



From Captivity to Empowerment: the Spectrum of Farida Khalaf's Journey in *The Girl Who Beat ISIS*

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Abstract

*Conflicts have existed between countries, races, groups, civilizations, customs, genders, castes, colors, religions, and even faiths from the beginning of human history. Numerous conflicts have been sparked by these divisions, which have had a lasting effect on society as a whole in addition to causing suffering and destruction personally. In this context, Farida Khalaf is a renowned name who through her memoir *The Girl Who Beat ISIS* explores a remarkable transformation from a victim of ISIS captivity to a symbol of resilience and empowerment. The paper examines the broader themes of resistance, survival, and the reclaiming of identity in the face of extreme adversity, emphasizing how Khalaf's journey transcends personal suffering to become a testament to human strength and empowerment, adding with the contemporary struggles for freedom and dignity.*

INTRODUCTION

ISIS's savagery is well-known around the world, partly because of the compelling accounts of its survivors. These reports detail the horrifying crimes committed by ISIS against non-Muslim men and women belonging to different ethnic groups, including as Christians, Yazidis, and Kurds, with the intention of inciting fear and subjugation among these populations. But in this horrifying environment, the situation of non-Muslim women is especially dire. In addition to experiencing the same levels of violence as men, women were routinely dehumanized, viewed like commodities, and made into inanimate objects of trade. Many were held captive, purchased and sold as commodities, or presented as gifts to combatants, who then used their corpses as weapons of mass destruction. This harsh reality is captured in the story of Farida Khalaf in *The*

Girl Who Beat ISIS. She endured unspeakable atrocities as a Yazidi woman held captive by ISIS, including physical assault and servitude, all of which were intended to rob her of her humanity and will.

Textual and Theoretical Discourse

Farida's survival and tenacity are powerfully demonstrated in *The Girl Who Beat ISIS*. The autobiographical book, which was co-written with German journalist Andrea C. Hoffmann and released in 2016, details Khalaf's terrifying journey from a perfect life to the atrocities of captivity. The narrative describes how ISIS kidnapped Farida, her companions, and other women, sending them into a nightmare. While some young ladies, as young as 13 or 14, were quickly taken by powerful fighters, Farida, who was 18, and her friend Evin, who was 24, were

deemed "too old" and were finally sold into slavery.

Khalaf's testimony is narrated in the first person, giving the reader a deeply personal and immersive experience of her journey. The book is structured into three distinct parts: the prologue, the main body of the story, and the epilogue. The core of the narrative is divided into nine chapters, each capturing a pivotal phase of her ordeal. These chapters are titled: 'Our World as it Once Was,' 'The Final Wonderful Summer,' 'The Catastrophe,' 'The Slave Market in Raqqa,' 'In the Dark Room,' 'With the Beasts,' 'In the Military Camp,' 'The Road out of Hell,' and 'No Home Not Anywhere.'

In the author's note that precedes the piece, Khalaf discloses that she would like not be identified as Farida and that her real name is Khalaf. This choice highlights the risk and vulnerability she remains in even after making her getaway. Khalaf gives readers a peek into her early years as she muses about her childhood in the prologue. This is when we meet her father, who tries to teach her strength by teaching her how to use a rifle, giving her an early taste of the strength she would need on her terrifying trip.

My father showed me how to stand. 'Put your left foot a touch further forward and bend your legs slightly.' He corrected my posture by taking hold of my shoulders from behind and adjusting my torso so I was front on. As a border guard in the Iraqi army he knew how to handle rifles. He placed the gun, an AK-47, in my hands. The Kalashnikov wasn't as heavy as I'd anticipated. (1)

This blend of innocence and preparedness sets the stage for the unimaginable trials that follow, framing the resilience and courage that define her story.

Khalaf, a Yazidi girl living in the quiet town of Kocho, tucked away in the northern Iraqi foothills, was born in 1995. She had an ambition of being a math teacher as she grew up playing with her brothers and friends and doing well in school. Farida was the only member of her family who hoped to use education to expand her

horizons and go beyond the hamlet. But when ISIS attacked her village in August 2014, life took a terrible turn and her hopes were dashed.

