

# Female Survival as Moral Resistance: An Ethico-Philosophical Reading of Nadia Murad's *The Last Girl* Through the *Thirukkural*

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**Abstract**—This paper provides a moral philosophy reading of *The Last Girl – My Story of Captivity and My Fight Against the Islamic State* and challenges the idea here that Nadia Murad writes as a daughter of Yazidi and the consequences of this statement to the female survivors, as opposed to her as princesses in need of re-education done as a survival strategy is a form of moral resistance lacking the sympathy. Placing the testimony of Murad in the generic ethical scheme of the *Thirukkural*, a classical text of Tamil which is based on principles of virtue, compassion, justice, restraint and protection of the vulnerable on this grounds, past partisanship the paper explores how gendered violence, religious persecution and herself produce not only humanitarian disaster, but also complete ethical disaster. In a detailed account of the story of abduction, sexual enslavement and survival by Murad, the article states that violence against women is one of the gauge indicators that suggests the moral decadence of societies that were fashioned under the influence of both the military and ideology distortion. Methodologically, the paper is an attempt to blend both the moral philosophy and practical ethics into a thematic approach, Ways to take the Kural into English short of making it an unwieldy poem which cannot be translated or also fails in doing so trying to create nuances of meaning not dogmatical equivalences everything in this is done so that nuances of meaning rather than dogmatic equivalences may come out. The analysis shows how Murad's act of survival and witness cannot be solely about personal endurance; it also transcends the call to If dehumanisation, restores moral visibility at all possible levels and demands global accountability. Holding a classical ethical text up against a modern memoir of genocide, and making references to trauma theory as well as other philosophical traditions in so doing, the paper says that universal moral philosophy still matters to interpret these narratives of gendered violence,

trauma and resistance increasing coming from young writers at very high levels.

**Index Terms**—Nadia Murad, female survival, moral resistance, gender ethics, testimony, ethical philosophy, genocide narratives

## I. INTRODUCTION

Accounts of genocide and mass violence are not just sites of suffering, but interrogation. The life writing forged under conditions of extreme violence demands interpretive frames that speak to the particularities of lived trauma and ethical constellations rendering such events real. Nadia Murad's *The Last Girl: My Story of Captivity and My Fight Against the Islamic State* is a case in point. Born of atrocity and terror, she learned as a young girl that under these systems their life became valueless. Nadia Murad's *The Last Girl* Drawing from personal testimony, this powerful account is Amal's attempt to make sense of the horror she all too often experienced in both the west and middle east.

The Yazidi, a tiny ethno-religious minority in northern Iraq, have been persecuted for centuries, tortured and killed by Ottoman Turks as well as Saddam Hussein loyalists and I.S.I.S., which was recorded by the United Nations Human Rights Council as genocide. ISIS systematically slaughtered Yazidi men and enslaved women, prompting tens of thousands to become displaced. According to reports more than six thousand women from the Yazidi sect were abducted and hundreds of girls were forcibly wedded, as entire villages were razed. These atrocities can be cited by those who consider that Murad's memoir is to some extent an act of personal testimony and evidence of a

mass ethical collapse. Scholars interested in *The Last Girl* so far have predominantly engaged the memoir via trauma studies, feminist testimony, survivor resilience and human rights advocacy. While these views have yielded valuable insights, they tend to be stuck in descriptive, psychological or juridical models. What has been less explored is the memoir's potential as an ethical text it is not just that of a chronicler of suffering but also that of essentially evaluating a moral context in which violence becomes accepted. In this article, the gap is filled by using an ethical-comparative moral-philosophical method to read Murad's testimony against the background of the *Thirukkural*, a classical Tamil treatise in one thousand three hundred and thirty couplets on virtue, justice, compassion, virility or restraint of cruelty and moral responsibility. All Kural references in this article are from G. U. Pope's English translation, *The Sacred Kural; or, The Tamil Veda of Tiruvalluvar* (1886). The ethical outlook in the *Thirukkural* is universal. Thiruvalluvar's argument for the sheltering of the vulnerable and for justice and compassion as inseparable has crucial implications towards reading contemporary tales of violence and displacement. As such, this article employs the *Thirukkural* as its primary comparative touchstone while acknowledging that the cross-cultural conversation about ethics is hugely valuable.

