

Vengeance And Violence

Kurdish Women Recount The War

BY SHAHRZAD MOJAB

Basé sur des actes de vengeance et de violence commis envers les femmes activistes politiques ou les épouses des guerilleros, cet article met en lumière les conséquences cachées de la guerre sur les femmes du Kurdistan ainsi que l'impact de leur déplacement dans la région ou dans la diaspora occidentale.

The Kurds constitute the largest non-state nation in the world. They were forcibly divided among the neighbouring states of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria in the aftermath of World War I. Their nationalist movement is one of the most persistent in modern history. Various nationalist movements have aimed at self-rule in the form of either an independent or autonomous state. This struggle for self-rule has primarily targeted the four nation-states of Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria, but it has also involved major western powers (in particular the United States, Britain, and France), numerous local actors including diverse political organizations, different classes such as landowners, peasants, workers, and the urban bourgeoisie. The nationalist movements have been largely male enterprises but women have also participated in it in diverse and changing roles. The change is visible from a marginal non-presence to a more active involvement in the conduct of war and politics.

In the last two decades of the twentieth century, women joined the ranks of guerillas fighting against Turkey and Iran, entered parliamentary politics, published journals, and created women's organizations. However, the patriarchal nationalist movement continues to emphasize the struggle for self-rule at the expense of the

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struggle for equality. Nationalists depict women as heroes of the nation, reproducers of the nation, protectors of its "motherland," the "honour" of the nation, and guardians of Kurdish culture, heritage, and language. In these depictions of women, or in the relegation of equal rights to the future, the Kurdish case is by no means different from other nationalist movements.

One may argue, however, that the Kurdish case can be distinguished from others by the brutality of national oppression. The Kurds have been subjected to genocide, ethnic cleansing, linguicide, and ethnocide, i.e., the deliberate killing of their language and culture. I call this the "external war," i.e., a war imposed on all Kurds—men, women, and children—by four nation-states, which have forcibly incorporated Kurds into the state structure. These states use both physical and symbolic violence in order to assimilate Kurds into the dominant nation.

Turkey, for instance, has called the Kurds "mountain Turks," and the Kurdish region is called "the Southeast."¹

There is, at the same time, another war that is waged against women not by the state but rather by the male members of the Kurdish nation. I call this the "internal war" against women. The two wars, external and internal, are tied together in complex ways.

If Turkey denies the existence of the Kurds and rejects their resistance as tribalism, backwardness, and terrorism, many Kurdish nationalists deny the existence of women's oppression in Kurdish society. Even worse, they claim that Kurdish women enjoy more freedom than the women of the neighbouring nations. This myth of the exceptionalism of Kurdish women legitimates the universal nationalist claim that the nation's unity should not be jeopardized by internal conflicts based on gender or class. Even when the existence of patriarchy is admitted, it is treated as a problem secondary to national oppression. In other words, while slogans about gender equality can be raised, especially in annual events such as March 8th (International Women's Day), there is no need for feminist knowledge, feminist organizing, and independent women's organizations.

Kurdish nationalist organizations have had, since the 1950s, their own "women's organization," which has usually served as cosmetics or for rallying support for the males who were leading the nationalist movements. Since the 1980s, however, two political organizations recruited women into their military and po-

litical ranks. One was the Kurdistan Workers Party, generally known as PKK. The other was Komala, which was the Kurdistan branch of the Communist Party of Iran. The practice of these two organizations provides abundant evidence about their treatment of women. In this article, I study the politics and practice of Komala.

While the literature on Kurdish nationalism is growing in quality and quantity, research has ignored the gender dimension of the war in which women are targets of both internal and external violence. Kurdish women are absent from the increasing feminist literature on women and war, too. For example, in *Women's Rights Human Rights: International Feminist Perspectives* (Peters and Wolper) there is no reference to the Kurdish women nor is there any in the more recent collection of *The Women and War Reader* (Lorentzen and Turpin).

