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Women, Daesh and discourse

A critical analysis

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# Women, Daesh & Discourse: A Critical Analysis

by

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# Abstract.

Shortly after Daesh emerged on the global stage in 2013, it was almost impossible to avoid sensationalist news media stories about the mass violent atrocities that the group perpetrated across vast swathes of territory in Syria and Iraq. What differentiated this reporting from the news coverage of other conflicts, however, was its overwhelming focus on women. In particular, women were made "visible" by the news media in a way seldom seen as news agencies became fascinated with the stories of women as victims of, participants in, and fighters against Daesh. Much of what was written, however, fails to recognise the agency of women in the region. Rather than reporting on the women's experiences, as told by them, the UK news media constructs harmful representations through an inherently patriarchal and Orientalist lens. This means that despite seeming to centre women and issues of concern to women, news coverage has made them "visible" only in particular ways, not in the fulsomeness of their agency and experience. Specifically, they are made "visible" only insofar as their stories reinforce gendered ideas about what it is to be a woman, and more specifically, what it is to be a woman in the Middle East.

My thesis takes as its case the representations of such women constructed between 2013-2017 by the BBC, the Daily Mail, Sky News, and the Guardian. Operating within a feminist framework, my aims are two-fold. Focusing first on news discourse, I use a critical discourse analytical framework to investigate the ways in which women in Syria and Iraq are represented in 245 news articles. Recognising that the news media and the ideologies that they propagate have the power to shape public perception, my aim is to uncover and examine the assumptions relied upon to construct a specific image of the conflict and its participants. As part of this analysis, I consider the implications of such representations, namely their societal function and their impact on the construction of knowledge. Arguing that in order for women to be made truly visible, their voices must be heard, I also engage in a narrative analysis of the stories of women sourced through personal interviews with refugees living in Belfast, survivor (auto)biographies, social media posts, and third-party interviews. In engaging with such stories, my aim is to deconstruct and redefine the knowledge constructed through UK news media representations by examining the ways in which women's stories challenge and disrupt it.

**Tables of Figures.**

The figures used in my thesis are numbered to highlight the chapter in which they can be found and the order in which they appear in each chapter. For example, Figure 3.1. is the first figure in chapter three.

**List of Abbreviations.**

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|---|---|
| **Daesh** | ad-Dawlah al-Islāmiyah fī 'l-ʿIrāq wa-sh-Shām |
| **ISIS** | Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham |
| **ISIL** | Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant |
| **IS** | Islamic State |
| | |
| **AQI** | Al Qaeda in Iraq |
| **ISI** | Islamic State in Iraq |
| **TwJ** | al-Tawid wal-Jihad |
| **JN** | Jabhat al-Nusra |
| | |
| **YPJ** | Yekîneyên Parastina Jin or Women's Protection Units |
| **YPG** | Yekîneyên Parastina Gel or People's Protections Units |
| **SDF** | Syrian Democratic Forces |
| | |
| **CPA** | Coalition Provision Authority |
| **UN** | United Nations |
| **UK** | United Kingdom |
| **US** | United States |
| | |
| **SGBV** | Sexual and gender-based violence. |

**Chapter One: Introduction.**

In the UK news media's coverage of Daesh (2013-2017), the experiences and actions of women in Syria and Iraq are made "visible" in a way seldom seen in the discourse of war and violent conflict, thereby marking a distinct shift in an area of study in which feminist scholars have for decades been asking: 'Where are the women?' (Enloe, 1989). Women depicted as victims of, participants in, and fighters against the jihadist group (see, Sjoberg, 2018: 297) were propelled into the spotlight as daily news articles detailing their experiences of conflict, and their reported interactions with Daesh, began to emerge. Despite seeming to centre women and issues of concern to women, however, the representations of women constructed in the UK news media are selective and sensationalist, and rooted in patriarchal and Orientalist assumptions, which subordinate women's agency and contribute to the development of harmful and incomplete knowledge about the conflict and its participants. These representations of women, and their potential ramifications, form the basis of my investigation.

