



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Bearing Witness To The Gendered Violence And Women's Agency In Nadia Murad's *The Last Girl* And Christina Lamb's *Our Bodies, Their Battlefield*

Ms. Richa Chand

Assistant Professor, Department Of English
NSN PG College, Lucknow

Abstract : Women are the worst sufferers during conflict and yet they are significantly absent from all efforts to mitigate it, all endeavours to record it and all initiatives to resolve it. War being a masculine construct has hardly allowed women space to record their experiences since times immemorial. Nevertheless, the changing face of violent conflicts in the twenty-first century, urges reconsideration in the discriminatory practices that disregard the permanent and often devastating consequences of wars on the lives of women. An intersectional perspective that includes the intricacies of race, gender, religion, background, geographics and politics, must be endorsed so as to understand the overall impact of armed conflicts on the other half of the population. In addressing the reckless erasure of women's histories and experiences, particularly of sexual violence, women must shoulder the responsibility of representation, hence standing in solidarity for the mute voices drowned away by the cacophonous business of warfare. This research paper proposes to study Nadia Murad's *The Last Girl* and Christina Lamb's *Our Bodies, Their Battlefield* as examples of the agency of women in regrouping and rebuilding from their shattered, limiting and chaotic surroundings.

Keywords: Women, Conflict, Peace, Security, War, Gender Based Violence, Displacement.

Women's role in war torn areas are being increasingly analysed using feminist war studies, gender justice, and intersectionality in the twenty-first century. No longer situated at the periphery of war narratives, women are being recognized as deliberate victims of war crimes alongside being key agents of peacebuilding, justice, and post-conflict reconstruction. From the battlefronts to global diplomatic negotiations, women's experiences expose the gendered nature of war and the indispensability of feminist perspectives towards peace and security. Owing to enhanced coverage for instance, armed conflicts in all major regions including Syria, Ukraine, Sudan, and Afghanistan helps reveal the militarization of gender during wars. Despite being disproportionately impacted through displacement, sexual violence, and collapse of social infrastructure women are seen as making immense contributions to organizing, caretaking and rebuilding their war-torn communities. This is evidenced in Nadia Murad's *The Last Girl* and Christina Lamb's *Our Bodies, Their Battlefield*, which emphasizes the rise of a new generation of survivor-activists who are reframing the narrative from one of victimhood to that of agency, actively seeking justice and international accountability.

Sexual violence has commonly been used as a weapon of war for centuries, silencing survivors and fostering a culture of impunity. The emerging new stories driven by brave individuals or survivors however not just boldly challenge the heinous aspects of wars and conflicts but also actively seek justice. Documented in Nadia Murad's memoir *The Last Girl* her story of captivity reveals appalling insights into the world and minds of perpetrators of violence. The Yazidi captive of ISIS effectively translates her trauma into a testimony of extreme violence, resilience and sheer grit through which she becomes the voice for

many like her. Calling out the systemic abuses, Murad carefully records an oft neglected side of history revolving around women and their experiences of violence during armed conflict. Through the help of her lawyer Amal Clooney, she is able to express her trauma before the United Nations and world leaders, allowing her to take control of her narrative. Murad as such protects herself from being dehumanized by her trauma and rather uses it to demand justice as well as shakes the world's consciousness creating awareness.

Similarly, Christina Lamb's *Our Bodies Their Battlefield* intensely records the myriad instances of sexual violence used as a weapon during conflicts. Ranging from the Bosnian women's accounts during the siege of Sarajevo to the plight of women in Rwanda, Nigeria, Burma, Philippines and the Democratic Republic of Congo, Lamb painstakingly documents and brings into the global purview their surreal stories of pain, turmoil and resistance. Through her testimony she evidences storytelling as an act of political resistance. By making it a tool that forces global consciousness to look inwards in shame as they recall the suppression of crimes against women as a mere casualty of war in official records, she avenges and implores a revision in an outlook that inadvertently disadvantages women.

Both Murad and Lamb transcend themselves from simply being storytellers to revolutionists, insisting upon institutional transformations. Murad's relentless lobbying led to UN intervention wherein sexual violence as a weapon of war became duly acknowledged, paving the way for prosecution of ISIS members on charges of genocide, thus playing a crucial role in shaping policy (Human). Similarly, in chronicling the several cases in her *Our bodies Their Battlefield*, Lamb demonstrates the agency of survivors as their movements and demonstrations compelled national and international agencies to respond. Boldly resisting the legal systems that have since long remained ineffective in prosecuting sexual violence, women from Rwanda, Bukavu, Philippines and Argentina amongst others, call for international accountability and structural change. Lamb's survivors prove their resilience, hope and strength to rebuild through an optimistic outlook amidst sheer adversity, loss and unfathomable trauma.

A central theme of both texts is the recovery of identity seen clearly in Murad's staunch resistance of being perceived as merely a victim, as well as the myriad survivors of rape in Lamb's anthology where they collectively refuse to be defined by their trauma. In her speeches and writing, Murad insists upon dignity, resilience, and the right to be looked upon beyond the trauma she underwent in ISIS captivity (BBC). Lamb too demonstrates how women of different cultural backgrounds derive strength from solidarity, activism, and leadership. Congolese survivors in Panzi Hospital for instance, not only recover from horrendous mutilations but also become trained advocates, transforming their roles from passive recipients of aid to empowered agents of change. This redefinition turns survivors into agents of history, with the ability to reshape collective memory and influence future policies.