The limited literature produced by Kurdish women's groups or Kurdish political organizations, in particular, in Iraq and Turkey, has focussed more on two aspects of women and war, which Jennifer Turpin, in another context, calls "Women as Direct Casualties" and "Women as War Refugees." While women as war casualties and as refugees constitute the most visible or open faces of all wars, there are many different ways in which war destroys the life of women. For instance, Turpin adds: "Wartime Sexual Violence Against Women," "Wartime Domestic Violence," "Loss of Family," "Loss of Work, Community, and Social Structure," "War, Environmental Destruction, and Women," and "The Impact of Military Spending on Women" (3-18).

So far, in my research on Kurdish women and war, I have written on one of the internal wars on Kurdish women (Mojab). This is the practice of honour killing in the "Safe Haven" that was created by the allies of the 1991 Gulf War in Iraqi Kurdistan. During that war, the

United States encouraged the Kurds of Iraq to rise up against Saddam Hussein's regime, but when they did so, Washington abandoned them. The Iraqi Army was then free to unleash its air and ground forces against the Kurds, and forced some two million people into exodus to the mountains, resulting in the death

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of tens of thousands from exposure to cold and hunger. The stated goal of the "Safe Haven" was to return the refugees to their homes, and protect them from continuing Iraqi repression. Under the protection of the United States, Britain, and France, the Kurds of Iraq created an autonomous government called the Regional Government of Kurdistan. However, a situation of intermittent war continues to ruin the life of the people there. Under these conditions, violence against women has increased in scope and frequency. One of the most common practices is "honour killing." I have documented the way the "Safe Haven" has turned into a slaughter-house for women (Mojab). Numerous forces—local, regional and international—are involved in these crimes in different roles and at different levels.

This article is an effort to bring to the fore other hidden consequences of the war on Kurdish women. It is based on the experiences of vengeance

and violence committed against women who were political activists or spouses of *peshmargas*, i.e., guerrillas. The research is aimed at addressing questions such as: what happens to a wife of a *peshmerga* who remains behind, in enemy territory, while the husband is fighting or seeking refuge in remote mountain areas? How is the wife being treated by her family, her in-laws, and the security forces? What happens to her children? How does she support herself and her children financially? How is life after reunion with husband? What is the impact of years of separation on marriage and children? What is the impact of displacement in the region or in the diaspora in the West? This is an on-going project, data collection has not been completed yet, and the project has raised many unanswered theoretical and methodological issues, thus efforts have been made to expand the research and to apply for further fundings.²

My analysis here is based on the lives of Kurdish women who participated in this research. The life story of the women embody the many faces of violence. Some are educated, urban women who participated actively in the autonomous movement in Iranian Kurdistan during most of the 1970s and 1980s. Others are poor peasant women who never participated in the nationalist movement and have no formal education even in their native tongue or in other languages. The lives of these women, nevertheless, converge at one point and take the same course. They marry, by choice or through arranged marriages, freedom fighters of the same political organization. It is from then on that their bodies, their souls, their hopes, and dreams become the battle ground of the internal and external forces of violence. I only have enough space to recount one story. To ensure the anonymity of the women, all the personal names and the places in the diaspora have been renamed. Women are named, here, after the name of stars in Kurdish. Stars have a special signifi-

cance in the literary politics of Kurdistan/Iran. They symbolize existence, continuity, brightness, hope, and resiliency; these are attributes of most of the Kurdish women whom I interviewed for this project. Only the name of the places in Kurdistan are real in order to contextualize their life history.

Zohal: the lost life

Personally, I feel connected to and am part of Zohal's life history, although I did not know her by name before the interview. She and I witnessed the Islamic Government's attack on the city of Sanandaj in Iranian Kurdistan. We both were in the city during what is now well-known as 24-days-of-resistance in Sanandaj in the Spring of 1980. When I met Zohal for the first time in her apartment, she immediately recognized me as I was an active member of the city's Association of Militant Women. We began our conversation by remembering other women and asking each other what happened to so and so. It was a difficult moment to remember many friends who were arrested, imprisoned, tortured, and executed.³ In the last 19 years, I have tried to imagine the life of women like Zohal after the army captured the city. I remember vividly the night that I left the city; it was two days before the resistance groups evacuated the city. I was part of a group who had to re-locate the wounded *peshmargas* from the local hospitals. We knew that when the army entered the city, they would be among the first casualties. Throughout that night and all these years since, I wanted to be able to imagine life in the city after it was occupied by the army. My conversation with Zohal was the first time that I had a chance to talk to a woman, in an intimate and trusting way, to find out what happened to she and others after we, members of the resistance movement, left.