Operating within a feminist intersectional framework and paying particular attention to depictions of agency (or lack of agency), my thesis critically analyses news media representations of women living in Caliphate territories of Syria and Iraq that have been constructed by four UK news agencies that span the political and ideological spectrum: the BBC, the Daily Mail, Sky News, and the Guardian.[1] Particularly, I examine how the women are portrayed in news articles by the selected agencies, and the societal function and impact of such portrayals, that is, what they do and why? Recognising that the news media and the ideologies that they propagate shape public perception, I investigate the ways in which the constructed representations of women are used to reinforce and legitimise patriarchal and Orientalist versions of social reality, and how they impact and inform general understandings about the region and the conflict taking place, and more specifically, its female participants.

To deconstruct these representations, and the perceptions, beliefs and ideologies that underpin them, I also engage in a narrative analysis of the personal stories of women sourced through semi-structured interviews with refugee women living in Belfast, survivor (auto)biographies, online social media postings and third-party interviews. My

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[1] Discussion relating to the selection of news media platforms and agencies, as well as an analysis of their political and ideological backgrounds, is detailed in Chapter three: Methodological Approach and Ethical Strategies.

aim at this stage of my investigation, is to foreground the voices of women, and to challenge UK news media narratives by demystifying the reality of their experiences of Daesh, highlighting the existence and significance of women's agency in the region. Relying on the women's own words as they describe their lives, attitudes, and identities, I examine how women in Syria and Iraq are impacted and/or informed by such representations, and how the stories they tell disrupt and/or challenge them.

My thesis is guided by four overarching research questions: 1) How are women and their experiences and roles portrayed in UK news coverage of Daesh? 2) How do these depictions influence social practices, attitudes, and power relations in relation to women? 3) How do UK news media representations impact the construction of knowledge about the conflict, and UK responses to it? 4) What impact do such representations have on the women to whom they relate, and how are they negotiated and challenged by women? Prior to addressing these questions, however, I begin my thesis with a brief background of Daesh detailing the jihadist group's origins, how UK news media attention followed their activities and the ways in which women came to be centred in the news coverage (section 1.1). I then conclude this introductory chapter with an outline of the structure of my thesis (section 1.2).

## 1.1.    Thesis Background.

Despite first appearing under the name Daesh in 2013,[2] it was only after the jihadist group proclaimed the establishment of its *Khilafah* (Caliphate) in June 2014, that it began to grow in prominence on the global stage (see, Kadivar, 2020: 8). From this point, it was almost impossible to avoid news media coverage about the mass violent atrocities that Daesh perpetrated as it moved across Syria and Iraq and attempted to capture territory for its caliphate. Depicted as a 'media frenzy' (Dirik, 2014), a significant amount of this news coverage fixated on the stories of the women in the conflict, making them explicitly "visible" in the public discourse of war and global security politics, discourse from which women have long been omitted. Specifically,

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[2] Daesh is the Arabic acronym of *ad-Dawlah al-Islāmiyah fī 'l-ʿIrāq wa-sh-Shām.* In English, this has become known as Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or ISIS. Daesh is used predominately in my thesis because it is the term most used by the women's whose voices I engage with.

women in the region were made "visible" in news discourse as victims of, participants in, and fighters against Daesh (see, Sjoberg, 2019: 297).

My thesis takes as its case the representations that have been constructed of such women in UK news discourse (2013-2017) and argues that while women are indeed made "visible", they are only made "visible" in particular ways, not in the fulsomeness of their agency and experience. Through an analysis of 245 news articles sourced through the BBC, the Daily Mail, Sky News, and the Guardian, I demonstrate that women in Syria and Iraq are made "visible" only insofar as the experiences and actions at the centre of the reporting reinforce gender-stereotypical and Orientalist ideas about what it is to be a woman, and more specifically, what it is to be a woman in the Middle East. From an investigation of the language and ideologies perpetuated through this discourse, I assert that the constructed representations are not designed to make clear the reality of women's lived experiences in the Caliphate. Rather they are intended to construct a homogenising and sensationalist image of the conflict and its participants that will reinforce Western knowledge about Muslim societies, its cultures, and its people, and invoke a sense of moral outrage in the public, thus justifying military intervention in the region as being in defence of women.