The key point of the study posits that the survival of women constitutes a moral condition. Survival in the narration pieces by Murad is not only an act of biological survival, but a moral strike, a protest against dehumanization, epistemology, and annulment. When the Yazidi women are imposed and transported there in their numbers through systematic rape and enslavement, the occurrence explains how gender serves as a tactic of cultural extermination. It is a violence that is inevitable and the antithesis of ethical inversion where brute strength is herded with right with the control of religious and social standards. The *Thirukkural* directly refutes this reversal through the statement that the source of moral authority lies in compassion and justice and not conquest, ideology and domination.

Comparing the lived experiences by Murad and the moral commandments advocated by Thiruvalluvar and placing them in the context of the world morality, this article proposes that the violence against women is the greatest failure of morality of the society. The article

is a thematic moral-philosophical evaluation, as far as the methodology is concerned, based on paraphrased Kurals of well-known English versions [Pope, 1886] and applicable interdisciplinary understandings, which sheds some light on ethical aspects that are more than what is written. Reading Murad as an ethical witnessing, the policy of witnessing is not merely a form of remembering but it is also a moral citation. Her choice to name and define her trauma turns it into a personal experience as well as a collection of moral knowledge, which has to challenge not only the people who commit such action but also the moral apathy of the entire world witness. That way, the testimonial work will be an ethically healing profession that will re-establish the value of the human being amidst cruelty and hostility. Placing a traditional ethical text within a discussion with a broad-stroke modern account of genocide and gender-based violence, and performing an appeal to other paradigms of philosophy and trauma, this essay claims the value of the traditional moral philosophy to literary studies. It insists that the moral valence of violence cannot be separated out of the gender justice, responsibility, and global solidarity issues, and that the story of Murad shows how moral resistance works through survival, telling the truth, and moral pleas of justice.

## II. YAZIDI IDENTITY, RELIGIOUS MARGINALISATION, AND ETHICAL PRECARIETY

In *The Last Girl*, Yazidi identity is found by the protagonist in a fragile, but unbroken moral ecology not only taught in oral narrative as opposed to institutional scripture. By saying, "Yazidism is an ancient monotheistic religion, spread orally by holy men entrusted with our stories" (Murad, 6), Murad foreshadows a religious practice that is founded on narrative practices found in collective memory, practice and responsibility. It is important to note that her metaphor of comparing Yazidism to "an ancient tree with thousands of rings" (6) is central, and it determines the history of the Yazidis not merely as a covenantal dogma but as a repository of the hoard of morals, where every single generation carries the writings of survival, loss, and continuity. The picture of successful flourishing combined with the repetitive trauma suggests that the identity of the Yazidi is not based on endurance alone but persecution as well. On

the other hand, the oral based form of religious continuity is a weakness – it is a form of allowing a slip to take place in the preeminent hierarchical theology that authorises itself by means of text. Murad records how her people were acrimonied on a daily basis, “People say that Yazidism isn’t a ‘real’ religion because we have no official book like the Bible or the Koran... they say we are dirty” (28). In the delegitimation, a pathway of religious distinction degenerates into the moral inferiority and discrimination becomes a natural or appropriate thing to do. This verdict dilutes religion to its written signifiers, traditions, codes of purity, as it dispenses with the ethical spirit of the community that the religion has cultivated. It is not just the open-minded cheating but the ethical vaporization the statement that the right of mankind to dignity and even to safety is extinguished when it becomes inconvenient or shameful to see it. A hefty moral rebuttal to this reason is provided in the *Thirukkural*. Thiruvalluvar specifically divides the moral value off of any performance or institutional endorsement which states: “Spotless be thou in mind! These only merits virtue’s name; All else, mere pomp of idle sound, no real worth can claim” (Kural 34, trans. G.U. Pope). Moreover, Murad associates the process of religious marginalization with tolerance of violence as the element of Iraqi society. The fact that “no one who had been through an Iraqi school would think that we deserved to have our religion protected, or that there was anything wrong or strange about endless war” (31) points to the way the whole process of ethical desensitization typically gets established. Education is not a form of correcting morality instead it becomes the process through which violence is humanized and compassion is taken out of us. This justification of war creates a society where the oppression of minorities is never seen by society as injustice, but rather it is natural. The *Thirukkural* constantly discourages this moral corruption, and Thiruvalluvar says that during times of high disturbance, justice must not be withheld: “Even to those that hate make no return of ill; So shalt thou wisdom’s highest law, ‘tis said, fulfil” (Kural 203). In addition, Thiruvalluvar says, “To punish wrong, with kindly benefits the doers ply; Thus shame their souls; but pass the ill unheeded by” (314) and this is the norm that Buddhism (ahimsa) and the call of Christians to love their enemies share. The fact that

most people do not care about Yazidi suffering thus denotes a failure of civilizational ethics. A society that loses the habit of being compassionate to the vulnerable in society, particularly to those religious minorities, loses the moral legitimacy.