Zohal was a high school teacher and had married a *Peshmarga*. He

was also a teacher, much liked by students and well-known in the city. It was not long after their marriage when Zohal noticed that "politics is [her] bedmate, too." Her husband only saw her as his "political partner and not life partner." The birth of her first and only son strained the relationship further. Her demand for

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better care, sharing in the household chores, preparing the house for their child, etc., were seen as "unacceptable and shameful," especially considering that the government offensive on the city was eminent. Zohal remembers:

I had this strong guilt feeling. I could not understand what was wrong with me. I was a teacher, too, and could see the dominance of nationalism among my students, even in the air that we breathe. For god's sake, I was a nationalist, too. My in-laws frowned upon me. I was degraded to a materialistic, self-indulgent, self-centred woman. I was depressed.

Zohal's son was among the first children who were born during the war. The war situation superseded the joy of giving birth to her son. She felt resentment from her in-laws, though she gave birth to a son, and

from the officials in the poorly equipped hospital. She recalls:

Birth was seen as an unnecessary burden on a system which chronically suffered from the shortage of nurses, doctors, medicine, etc. I felt pressed between my proud role of being a Kurdish mother, the symbol of sacrifice and piety of the nation, and a selfish, useless woman whom I even could not identify.

Soon, Zohal was left with the only child, as her husband, along with hundred others, fled the city to the mountains. She did not see him for many years. This is what she remembers after the army entered the city:

*You know, it was almost towards the end of the spring. The schools were closed down. I had no salary, as the government announced that they needed time to identify the zed-e enqelabie (counter revolutionary, i.e., against the Islamic state). It did not take me long to realize that I won't be able to pay my rent and cover the cost of raising my child. I could not imagine that one day I would witness my own poverty. I was a wage-earner and was supposed to be able to support myself. I passed days and nights while I went to bed hungry as I was so cautious about what I bought and cooked. I approached my in-laws to support me. You know, it was dangerous to live as a single mother. The security forces knew that there were many *peshmerga's* wives who were left behind, and we were good targets for them. Even neighbours, relatives, friends, could have turned against you. For fear of repercussions by army and government officials no one was willing to take me in. What was painful was the expectation from all around me, including the political organization which my husband affiliated with, that I once more should become the sym-*

bol of continuity of the resistance. I received secret messages from my husband that encouraged me to stay in the city, and gave me leads about who to talk to. After a few weeks when things were settling down gradually, schools were announced closed for the summer and I left the city to join my parents for a few months.⁴ However, I received notification from security forces that I needed to go back to the city in order to prepare myself for classes. Since the war interrupted the school year, they wanted to begin the academic year earlier to compensate for the lost year. I passed the first round of extensive investigations. I had to submit a written testimony about my own activities since the beginning of the revolution and on all the people that I could remember. This was the first step in a long process of interrogation.

They asked me for a while to report everyday after the school to the army headquarter and sign in. This was very difficult as I had to beg someone to look after my son. I was called into the investigation office several times. They wanted me to give them information about the hiding places of peshmargas. They thought that as their wives, we should be in touch with them. I was beaten by them, but had nothing to say. They could not believe me that I had no direct contact with them. One day they faced me up with the woman whom my husband told me to trust and contact. She had told them that I had received secret messages. See, when the men left the city, they did not realize that even some of their own political allies had changed position and joined the enemy. Before the end of the academic year, I got a notification that I had been expelled from any teaching position anywhere in Iran as well as any government job opportunities. I was devastated. I didn't know who to turn to or where to go,

that's why I decided to go to the mountains as well.

Zohal's life in the mountain camp of one of the political organizations, Komala, opened a new cycle of violence in her life.⁵ This time it was more of an internal/domestic type violence. After three or four years of separation (she could not remember exactly), she and her son re-entered the public/political life of her husband. He had a difficult time to adjust, especially with the child. Zohal remembers that her son's behaviour was under his father's scrutiny all the time. Every wrong move, noise, and demand was treated with a slap on his face. This saddened Zohal so deeply that she saw herself more and more distanced from her husband. To the extent that, as she put it, "any sexual relationship was impossible for me and this made him even madder."