Operating from an interpretivist epistemological position that situates discourse, and in this case news discourse, as a central way through which social actors make sense of the social world (cf. Fairclough, 2001; Georgaca & Avdi, 2011; Hassan, 2018), my thesis contends that as the UK news media constructs representations of women as victims of, participants in, and fighters against Daesh, it has the power to shape public perception of such women, and through them, Daesh and the conflict more broadly. However, the perception that it constructs is not undistorted. Rather it is imbued with the social and political ideologies, preconceptions, and beliefs of those who construct it. This means that the representations perpetuated to the public are not objective, and as such, it is my contention that they have damaging implications for the production of knowledge. To understand how this occurs and to challenge the resulting knowledge, it is necessary, therefore, to analyse not only the ideologies that permeate discourse, but the impact such knowledge has on those to whom the news discourse relates.

Prior to beginning my investigation in earnest, however, it is necessary to first provide an overview of Daesh and the conflict in which they are engaged in Syria and Iraq.

This is particularly important when considering that, in the UK news media, it is often insinuated that the group simply emerged out of nowhere in 2014 when news coverage of the instability in the region intensified (see, Oosterveld & Bloem, 2017: 5). In reality, however, Daesh has its roots in Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Formed in 2004 by a Jordanian jihadist, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, and in response to the US-led invasion (see, Hassan, 2018), AQI brought together a complex network of mainly Sunni Iraqi insurgents. Alongside extremists like al-Zarqawi who used his influence as the leader of al-Tawid wal-Jihad (TwJ) to form AQI, the jihadist group is also alleged to have included former members of Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist Party who had been purged from government by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in May 2003, former members of the Iraqi security forces who were disbanded at the same time, and a stream of foreign jihadis (see, Kirdar, 2011: 4; Hassan, 2016: 761).

Under the leadership of al-Zarqawi, AQI exploited the political upheaval in Iraq and the widespread disempowerment of Iraqi Sunnis to wage war against the US and the new Coalition Provisional Authority. In particular, AQI set out to disrupt reconstruction efforts, to target American forces and their coalition and humanitarian partners, and to stoke sectarian tensions to fuel a 'civil war between Sunnis and Shiites' that would destabilise the country (Hassan, 2018). While the violent agenda and internal politics of AQI is discussed elsewhere (see, Fishman, 2006; Phillips, 2009; Kirdar, 2011; Hassan, 2016), what is important in the context of my thesis is that after al-Zarqawi's death in June 2006 as a result of an American airstrike (see, Hassan, 2016), the transition from Al Qaeda in Iraq to Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) began to take place with Abu Omar al-Baghdadi as its leader (Kirdar, 2011: 5).

From 2006 until Abu Omar al-Baghdadi's death in 2010, ISI was severely weakened (see, Barrett, 2014; Hassan, 2016). Most historians agree that this was due to a confluence of events. First, in 2007, there was a 'surge' in US troops on the ground in Iraq as President Bush amended America's counterinsurgent strategy (see, Simons, 2008: 57). Second, the indiscriminate nature of ISI's violence coupled with its efforts to impose its own interpretation of Islamic law resulted in a loss of local support (see, Kirdar, 2011: 5; Zelin, 2013). Third, in the Anbar province of Western Iraq, Sunni tribes began to partner with American forces to fight against ISI and other Iraqi insurgents as part of a movement popularly known as the Sunni Awakening (see, Hassan, 2016: 761; Chamoun, 2020: 39). The success of this movement led to the capture and/or

death of thousands of insurgents (see, Kirdar, 2011: 5), thus depleting ISI's active membership and contributing to the group's degradation.