The preliminary thoughts of Murad demonstrate that the Yazidi genocide was not entirely predisposed by the extremist violence per se; it was also a result of the persistent lack of ethical security formed by religious marginalization, institutional indifference, and a general culture of cruelty. Through examining the moral philosophy of the *Thirukkural*, “What is the work of virtue? ‘Not to kill’; For ‘killing’ leads to every work of ill” (321), it is observed how Yazidi suffering throws into focus what occurs once the aspect of compassion, which is a vital ethical principle is cast aside. Therefore, the Yazidis massacre should not be only a crisis of humanitarian catastrophe; but also, an indictment of cultures that have not fulfilled their least moral obligations to others.

### III. GENDERED VIOLENCE AND THE ETHICAL COLLAPSE OF HUMANITY

In *The Last Girl*, Murad tells the story of the terrible ordeal through which she manages to escape ISIS leaders by unfolding the gruesome details of the story and describing the pain and suffering she had to endure whilst being in the hands of her captors. In the territory controlled by ISIS, a simple look at an unrelated man does cause beating by the crowd, which shows how much the regime takes control measures. Yazidi female violence is not a by-product of war, but rather a part of the ideology of domination itself. Her individual moral severance is clear when Murad exclaims, “We were no longer human beings – we were sabaya” (123). However, this breakage is not merely verbal articulation, but an ethical jihad that alters the woman as an actor to an object. In this way, the language used becomes the thing that a moralist uses to meet the needs of perpetuating slavery by not only engaging in the open sexual subordination, but also by brainwashing the women who are not sex slaves to embrace a new moral space in which slavery is natural and rebellion is not explainable. To this ethical downward spiral, add religious distortion. Murad reveals “according to the militants’ interpretation of the Koran, raping a slave is not a sin” (123). This is a classic example of what in moral

philosophy referred as ethical inversion – when by some selective doctrinal reading violence becomes a good. The *Thirukkural* denounces any moral rationalization that will support bodily hurt as: “If, ere the noontide, you to others evil do, Before the eventide will evil visit you” (Kural 319). These are not values that can be limited to the *Thirukkural*, which nevertheless echo through the teachings of all religions.

Murad also makes us understand how the violence has been organized as an economic and bureaucratic activity rather than a series of individual acts of brutality. These works have it such that possessive is achievable because they have been paid off to a man through a dower price, and she warns that they “can be given as gifts and sold at the whim of the owner, ‘for they are merely property’” (139). Women’s bodies become the coins of exchange on a war economy, human life converted into commodities. For such a system represents the lowest moral stage of what *Thirukkural* terms as “When souls unwise true wisdom's mystic vision sees, the 'graceless' man may work true works of charity” (249) and also, he says “Gain of true wealth oblivious they eschew, who 'grace' forsakes, and graceless actions do” (Kural 246). The sheer presentation of rape and torture in the memoir acts as a sharp jolt to the reality the concept of domination is meant to annihilate people in all aspects physically, psychologically and also in moral aspects. The writer mentions, “He hit me... if I cried or kept my eyes closed while he raped me” (171) and in another place she witnesses, “one girl had her hands and legs tied when her captor raped her” (195). All these events are even more than bodily violence, and they serve as a tool of humiliation which is aimed to destroy subjectivity. These behaviours point to the need to make people obey and express the desire not only to punish organizations but also to break down the state of psychological resistance. The interest in coerced obedience and consciousness of experience deceives the intention to destroy the internal independence of the victim. In this regard, ISIS seems to follow a paradoxical state of revelation and elimination. Women turn hyper-visible as sexualized bodies in domestic settings and, at the same time, they are invisible in social settings while in the larger society. Murad tells about a woman, fully dressed, who was drifting through the streets with hardly being noticed and this selective visibility. It is also, of

course, forced invisibility — the rendering invisible of civic presence and moral agency. The *Thirukkural* warns that the systematic corruption of the week is fatal to the moral structure of authority: “His people's tears of sorrow past endurance, are not they Sharp instruments to wear the monarch's wealth away?” (Kural 555).

