Saussurean* meaning, but rather to what Roland Barthes has formulated. According to Barthes, the signifier is a mediator to handle the words, images, and objects in the sign equation (42). Therefore, the rape enacted upon the Yazidi body becomes a signifier that denotes a crime. Such an abhorrent act requires an interpretation and a meaning, i.e., the signified. The latter is not a thing, but rather “the mental representation of a thing (...) a concept” (42-3). The violated Yazidi body becomes the emblem of a brutal power, it becomes a metalanguage, a discourse that highlights another discourse.

While the violated minoritised body stands as a signifier of ruthless uninhibited power, the signified even implies more

power; that is, the whole paradigm of signification is self-referential. That the signifier and signified are identical in this case is an indicator that the gendered Yazidi body is a space of performing identity politics, a space onto which ideologies – those of ISIS and its adversaries – are inscribed. The small population of Yazidi people were seen by ISIS as synecdochic of all the other groups of those whom they perceive to be heretics.

Yet, the specificity of the situation cannot be understood without contextualizing the history of Yazidis and their culture. The Yazidis are an ethnically Kurdish religious group, and the bulk of their population lives in Iraq, where they make up an important minority community. While Yazidis form one of the oldest minorities in Iraq, they have been the target of persecution for centuries for their beliefs. Their numbers were reduced by massacres and conversions, both voluntary and forced (Schmermund 5). Arjun Appadurai confirms that ethnic violence “is partly a product of propaganda, rumor, prejudice, and memory – all forms of knowledge and all usually associated with heightened conviction, conviction capable of producing inhumane degrees of violence” (“Dead Certainty” 225). With the rise of the Islamic State, many Yazidi villages were captured in August 2014, and their inhabitants had

to flee to Mount Sinjar, where they were besieged. From that point onwards, the tragedy of Yazidis started, and they became a prey for ISIS to prove its power and establish its authority.

By the end of 2014, the Yazidi female body started to be visible internationally, yet only as a mere physical body that is either abducted, maimed or raped. Reports issued about the suffering of Yazidis attracted the attention of numerous international organizations, after which the suffering of this ethnicity made its way to the news. As became apparent, the Yazidi female body has become a contested ground on which ISIS has inscribed its discourse. Hence, it exists within a constant state of precarity. While all “lives are by definition precarious,” Judith Butler argues that the term precarity specifically “designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death” (25). Sadly enough, the Yazidi minority exemplifies this failure par excellence.

This paper will explore the precarious position of the female Yazidi body through Appadurai's concept of the minoritized body. Minorities always remind the majorities of “the small gap which lies between their condition as majorities and the hori-

zon of an unsullied national whole, a pure and untainted national ethos” (Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers* 8). The presence of the minoritized body tarnishes the homogenous nature of the majority. I argue that the minoritized female Yazidi body has simultaneously been a mirror of the terrors of Daesh, and a tool employed by Daesh as well to heal “the anxiety of incompleteness” (Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers* 8). While the argument aims to understand the logic of violence that the Yazidi body has to suffer, it will also read the intersectional discourses of identity that the Yazidi body exhibits to a world that had not previously heard about it. The minoritized body engages three actors: the victim, the perpetrators and the global audience who consume media.

The problem with minorities is that their presence blurs the boundary between an imaginary pure self and the rest of the world. Appadurai has tried to solve the puzzle of why minorities are necessary but unwelcomed, by proposing that “we need the minor groups in our national spaces- if nothing else to clean our latrines and fight our wars” (*Fear of Small Numbers* 44). It is obvious that the ambiguous relation with minorities echoes the ambiguous relation with globalization. Appadurai concludes that globalization “being a force without a face, cannot be the object of ethnocide.

But minorities can" (*Fear of Small Numbers* 44).