Despite these events, however, ISI's misfortune did not last long. In 2010, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the man who would eventually declare the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate in 2014, assumed the leadership of the jihadist group and began efforts to rebuild it, and to restore its operational capabilities. His efforts were aided by the Shia-dominated government in Iraq who reneged on promises that had been made to the Sunni population as part of a reconciliation agreement that included the 'equitable distribution of oil revenue, absorption of fighters from the Sunni Awakening Movement into the Iraq Army and reversal of the purge of Ba'athists from the government' (Hassan, 2016: 761). This meant that as US troops began their withdrawal from the region, Sunnis were once again disenfranchised socially, economically, and politically. Using the resentment and frustrations of Iraqi Sunnis to ISI's advantage, Abu Bakr reasserted the jihadist group's authority and legitimacy in Iraq and began to recapture some of the local support that had previously been lost (see, Byman & Williams, 2015).

Abu Bakr also harnessed the chaos of the Arab revolutions which began in 2010, and the Syrian civil war which began in 2011, to extend ISI's reach beyond Iraq and into Syria (see, Oosterveld & Bloem, 2017: 5). Daniel L. Byman and Jennifer R. Williams report that when Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of Al Qaeda proper, called on Iraqi insurgents to take part in the Syrian civil war, Abu Bakr sent a small number of ISI members to build a Syrian faction, which led to the creation of Jabhat al-Nusra (see also, Zelin, 2013; Lister, 2016: 5). Abu Bakr then travelled to Syria in 2013 and announced the rebranding of ISI to ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), or Daesh in Arabic. Despite this, Jabhat al-Nusra denied any affiliation with Daesh, and after Abu Bakr refused to follow al-Zawahiri, Al Qaeda proper also disavowed the group (see, Zelin, 2013; Byman & Williams, 2015).

As the dust settled on this infighting, Daesh emerged as a dominant force in Syria and as such began to attract a substantial number of foreign jihadis who travelled from all around the world to fight under its banner (see, Byman & Williams, 2015; Wood, 2015). In Syria, Daesh fighters began to embed themselves in local communities where they took advantage of the political and security vacuum to build ties, to bolster support, and to spread the group's extremist ideology under the pretence of battling against the

Assad regime. In particular, fighters established strongholds in the Aleppo and Raqqa governorates in Northern Syria. With a Syrian base firmly in place, however, Daesh's true intentions became apparent as it turned its attention back to Iraq and began to commit mass atrocities in an effort to capture cities and towns for its caliphate which would now span both Syria and Iraq (see, Wood, 2015; Oosterveld & Bloem, 2017).

Fallujah was the first city to fall to Daesh in December 2013 (see, Hassan, 2016: 761), and within six months the jihadist group had taken control of Mosul, Iraq's second city (Abdulrazaq & Stansfield, 2016: 525). It was the ferocity of the attack on Mosul and the swiftness on Daesh's success that captured global attention. The world watched as a relatively small number of Daesh fighters, an estimated 1500 (Lafta, Cetorelli & Burnham, 2018: 1), entered Mosul on June 10th where they freed prisoners, took many hostages, killed indiscriminately, destroyed religious and heritage sites, caused 50,000 residents to flee the city, and seized Iraqi weaponry left behind by government troops (see, Smith, Brook-Holland, Page, 2014; Cunliffe & Curini, 2018). Mosul was also the site where Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi delivered his June 29th sermon in which he declared the establishment of a Caliphate in Daesh-held territories and proclaimed himself the *caliph* (leader) of the global Muslim community (see, Hassan, 2016; Safi, 2019).

While it was the declaration of the Caliphate that first sparked the news media's interest in Daesh, when its attention began to shift to the women in the conflict, the coverage intensified significantly. First, UK news discourse made women "visible" as victims of Daesh through a plethora of news articles detailing horrific stories of the sexual and gender-based violence that Daesh perpetrated against mainly Yazidi women after its assault on the Sinjar region of Northern Iraq on August 3rd, 2014. Next, women participants in Daesh became a focal point of the news coverage as the number of women migrating from the UK to Syria and/or Iraq to join the jihadist group increased. Finally, after the battle of Kobane in the final months of 2014, women fighters against Daesh were thrust into the news media spotlight as details of their participation in frontline battles began to emerge. Given the news media's fixation on women, it is perhaps unsurprising that they quickly became the principal way through which information about the conflict was reported in UK news discourse.