It is also a part of international legal norms that regard violence against women as a serious crime. This view of violence are not “patriarchal violence” but instead power/absence-of-legitimacy for a state. A community that prospers on degradation of another, is bringing upon itself and existential danger on the common yardstick of justice, security and humanity.

The testimony of Murad provides a clear definition of gendered crimes of violence that will be magnified most in an environment of degraded morality. Women stripped of their status as anything more than a sabaya, rape being accepted as a part of institutionalised doctrines, the violence of the female body ritualised; these are obscenities that should be seen as essential impediments to a moral universe dominated by cruelty, where power is the enemy of good. The analysis of the moral philosophy of *Thirukkural* proves that the narrative presented by Murad is a loud condemnation of any religious, political or cultural system that allows violation or sacralisation of the female bodies. Violence on women in this case should not be an incidental effect of war, but a conclusive one, that we have succumbed to moral extinction as a human race.

#### IV. FEMALE SURVIVAL AS MORAL RESISTANCE

In the context of systemic dehumanization portrayed in the system as it is presented in *The Last Girl*, the concept of survival cannot be limited to simple biological perseverance or passive resistance anymore. Instead, the fact that Murad survives despite the opportunities that are created by the conditions of the situations aimed at subduing the body, mind, and conscience is a case of moral resistance. In an age when violence tries to destroy women as a trivial by product, the very existence of survival casts indignant eyes at the concept of morality of domination. Proclamation of Murad, “We are human We are not nothing” (282) is not a couple of words of feeling, but it is an express statement of ethical being, a statement

of being as a person. Hidden in this statement is an explicit denial of the ideological representation of the Yazidi women as being *sabaya*, beings lacking moral acceptability or intrinsic value. Murad stands a moral test in humanizing herself, which ISIS strives to abolish. However, according to the moral principles of the moral theory expressed in the *Thirukkural*, the worth attached to the righteousness and respect is true power: “Not lance gives kings the victory, but sceptre swayed with equity” (Kural 546).

In this case, resistance is anchored on moral fortitude and not physical strength. This phenomenon can be explained by the feminist ethic of care which concentrates on the resilience which is presented in the reflexive rejection of vulnerability. Surviving in the ISIS environment requires calculated moderate, a kind of moral narrow-mindedness that will reduce self-destruction but prevent quick destruction. The fact that being silent was the only way to survive is emphasized by the fact that when Murad mentions, “screaming only got you into more trouble” (127) there was harsh calculus that the captive women had to pass through. Such imposition of meekness should not be misunderstood as ceding but rather it should be understood as a strategic morality of adjustment in a hostile space where being in any way assertive is penalised. It is a restraint recognized by the *Thirukkural*, which praises such a restraint as being of a moral nature of profound courage: “With overweening pride when men with injuries assail, By thine own righteous dealing shalt thou mightily prevail” (Kural 158).

In the moral vision of the *Thirukkural*, however, misery does not destroy moral value. On the other hand, the experience of living in harsh injustice depicts a virtue that is tolerated even when the ethical context is almost killed. Female endurance of survival, which is an ethic of enduring, resilient patience that is not ready to cower before its own moral being, is seen in *Thirukkural*. Therefore, the survival is resistance, not in the sense that it abolishes violence but only in the sense that it leaves the ethical possibility of truth, justice and human dignity alive in a world that tends to violently shut it.

#### V. TESTIMONY, VOICE, AND ETHICAL WITNESSING

This is because the change experienced by Murad as she comes out of captivity as a global witness is an unparalleled ethically-political intervention converting a horrific adversity into a willed ethical action. Among the limitations of coherence that she could thus clearly express after her release was, among others, this, “my story... could be someone else’s political tool” (265), a witness to how weakly soiled is the ground on which testimony takes root. In the world where the narratives of violence can be volatilized and perverted as easily as they are instrumentalized, swerving or manipulated, speaking up at the same time is not only a threat but a moral obligation. Murad attempts to resolve this tension by placing her voice between being solely a means of personal trauma and a moral responsibility to the dead and the displaced and the silenced: there was so much the world needed to hear (299). In turn, witnessing serves not merely as a witness against violence and ethical oblivion but also makes the claim that testimony is an obligation of conscience. According to the *Thirukkural*, truth telling is not a matter of security or social acclaim or political necessity; it is one that all responsible people should follow. Thiruvalluvar asserts: “Outward purity the water will bestow; Inward purity from truth alone will flow.” (Kural 298). Murad manages to accomplish this by not only objective reporting in addition to moral intuition, but she narrates atrocities without sensationalizing or abstracting the dignity of the victims.