The hardship of life in the camp for her son made her to agree with the suggestion of the political organization that due to the shortages of the supply and the arrival of the winter, children should be sent back to families in the city. Zohal, in tears, recalls the scene where her son was taken away from her bosom:

I talked to him days before he was supposed to leave. I talked to him about good days that he had with my sisters and brothers, how they loved him, played with him, bought him toys. He wanted to know what would happen to me. I told him that I would come soon.

The children were sent back to cities with older women—mothers of peshmargas—as they were safer and less harassed by guards and army personnel.

Zohal, later heard the stories about her son who cried and asked for her all the way to the city. Her son's absence made life in the camp much more intolerable for her. "The psychological torture," she says, "was unbearable."

I finally decided to leave; this made him [her husband] furious. But I made my mind and left the camp, went back to the city and gave myself in. I tried to tell the secret forces the truth about myself. I still wanted to protect the political organization. I told them I was in the mountain but decided to separate from my husband and raise my child. This was the truth. They beat me to death to get information. I had none. After few days of torture, they also realized that, they had more information about the camp than I did, so they released me.

Zohal, later joined her son and began different "illegal" jobs until seven years later when her husband sponsored them to leave the country. She never stayed with her husband, and made that also a condition of accepting the offer of sponsorship.⁶ As we were getting towards the end of our more than ten hours of conversation, Zohal began crying. She whispered, "That was my life. A life lost. Look at me; I am a cook, my son is emotionally disturbed and needs me. I'm close to 50, lonely and hopeless."

Zohal's life story depicts the conflictual and symbiotic relations between the violence of internal and external war. While each life story is unique, Zohal's story takes the shape of a piece in the jigsaw puzzle of Kurdish women's lives. As mentioned earlier, I chose her story because of my own connection to the time and place of the narrative; however, other women who participated in my research could easily identify with her experience, too. Nahid, for instance, talked about the multiplicity of sources of oppression. As the eldest daughter of the family, she soon took the role of her mother when she passed away while Nahid was only 13 years old. She begged her father to let her go to school and it was only with the intervention of other family members that he finally gave in. Nahid became a popular and trusted

teacher who took upon herself to be a teacher as well as a mother of her younger siblings. She has carried that role until today, continuing to manage her entire family in exile. During the war, she was arrested several times, imprisoned and tortured, "not for any crime that I had committed," she said, "but only for being my brothers' sister/mother."

The nationalist resistance intervenes in patriarchal gender relations. By recruiting women into the war to "liberate" the nation, it draws them out of the domestic sphere and into the public sphere of life. In this process, women join the rank and file of political organizations, establish women's groups, publish journals, and contribute to society's consciousness about unequal gender relations. However, the nationalist movement generally thrives on the patriarchal order. In Iraqi Kurdistan, for instance, some nationalist leaders treat Islamic, feudal and tribal gender relations as part of the national culture. The Kurdish nationalist movement is distinguished from many movements by, among other things, the brutality of national oppression and the persistence of pre-modern, feudal, and tribal relations. Official policies of genocide, ethnocide, and linguicide provide justification for the nationalist project of reducing resistance to national liberation only.

Under conditions of armed struggle against the nation-state, nationalist organizations rely on traditional patriarchal family relations, such as the extended family support system. When the son is away in the mountains, his wife is the property of his family; she is in the custody of her in-laws. However, in the absence of the son, the subordinate position of the daughter-in-law is further reduced to that of a bondswoman, or a hostage. At best, she is treated as a stranger, a burden, and even an enemy. Some of the women I interviewed talked about the in-laws' household as another prison. They were held physically under house arrest. Their food and purchase of

basic necessities were rationed and tightly controlled. As daughter-in-laws, they were the "honour" of the family, but they were also fugitives who had to be hidden from the eyes of the security forces; all this meant more control, more suppression and more restriction.