Although ISIS violence towards the Yazidis, and in particular the women, is extreme and bloody, it is a justified violence from the perspective of its adherents. ISIS will accept any member provided that they adhere to the principles of the organization. In this sense, ISIS is an Islamic International that has many of the same characteristics of the global transnational corporations which prompted its rise. And, just as the trade of trafficking human beings targets the weakest, poorest and most marginalized, ISIS targets the Yazidi minority, not only as a source of financial profit, but also as a tool of propaganda and a method of spreading panic. The discourse of ISIS confirms the enslavement of Yazidi women, "while defending the practice of 'saby': taking women captured in war, including married women, as sex slaves, often after their husbands have been executed" (Moran 26). The latter objective in particular is a cornerstone in the organisation's ideology - which helps explain the title of the Islamic strategist Abu Bakr Naji's book, *Management of Savagery* (Idārat at-Tawaḥḥuṣ), which can be considered the marker that governs the mindset of ISIS. The Yazidi female body therefore functions as a signifier of the Islamic State's horrific and hostile ide-

ologies towards those adopt different religious beliefs or ideologies.

While this paper intends to explore the position of the female Yazidi body as a minoritised body, it also gives voice to selected testimonies of surviving Yazidi women. This should also highlight the intersectional discourses of identity that such a minoritised body exhibits amid a bloody conflict.

A Minoritized Body

Because the Yazidis are a minority, then the female Yazidi body doubly belongs to a minority as well. Being a minority is the denominator which defines the Yazidi body politic when the women are taken as spoils in the possession of ISIS. However, the term *minority* has multifarious meanings, and so this argument adopts the concept of *minority* as advanced by Appadurai who confirms that it is not only a matter of small numbers that can generate a minority. Accordingly:

Minorities do not come preformed. They are produced in the specific circumstances of every nation and every nationalism. They are often the carriers of the unwanted memories of the acts of violence that produced existing states, of forced conscription or of violent extrusion as new states were formed. And, in addition, as weak clai-

nants on state entitlements or drains on the resources of highly contested national resources, they are also reminders of the failures of various state projects (socialist, developmentalist and capitalist). They are marks of failure and coercion. They are embarrassments to any state-sponsored image of national purity and state fairness. They are thus scapegoats in the classical sense. (Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers* 45)

Appadurai's discussion of minoritisation provides a salient lens through which an outsider can begin to understand the position of the Yazidi women who became spoils of war towards the end of 2014. Ironically enough, because Yazidi people are a minority on the pretext of their religion, until 2014 they were invisible to the extent that they were almost entirely unheard of beyond the region of the Levant and Turkey. Yet following the first testimony of a Yazidi woman, it seemed that the whole world was suddenly eager to try to find out who the Yazidis were. The question remains therefore: how can we interpret the persecution of the female Yazidi body? We need to engage with a rigorous theoretical framework that can explain the fear of small numbers facing minoritisation that nonetheless creates the geography of anger.

Foucault's theory of discipline and punishment has always provided the most convenient approach to examining power relations, whether physical or discursive. It lends itself adroitly to this framework. However, although it is of great use to post-structuralist feminist theory since it considers the body as the main target of power, to do so is not without its problems. In daily life in countries where the rule of law is not the norm, it has become almost normal to torture a man until death, or to sexually abuse a woman in order to humiliate her. Therefore, the imbalance of power relations should be taken into consideration. According to Foucault, in pre-modern societies the body lay completely under the ruthless mercy of disciplinary power, whereas in modern societies it has become docile, and is subsequently able to produce knowledge and subjectivity (138). In modern societies, the law is replaced by the norm, and thus any deviation from the norm is an exception. Whilst the Foucauldian theory vis-à-vis modern power is largely convincing, it fails to explain the savage mindset of ISIS. Rather, ISIS exerts a variety of ideological power that stands as an exception to the normative *modern* notion of Foucauldian power, and whose practices cannot possibly produce any subject.