The testifying of Murad performs two functions. Firstly, it makes the plight of the Yazidi people, which has remained mostly obscure culturally, socially, and politically over centuries, touch the rest of the world. Second, it interrupts traditional global viewership by generating a feeling of accountability, and thus, emphasizes the fact that active spectators of injustice are similarly involved in the silence. The fact that she turns her pain into testimony would suggest that the voice is a place of moral authority, taking on the actual offenders of violence as well as those systems, which reproduce violence. This way, her story brings the insistence of the *Thirukkural* that ethical behaviour has to be firm and have real world implications and thus her personal goodwill is tied to societal responsibility.

## VI. DISPLACEMENT, BELONGING, AND ETHICAL LOSS

Surviving is not just a temporal gateway as it is a permanent process of work to Nadia Murad. In her endless experience of ordinariness devastation, and in the moral convolution of her survivor-ness, she is proactively involved in repairing the world negativity. Her comment, “Germany promised safety... But Iraq would always be home” (297) can be related to the conflict between material security and attachment to the culture. However, the issue of safety is not enough to recover the genocide trauma, displacement shatters the moral and social continuity, grabbing the survivors out of the linguistic, religious, and communal structure that form identity and moral agency. Murad explores, “Our community was scattered, living as refugees inside and outside of Iraq” (299). The forced relocation of Yazidi people shows that displacement acts as a vehicle through which the consequences of violent trauma permeate into moral impact no less than physical harm to the body. There is a lack not only of material plane in the displaced communities but also disaggregation of the moral life. Belonging is a moral concept that cannot be disentangled with existence: human well-being is something that requires being linked to community, culture, and tradition. In this atmosphere, the advice offered by Thiruvalluvar can be heard with the same richness: “The profit gained by wealth's increase, Is living compassed round by relatives in peace” (Kural 524).

The *Thirukkural* instructs the connection between the ethical life, which is not just individualistic. The material money or even life quality is not enough to substitute the moral and social sustenance that the individual gains by being a part of a community or culture. The daily expenditures of such moral waste are indicated in Murad, she says, “eating the Iraqi food I miss so much” (305). We demand the comforts of taste, habit and locality. Unless it is the nostalgia, this need becomes existential need which is common to all humans a life-making impulse that asserts our humanness and moral rights. In his testimony, Murad emphasizes the post-physical safety of recovery, and it is necessary to restore belonging, dignity, and community.

## VII. CONCLUSION

In the article, it is shown that the book, *The Last Girl*, is not just a memoir of pain but an ideal of female survival, as well as moral defiance, especially, when the story is interpreted through the ethical prism of *Thirukkural*. This is demonstrated in the testimony of Nadia Murad, gendered violence, religious persecution and displacement are not the work of a monstrous, but symptomatic of an ethical failure of monumental magnitude. The commodification of the Yazidi women, the banalisation of the evil, and the promulgation of the forced divisions, even in our very own perception testify to the moral fall of the societies and humankind. According to the universal moral law considered by Thiruvalluvar, compassion, restraint, justice, and protection of the weak are all precepts of morale, the survival of Murad in the epic can take an ethical dimension. It is a reflexive moral agency, the will not to be thought pointless. Her categorical testimony further extends this agency to the personalization of pain by making it an educative source of morality, or diagnosis of recovering ethical responsibility. Survival and voice are therefore connected as both are used to oppose systems that aim to destroy man and human dignity.

To add to it, the tagline of the film over available material, *The Last Girl*, argues that ethical bravery goes beyond the individuals who put their life on the line. The power and the explicit tone in which Murad writes makes us accountable readers, free members of the world knowledgeable, global citizens and probably even nations that must not only be encouraged to react with punitive condemnation of violence but also should help re-establish the wellbeing and moral uplift of the powerless through proactive actions and deeds. Her account shows that human potential of good survives even over the heinous evil such that surviving, telling of the truth and acts of kindness have become the resistance of the soul- the contentiousness in the face of the most tyrannical of authority.

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