Vengeance is another product of war in a culture that is misogynist. Women who remain in the enemy territory, while their husbands are out of the region, become targets of the coercive forces of the state. State vengeance takes a gender dimension since state structure and the administrative, judiciary, and military personnel live and operate in a misogynist political culture. However, patriarchal violence in Kurdish society exists and operates independently from the nation-state. This can be readily seen in the extensive practice of honour killing in the territory of the more or less independent Regional Government of Iraqi Kurdistan, established in 1992. However, Kurdish patriarchy and the nation-state reinforce each other, as if they exist in a symbiotic relationship. For instance, in punishing women, the state capitalizes on the patriarchal relations of "honour" and "shame." One woman said, "the worst punishment for me was going to the army headquarters. The rumour of rape and sexual harassment was enough to taint my reputation. The army treated me as an available woman, a 'man-less' woman who needs their protection." During Iraq's 1988 genocidal campaign known as *Anfal* (Middle East Watch), thousands of Kurdish women were taken by the Iraqi army for abuse. When some of them returned to Kurdistan after the defeat of Saddam Hussein in the Gulf War, they were the "shame" of the family and the nation. Rumours of their killing by family members and fellow Kurds are abundant.

We are just beginning to understand the scope of patriarchal violence against women in times of peace and war. In a world order based on

unequal gender relations, wars escalate patriarchal violence. It is well known that the women of the enemy are targets of the warmongers. This brutal violence is the open face of all wars. While we still need to know more about it, the hidden faces of the internal war take a heavy toll on women in this war-torn world. From the point of view of the women I interviewed, the violence of the internal war was much more devastating than the brutality of external war. It was easier to resist the external enemy than challenge the enemy within.

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¹For instance, the Turkish state has banned the names "Kurd" and "Kurdistan," and has used the educational system, the media and other institutions in order to make them ashamed of their linguistic, national, and historical identity.

²This project has been partially funded by a SSHRC Strategic Network Grant called New Approaches to Lifelong Learning (NALI). I have recently received a SSHRC Assistance for New Researchers Grant in order to expand the scope of the research.

³A dark chapter in the two decades rule of the Islamic regime is the expe-

rience of Iranian women political prisoners. It is only very recently that several memoirs have been published as well as a ten-minute documentary called *They Did Not Fear Death* which includes the names of 2,843 women prisoners who were executed in Iran since 1980. This documentary was first shown at the tenth annual conference of the Iranian Women's Studies Foundation held in Montreal. There are 101 names of Kurdish women members of Komala in this documentary. The experience of Kurdish women is yet to be written and some of the women who have participated in this research have talked about their prison experience. ⁴This was also a very difficult period for Zohal's parents as well. Her oldest brother was suddenly diagnosed with leukemia and the family was struggling to finance his trip abroad. Zohal's arrival with a new-born baby was a burden on them, too. Her brother passed away soon which also caused the death of her father who could not bear the loss of his son. At which point the financial burden on her mother was exacerbated and made it very difficult for Zohal to stay much longer with her.

⁵The camp life in the mountains of Kurdistan has not been a subject of study at all. I have benefited from the studies presented at the Second Conference of Women in Conflict Zones Network in Sri Lanka (December 1998), in particular Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake, "After victimhood: Cultural transformation and women's empowerment in war and displacement"; Gameela Samarasinghe and Ananda Galappati, "Living in conflict zones, past and present: Women and psychological suffering"; Malahi de Alwis, "The 'purity' of displacement and the re-territorialization of longing: Muslim women refugees in north-western Sri Lanka"; and Neloufer de Mel, "Agent or victim? The Sri Lankan women militant in the interregnum." I hope that with the expansion of my current research, I can unravel the experience of

women's lives in the camps. ⁶Diaspora is yet another whole new life for Kurdish women like Zohal which is not included in this paper. Although I use the term "diaspora," but I find it problematic, especially as it has been applied to women. The masculine construction of this concept could be the topic of another paper; something that is clear from my research is that women challenge the notion of "blood and belonging," which I consider to be embedded in the concept of diaspora.

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ZAKIAH ALIYA KASSAM

April Showers

warm saltless tears
 fall upon her naked body
 kissing her cheeks
 caressing her neck
 providing comfort
 because they are not her own
 where is the strength?
 where is the resolve?
 the hot tears that beat
 against her skin
 are a painful reminder
 of beatings borne
 so many times
 where do the droplets stop
 and her own tears begin?
 with each painful blow
 she stood proudly
 head held high
 for she did not cry
 the tears that fell
 were not her own

Zakiah Aliya Kassam's poetry appears earlier in this volume.