On the other hand, the feminist critique of the normalising relation between the body and matrices of power is essential. If individuals are simply the products of power, or mere *docile bodies* shaped by power, then it becomes difficult to explain who resists power and why. Thus, Nancy Fraser finds Foucault's assertion that power always generates resistance incoherent (Fraser 29). Supporting Fraser's position, the testimonies of the surviving Yazidi women prove that, for those women at least, their bodies resisted docility, and refused the paradigm of ISIS's disciplinary power, despite the enslaved women having been beaten, whipped, threatened, attacked, raped and incarcerated because they resisted. It must also be noted that some of these women took their own lives to protect their bodies from ISIS brutality and in other cases to elude facing the *shame* rape has wrought (Bahun and Rajan 87). An excerpt of one Yazidi woman's testimony throws light on the validity of the feminist critique of Foucault's claim. Rooba, who was at the time 28 years old, was enslaved by ISIS for 10 months. She says:

They brought us to Raqqa, Syria. One night nine girls tried to flee. They tied their clothes together and made a rope with them and fled from the window but then ISIS fighters found them

and brought them back. They hit all of us because we did not say anything to them about their escape. I was asleep when they came in and punished all of us, whipping us with a big scourge. There were about 70 of us. They put us all in a big room, locked the door and did not give us any water until the next day. Then one day they brought us to another building. On the front it was written something like 'selling place', and there I was sold to a 40-year-old man from Saudi Arabia. He asked me to marry him, and when I refused he said that he would punish me with the objects I saw on the table: a knife, a gun, a rope. But if I married him I would be treated with more respect, as far as I would sleep with him. I refused over and over again. I was sold again. They told me that I better commit suicide. They beat me. They beat my niece, who is only 3 years old. I was then sold again, to a man, a single man, who wanted to marry me and who wanted to sleep with me: I refused with all my energies, and again I was beaten, and so was my little niece. He tried to rape me, and when he couldn't he sold me again. (Catholic)

What we witness in the above testimony, along with those of many of Rooba's fellows, is resistance. Rooba's body and sub-

jectivity are adamant not to give in to the disciplinary practices of ISIS, resulting in her body being far from being *docile* in its enslavement under the organisation. Rooba's body becomes a site of power drainage. Foucault's theorization of the body as a product of power relations is proven invalid.

Another popular interpretation of what is happening to the Yazidi women is that such acts of violence are licensed by the patriarchal character of Islamic fundamentalist beliefs. This interpretation is evidenced by material published by the female media wing of ISIS, *Khansaa Brigade*, where the fact that a woman's role is limited to being a wife is emphasized (Winter). It is rather unconvincing to attribute these ideas merely to patriarchy, a term that requires unpacking to understand its workings in material reality (Kandiyoti 274). Similarly, concepts such as fundamentalism and extremism are abstract notions, incapable of sufficiently theorizing a convincing material explanation of why the Yazidi women were subjected to this ordeal.

As stated earlier, the organisation of ISIS represents an International whose global existence proves the failure of manifestations of globalisation that take pride in diversity and rapidity, and which is itself a reaction to globalisation. By examining

globalisation, we can understand the reasons behind the recentralization of the minoritised body. Appadurai invites us to consider the possibility that "part of the effort to slow down the whirl of the global and its seeming largeness of reach is by holding it still, and making it small, in the body of the violated minor" (*Fear of Small Numbers* 47). That Appadurai takes his examples from liberal democracies is proof of the pressure the minoritized body exerts upon the majority. The minoritised body is a body that must be extinct in order to cure the "anxiety of incompleteness" (*Fear of Small Numbers* 53) of the majority. Appadurai explains that incompleteness in this sense "is not only about effective control or practical sovereignty but more importantly about purity and its relationship to identity" (*Fear of Small Numbers* 53). As for the great capacity of the contrastingly minute Yazidi civilization's persecution to excite international rage, Appadurai offers a convincing answer:

Small numbers represent a tiny obstacle between majority and totality or total purity. In a sense, the smaller the number and the weaker the minority, the deeper the rage about its capacity to make a majority feel like a mere majority rather than like a whole and uncontested ethnos. (*Fear of Small Numbers* 53)

The tension between majoritarian identity and national purity augments the anxiety of incompleteness, and hence ISIS's predation on minoritized identities such as the Yazidi is proven effective. Predatory identities "claim to require the extinction of another collectivity for their own survival" (*Fear of Small Numbers* 51), and most importantly, they are mostly majoritarian identities. That is:

They are based on claims about, and on behalf of, a threatened majority. In fact, in many instances, they are claims about cultural majorities that seek to be exclusively or exhaustively linked with the identity of the nation. (*Fear of Small Numbers* 51)

The dynamics of violence practiced against Yazidi women then, were necessary for ISIS's formation of a collective and monolithic identity of *we*, their subjection being the final step to the movement achieving national/Islamic purity. Appadurai details that the process of forming a collective *we* happens through specific choices and strategies, often carried out by state elites or political leaders, and thus, "particular groups, who have stayed invisible, are rendered visible as minorities against whom campaigns of calumny can be unleashed, leading to explosions of ethnocide" (*Fear of Small Numbers* 45). The campaign that ISIS lev-

eled at Yazidi people was based on religious calumny and deviancy and, since its larger objective was to mobilize (or rather seduce) the members of the Islamic International, the capture of Yazidi women was a form of loud propaganda for such marketing. Sa'd Saloum, an Iraqi researcher, echoes Appadurai's opinion in an article published in an Arabic newspaper, when he questions in a denunciatory tone:

Yazidi men and women pose a worrying image that attracts several accusations, and implies an uneasy ambiguity about a group that lives outside history or in a world of superstition. Does this explain the avoidance of Iraqi intellectuals and researchers to condemn the repeated and opportunistic targeting of Yazidis? And does it explain the reluctance of authorities to initiate a serious investigation about who the perpetrators are? And does it explain also the utter silence of the religious institution? These are perplexing questions that condemn our acceptance of the different other. (Saloum)

Saloum's questions become even more pertinent in light of the testimonies of the Yazidi women, who were not only enslaved, but were also forced to conform to the principles of ISIS. One seventeen year old girl, who did not want to reveal her iden-

tity, recalls that her worst nightmare is that "while raping me they used to force me to recite verses from the Quran or they would whip me" (Testimonies). Furthermore, she asserts that "one time I resisted and one of the guards poured boiling water on my thighs" (Testimonies). As brutal as it sounds, the aim of such torture was to force the women to capitulate, and so to become part of the collective; i.e., to erase their difference. The Yazidi minoritized body has served the purpose ISIS intended: purity. The organisation needed to enact violence to declare its own identity - one based on fixity and timelessness - and the Yazidi minority provided the body politic to enact such violence upon. In an era in which digital technologies are ubiquitous and the circulation of information through internet platforms is commonplace, the testimonies of the Yazidi women who survived their slavery serve, ironically enough, the same purpose as those widely-circulated videos depicting the brutality with which ISIS tortures and kills its victims, which were frequently released in the organisation's earlier years. We can begin to understand that, like the viral videos, these testimonies simply reciprocate and consolidate our fear. They unravel our horror at the worldwide growth of a *predatory* identity, by displaying identity and its discontents par excel-

lence. While the testimonies endow the invisible with visibility and give the Yazidi women a voice, they unfortunately simultaneously serve the purposes of the organisation by spreading a vision of the insidious practices of ISIS towards minoritised women. Additionally, in the eyes of the international community, they summate to become a prominent article of evidence that ISIS is a terrorist organisation, and they thus help to rationalize military interventions in the Middle East. Although the invisible has been rendered visible, the unvoiced has been voiced, the marginal has briefly moved to the centre, and the voiceless have been given voice, the Yazidi female body remains a site upon which several discourses are inscribed with the exception of its value.