ISIS militants started a genocidal onslaught on the Yazidi people when she was just eighteen, enjoying her last summer before her final year of school. The ladies of Kocho were taken prisoner and sold into slavery, while the men and boys, including Farida's father and brother, were ruthlessly killed. Farida was one of the people kidnapped; her life turned into a nightmare overnight. After being imprisoned in a slave camp and traveling through ISIS fighters' residences, she was finally sent to a training camp in the desert. She resisted with unwavering bravery in the face of the enormous cruelty and violence.

ISIS fighters slaughtered the village's men and boys in the name of jihad before putting the single women and girls—including Farida Khalaf and her friend Evin—on a bus at gunpoint. After being brought to Raqqa, they were bought and sold into sexual slavery. Khalaf suffered horrendous treatment from her kidnappers, who frequently sexually assaulted her and beat her so badly that she lost sight in one eye and was unable to walk for two months. Her testimony highlights the harsh, extreme mindset of ISIS by eloquently illustrating the savage and merciless torture imposed on these women. She recalls:

The caliph has chosen you to be his brides, then it was the turn of the rest of us. A tall, bearded man stood us, his legs apart. He behaved like a state official. Do all of understand Arabic? he asked with a strong Baghdad accent of the girls nodded timidly... (65).

A vicious and cruel terrorist organization, the Islamic State (ISIS) dubbed itself "The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant." At its height, the gang raced over northern and central Iraq, taking enormous swathes of territory, including Mosul, the country's second-biggest city. It looked unstoppable. ISIS fighters assaulted Kocho in August 2014, moving in columns and carrying a black combat banner. The Iraqi armed forces, albeit outnumbered and outfitted with weapons

provided by the United States, fled, unable to withstand the fury of ISIS's assault.

ISIS fighters wanted to eliminate non-Muslim populations, especially by killing and destroying their women, all in the name of establishing a global Islamic state based on the Quran and Sharia law. They considered its so-called holy war to be fought in Allah's name, even if it meant coercing people into becoming Muslims. Nonetheless, a large number of moderate Muslims and Islamic academics vehemently contend that this violent view is a misrepresentation of Islam. The indiscriminate cruelty exhibited by ISIS, they contend, is wholly inconsistent with the actual meaning of the Prophet Muhammad's holy jihad, which advocated for peace rather than combat.

The misinterpretation of jihad by groups like ISIS serves their political agenda, using religion as a means to convert non-Muslim minorities for personal gain and political power, undermining the very essence of non-violence. Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, in his book *The True Jihad: The Concept of Peace, Tolerance and Non-Violence in Islam*, articulates the authentic meaning of jihad, emphasizing its foundations in peace, tolerance, and non-violence. According to him:

The word 'jihad' has nowhere been used in the Qur'an to mean war in the sense of launching an offensive. It is used rather to mean 'struggle' the action most consistently called for in the Qur'an is the exercise of patience. (p. 7-8)

ISIS's savagery against Yazidi men, women, and children caused unspeakable agony and destruction, harming both civilization and human lives beyond repair. Yazidis, who experienced terrible persecution, spoke of a profound sense of estrangement and group persecution. The Yazidi community developed a separatist ideology and identity in response to the violent oppression they experienced at the hands of ISIS as a result of this systematic dehumanization. Khalaf depicts in graphic detail the cruel treatment Yazidi women received, including how they were tortured like animals and used as slaves in the night markets run by

ISIS. In her memoir, she describes this horrifying incident, giving a vivid picture of the unimaginable horrors.

The men voiced their wishes and preferences candidly. In conversation they'd frequently reassure each other that they were justified in enslaving us because, as non-Muslims, we were not their equals as people. As pious Muslims they were the master race and we were subhuman. And in a group where everyone thought the same way, perhaps after a while they actually believed this to be true. We, however, made every effort to upset their view of the women "What you're doing is wrong," we told them. "Your religion does allow you to kidnap and sell women." (74)

Khalaf's story highlights the terrifying absence of escape from the clutches of ISIS fighters and the harsh reality that Yazidi women and girls must endure. Young girls are allowed to live with their mothers at first, but this brief period of safety is fleeting as they are eventually split up and coerced into marriages. Abduction for forced marriage is unquestionably an act of violence against women and a violation of their fundamental human rights, according to the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993).