My thesis problematises this news coverage and challenges the representations of women that have emerged from it. Through an analysis of 245 UK news articles, I demonstrate that the constructed image of women is distorted because the reporting, despite coming from news agencies that span the political and ideological spectrum, is selective and sensationalist and is rooted in deeply harmful patriarchal and Orientalist assumptions. Drawing from the archive of feminist theorising, primarily feminist International Relations, feminist postcolonial and feminist political theory, and using a critical discourse analytical framework, my thesis investigates the constructed representations of women paying particular attention to the ideologies that inform them, and to the impacts such ideologies have on shaping public perception of the conflict and its participants. Recognising that a more fully developed understanding of the effects of news discourse can be gained through an analysis of the lived experiences of those represented, I also engage in a narrative analysis of the stories of women in Syria and Iraq. As well as facilitating my examination of the ways in which women are impacted and informed by the constructed representations, this engagement enables me to centre the voices of women, and to deconstruct the news media representations of them by shedding light on the existence and significance of their agency.

1.2.    Thesis Structure.

My thesis studies the representations of women constructed in UK news coverage of Daesh between 2013-2017. It takes as its case representations of women portrayed as victims of, participants in, and fighters against the jihadist group in Syria and Iraq. Using critical discourse analysis, I investigate the patriarchal and Orientalist ideologies that underpin the constructed representations and assess how they are used to shape public perception of the conflict and the women in it. To challenge these perceptions, I also engage with the personal stories of the women to whom the news articles relate. Using narrative analysis, I explore how women are impacted by the news coverage of Daesh and uncover the ways in which their stories challenge and/or disrupt the constructed representations. My thesis is comprised of seven chapters, including this introductory chapter.

Chapter Two: *Literature Review and Theoretical Framework* outlines the vast archive of feminist theorising that I engage with in my thesis that encompasses feminist IR theory, feminist political theory, feminist postcolonial theory and intersectionality research. Paying particular attention to agency and the concept of voice as I define them from a poststructuralist position, I also introduce the key themes of my research beginning with a discussion of Orientalism, Spivak's theory of the subaltern and the concept of intersectionality. Relying on feminist theories of public/private dichotomy, I then explain why women's visibility has been a central tenet of feminist inquiry for decades, before moving on to review literature in which women's perceived subordinate roles in war and violent conflict are discussed and challenged.

Chapter Three: *Methodological Framework and Ethical Strategies* provides a broad overview of the methodology framework of my thesis. I present a discussion of critical discourse analysis and narrative research, which I deploy in the data collection and analysis of this project. Through a discussion of the link between media and power, I highlight the UK news agencies relied upon, and how they were selected for investigation. This chapter also outlines the methods used to source personal narratives, including the process through which I reach out to interviewees. Underpinning all of this, is a discussion of strategies used to address research challenges and to ensure the ethical rigour of my thesis.

Chapter Four: *Fragile, Beautiful, and Very Scared* examines UK news representations of women 'victims' of Daesh. Given that this coverage is dominated by stories about Yazidi women, I begin this chapter with an analysis of how Yazidi women came to be situated as the archetypal victims of Daesh violence. Next, I examine the narratives of sexual and gender-based violence that emerged through UK news discourse, and the ways in which such narratives have been used to shape the public's perception of Daesh and to justify military intervention in the region. Relying on the stories of women from the region, and through engagement with feminist IR theory and media studies, I also consider the potential ramifications of such representations. Specifically, I examine their implications for Yazidi women whose stories of resistance are largely ignored by the UK news media, and on other women in the region whose experiences of victimisation remain largely omitted from the narrative of events.

Chapter Five: *The Myth of the "Jihadi Bride"* investigates representations of women reported to be aligned with Daesh. Recognising that the UK news media frames its reporting in this context around migrant women and that the focus of the coverage therefore shifts to discussions of radicalisation, motivations, and the women's roles in the Caliphate, these are the main topics of discussion in this chapter. Focusing on the ways in which migrant women are represented, I examine and uncover the patriarchal and Orientalist ideologies that are deployed in UK news discourse to explain away the women's behaviour and to deny their agency. Engaging with migrant women's social media postings, I challenge representations that obscure and oversimplify their actions and discuss the ramifications that such representations are likely to have for the public whose understanding of the conflict and its participants, and whose ability to recognise radicalisation and its dangers, is dependent upon such discourse.