The Yazidi body as an intersectional site

The crux of the Yazidi women's plight can therefore be seen to be much more complicated than the physical violation they underwent. By emphasising physical violence as the only factor that marks the violation of the Yazidi body, it is implied that the Yazidi identity is fixed and unchangeable, and that their oppression takes only one form. In truth however, and as this chapter has demonstrated, the manifestations of oppression are various, and become visible according to the fore-

grounded constituents of identity. Positionality became an important concept in identity studies towards the end of the 1980s, emerging out of the fields of post-structural and post-colonial studies. Susan Friedman defines the conception of identity in the discourse of positionality as “the site of multiple subject positions, as the intersection of different and often competing cultural formations of race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, religion, and national origin, et cetera, and so forth” (21). The constituents of the Yazidi identity, similarly, emerge in a succession of categories that could be competing, conflicting, or even contradictory. In the Yazidi positionality, “the definitional focus is not so exclusively on oppression and victimization but rather on various combinations of difference that may or may not be tied to oppression” (Friedman 21). Put differently, the Yazidi identity is not structured only around the fact that they are a minoritised body predated upon, there are other intersecting elements that further complicate their position.

To clarify, from the outset of the victimisation process, the Yazidi women’s identity has been reduced to that of their bodies. Their bodies have accordingly become the carrier of multiple transversal discourses: ethnic, religious, gendered, political, national and international.

Accordingly, we must ask once more: who are the Yazidis? They are not quite Kurds, because they follow a different religion which is Yazidism, which they themselves consider a religious and ethnic identity. Hence they are a religious minority inside a Sunni majority. Yet, the Kurds themselves are not a majority, but an ethnic minority from the point of view of official regimes. In this way, the Yazidis are a religious minority within another ethnic minority. Thus, the factors of ethnicity, language and religion inflect the Yazidi identity, and when it comes to women, the factor of gender is added to the paradigm.

When the first Yazidi women were captured by ISIS in 2014, the factor of gender was foregrounded in news reports, yet they were captured primarily because of their religion. This explains the logic behind the slave market; when gender became the main marker of these women, they were turned into a commodity. In 2014, an October edition of *Dabiq* claimed that “Enslaving the families of the kuffar [non-believers] and taking their women as concubines is a firmly established aspect of the Sharia [Islamic Law]” (Boren).

The commodification and reification of the female Yazidi body frames and circumscribes all the other constituents of Yazidi identity. The families of the women who have survived their slavery centralise the

importance of the crime of rape, or to be more accurate, the tarnished honour. Khalida Khalid, adviser to the speaker of parliament in Kurdistan, argues that “We’re more concerned about what will happen later to these women, will they face discrimination or violence from their families” (Fadel). Dealing with the issue of rape by ISIS is quite complicated and, if it is mishandled, holds the potential to re-traumatize the victims (Fadel). The international community perceives the Yazidi women as the living proof of ISIS’s savagery; international non-governmental organisations condemn the crimes of war perpetrated upon them; and Muslim scholars never stop emphasizing the tolerant character of Islamic doctrine by explicating the position of minorities vis-à-vis the principle of shari’a [Islamic Law]. Yazidi women’s identity is accordingly inflected at the crossroads of many different formations of power and powerlessness. Likewise, the discourse of multiple positionality – whereby sexuality stands right at its centre – yields an interactional analysis of identity as the product of interdependent systems of alterity, imbalanced power relations and power interests.

How could the precarity that encompasses the Yazidi women be eliminated? What guarantees the rights of a minority caught in a conflict zone? Apparently nothing.

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Conflicts and wars appear to mean precarity by default. Additionally, and taking into consideration Fraser's concept of redistribution, while social justice should eliminate precarity, the drifting apart of gender justice and social justice goals have generated grave consequences, including: the utter misrecognition of sexual and gender based violence (SGBV). Female bodies remain a battlefield.

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