Violence against women encompasses any act of gender-based violence that may lead to physical, sexual, or psychological harm. This includes threats, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether in public or private. However, ISIS militants have grossly exceeded all limits, subjecting Yazidi women and girls to torture, dehumanization, and rape. Khalaf recounts a particularly harrowing night when ISIS militants used the *Quran* to justify their abduction of Yazidi women and girls. They enforced forced marriages that involved coerced conversions, physical violence, and mental abuse.

Muslimah intellectuals and activists contend that the *Quran* should be used as a

primary source when redefining the fight for liberation within the Islamic framework. They think that the message that the Prophet Muhammad brought to Arabia in the seventh century should continue to empower women even after he passed away. These women aim to uphold and further the democratic and liberating values that the Prophet supported, anchored in spirituality, by actively participating in Islamic tradition.

In her recent book *Inside the Gender Jihad*, Amina Wadud, a prominent Islamic feminist, details her activism and intellectual battle against gender prejudice. She criticizes both conservative and progressive interpretations of Islam, contending that the divine authority, writings, or rules are frequently misapplied by those in positions of power to marginalize women. According to her, Islam is essentially antithetical to patriarchy, which deprives women of their moral autonomy and erodes genuine submission to God. In order to promote a dynamic engagement with Islam that upholds justice and equality for women, Wadud maintains that Islamic texts must be the foundation for continuous discussion, analysis, and reinterpretation.

But, according to the indoctrination of ISIS militants, Yazidis are seen as servants of their "Prince of Hell," and they believe that their actions are justified by their interpretation of the Quran. They assert that Yazidis, in their eyes, are permanent property. Khalaf recounts a poignant incident involving a friend who was being forcibly married. The young fighter guarding her handed her his phone, urging her to call her family with a heartbreaking message: "This is my last message because I am going to be married by force to this fighter. I just want to see you one last time, and then I will kill myself" (93). In this moment of despair, as hope fades under the oppressive weight of ISIS's tyranny, Khalaf's narrative resonates deeply, allowing readers to connect with the harrowing experiences of the women. "She started to whisper, Freedom. And then I started shouting, Freedom! I thought to myself, this is the first time I have ever heard my own voice" (113).

Khalaf eventually fled into the desert with five little girls in her care after undergoing

excruciating physical agony and torture at the hands of ISIS fighters. Her first step toward overcoming the horrors perpetrated by ISIS was this audacious deed. She eventually reunited with her other family members after arriving at a refugee camp in Iraqi Kurdistan with the other girls after crossing the desert. This voyage is a potent monument to the fight for independence and survival in the face of insurmountable obstacles, as well as a representation of her valor and tenacity. However, the quest for freedom leads to a deeply unsettling twist in her narrative: the escapees face stigmatization from their traditional community. When she felt unwelcome in her own community, she took the brave step of moving to Germany, hoping to revive her childhood dream of becoming a mathematics teacher. Yet, her relentless pursuit of justice for the atrocities committed against her and her community by ISIS remains at the forefront of her aspirations.

CONCLUSION

At the end, it can be said that Khalaf's narration follows her journey from captivity to empowerment, is a moving example of how resilient people can be when faced with unfathomable hardship. Her terrifying experiences serve as a stark reminder of both the ferocity of ISIS and the incredible fortitude and resolve that may arise from suffering. Her journey from a victim to an advocate for justice personifies the struggle against injustice and provides guidance for those who have endured comparable suffering. She not only regains her identity and dreams via her story, but she also advocates for societal reform and acknowledges the horrors her community has endured. Her story is one of survival told with courage, hope, and resiliency. The systemic inequities and larger societal problems that women have endured for millennia still seem overwhelming, despite their extraordinary strength. Although admirable, their bravery is insufficient to eradicate ingrained prejudice or raise awareness of the problem of crimes against women. In order to address these injustices and promote long-lasting change, Khalaf's experiences demand a communal awakening and action.

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