The Last Girl and *Our Bodies, Their Battlefield* together demonstrate a worldwide paradigm shift. Survivor-activists are not only disrupting the silence over sexual violence but are reshaping the political and moral terrain through their incessant efforts for justice and recuperation. Their bravery breaks with narratives of powerlessness, instead spotlighting a movement characterized by resilience, equality, and change. By raising their voices against impunity and calling for accountability, women in these books redefine survival as not simply a destination but rather a new beginning of advocacy, agency, and reformation.

Both the works thus help highlight an interplay of the myriad forms of oppression including racism and sexism which compound to shape women's experiences, evidencing the triple-marginalization they face based on gender, race and country. Intersectionality here plays a crucial role in highlighting the ethnic, political as well as the gendered dimensions of brutality against women during conflict situations. In both *Our Bodies, Their Battlefield* and *The Last Girl* intersectionality remains essential in comprehending how various overlapping systems of oppression such as gender, ethnicity, class and religion for instance, align to constitute women's experiences of conflict based violence. Murad painstakingly shares her traumatizing experiences as a Yazidi woman who was enslaved by the ISIS, asserting how her identity situated her at a unique place of vulnerability, further enhanced by a general simplicity and lack of awareness characteristic of women living in remote regions worldwide. She was targeted firstly as a woman and then also persecuted for belonging to an ethno-religious minority. While her femininity made her vulnerable to sexual enslavement, as a Yazidi she also became a victim of genocidal violence and as such the convergence of

gendered and religious forms of oppression subjected her to extraordinarily brutal sufferings alongside systematic reinforcement.

In *Our Bodies, Their Battlefield*, Lamb offers a world-wide overview of sexual violence during war, demonstrating that it is never randomly executed or touched with an aspect of neutrality but rather is highly structured by race, ethnicity, class and geopolitics. For instance, she discusses how women in the Democratic Republic of Congo are raped not only to traumatize them individually but also to break up entire communities, more so if they belong to marginalized ethnic groups. In a similar vein, Lamb juxtaposes the international community's discriminatory attention based on race and geography, highlighting that African and Middle Eastern survivors tend to be less represented and supported compared to the European victims. Such inequalities expose the manner in which world power dynamics traverse local identities to dictate whose suffering is remembered and whose disregarded.

Both books hence express that sexual violence in war cannot be exclusively understood with a gendered analysis alone but rather requires an intersectional perspective that takes into cognizance the nuances of survivors' identities. Through Murad's own story and Lamb's journalistic expertise, both works demonstrate the ways in which women are doubly or even triply marginalized by perpetrators of violence, poverty, silencing, social stigma and international failure to deliver justice. Their testimonies confront the reductive accounts of victimhood to reveal the multi-tiered injustices that govern women's lives during armed conflicts. Intersectionality as such not only is an analytical tool but also a method of an all-encompassing justice, warranting that the survivor's humanity as well as distinctiveness is duly recognized and heard.

In opposing the systematic erasure of women's experiences in war zones, both *Our Bodies, Their Battlefield* and *The Last Girl* document women's agency in shouldering the responsibility for sharing their own history and of those silenced by war. The books challenge a prevailing discourse which tends to sideline the suffering of women as collateral damage. Murad's own testimony, born of genocide against the Yazidis and personal experiences as a victim of sexual slavery under the ISIS, is not just a chronicle of violence but a call for justice and cognition of the heinous atrocities that many women like her suffer as a consequence of wars and armed conflicts. Her voice becomes a repository for the voiceless others, holding within itself both acute suffering and defiance. Similarly, Lamb in her worldwide reporting, amplifies the voices of survivors from Nigeria, Bosnia, Syria and Congo, showcasing the ways in which despite the brutalization, women exercise agency in their struggle for recognition, justice and healing.

Both the works highlight the fact that women are not merely passive victims but rather active agents in recuperating as well as rebuilding from the destructions of war. Murad's evolution from a survivor to Nobel Prize winner is a metaphor for regaining power and identity, illustrating how frank expression becomes an act of resistance against erasure or censorship. Lamb on the other hand illustrates the survivors efforts towards organizing support groups, breaking with taboos, and negotiating international legal frameworks, demanding that sexual violence during war be sanctioned as a war crime. Against this background, women's agency is not just individual but also collective, grounded in solidarity, testimony and the sheer will to rewrite narratives that have kept them, secluded and sidelined. These texts challenge the tumult and constraints of war with resilience, demonstrating that even as horrors plummet to the depths of destruction, women remain at the forefront in undertaking the responsibility to remember, resist and rebuild.

As per UN Under-Secretary-General and UN Women Executive Director Sima Bahous, "Amid the global escalation of conflicts and humanitarian crises, strengthening women's participation in peace, security, humanitarian action and resilience is imperative." Principal frameworks such as UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, however, remain largely incapable in ensuring equal representation of women in formal peace talks or even in post-conflict government institutions. Nonetheless, grass-roots movements spearheaded by women, especially from the marginalized groups, are taking revolutionary change to the roots such as the Meira Paibis of Manipur, Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP), Kashmir and even Leymah Gbowee's prayer circle in Liberia. These movements emphasize that true peace is not merely the absence of conflict but the presence of justice, equality, and healing. Understanding women's roles in war and peace in the twenty first century requires an intersectional lens that accounts for the ways ethnicity, class, religion, or geography shape both vulnerability and resistance. As international conflicts change, so must our responses in placing women's voices at the centre not just ethically but as a strategic imperative for enduring peace.

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