Chapter Six: *Women Warriors* explores the representations that are constructed in the UK news media of women fighters against Daesh. Focusing on portrayals of agency, I investigate the ways in which Kurdish female fighters are differentiated from women victims of, and women participants in, Daesh, namely that the agency of women who fought against the jihadist group is recognised in the news discourse. Through a critical study of the language in use in the articles, however, I argue that despite portraying women fighters as remarkable on the surface, the UK news media subordinates their agency by depicting it as gendered and exceptional. In each section of this chapter, I analyse how this occurs: 1) through a determined focus on the fighters' identities as women, 2) through portrayals of their motives as non-political and based in feminised emotionality, and 3) through selective reporting of their actual activities on the frontline that diminishes the extent and significance of the roles that they played. To challenge the constructed representations and to shed light on the reality of women fighters' lived experiences, I incorporate an examination of their personal narratives throughout this chapter, narratives sourced through third-party interviews.

Chapter Seven: *Concluding Remarks* summarises the key arguments of my thesis in relation to UK news representations of victims of, participants in and fighters against Daesh. It also evaluates the implications that I discussed both for the women to whom the news articles relate, and the general public whose perception of the conflict and its participants is shaped by news discourse. I also consider the questions that arise from my analysis, and through a reassessment of the challenges that I encountered, I

conclude this chapter by outlining potential areas for further study, focusing on the changing nature of the conflict and the possibility of future personal fieldwork.

**Chapter Two: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework.**

For decades, feminist scholars have challenged what they perceive to be the relative invisibility of women in the dominant theorisations of International Relations (cf. Enloe, 1989; Blanchard, 2003; Sjoberg, 2019). Depicted in feminist International Relations (IR) literature as an area of study written 'by men for men' (Sjoberg, 2019: 55), scholars have long criticized the 'masculinist orientation' of traditional IR (Tickner, 1992: 6), arguing that the assumptions, explanations and representations of war and global security politics that it constructs have historically been based 'almost entirely of the activities and experiences of men' (1992: 1). Women's experiences and actions on the other hand, are described as remaining 'largely undertheorized and even unseen' (Sylvester, 1990: 47), as they are continually depicted as marginal and politically insignificant actors, and/or as agentless victims of political violence (cf. Sjoberg, 2010; Gentry & Sjoberg, 2015), a description that is frequently relied upon in the representations of women that have been constructed in UK news coverage of Daesh.

The unequal weight assigned to men and women in IR discourses, has been a central focus of feminist scholarship resulting in the development of a vast body of work. This work has been aimed not only at understanding women's absence from traditional IR discourse, but also at challenging that absence through the recovery of their experiences (see, Wibben, 2011), and at exposing the workings of gender and power in IR more broadly (cf. Brown, 1988; Blanchard, 2003; Enloe, 2014). Feminist IR scholars have also set out to deconstruct and redefine understandings of war, its causes, and its impacts (Sjoberg, 2019: 61). Valuable contributions have focused on analysing the gendered logic of the concepts of 'security' and 'protection' in warfare (see, Young, 2003, Shepherd, 2006; Sjoberg & Peet, 2011; Ahram, 2015), and on exploring the reality of 'women's presence in military forces around the world' and throughout history (Sjoberg, 2010: 54; see also, Alison, 2004). Each of these areas of study are particularly relevant to my investigation of the representations of women in conflict constructed in UK news media coverage of Daesh.

The concept of agency has been central to this feminist theorizing (cf. Brown, 1988; Davis, 1991; Butler, 2006). Feminist IR scholars have set out to deconstruct classical interpretations of agency in which it has been inextricably linked to personhood, in an effort to challenge women's subordination and marginalisation in social and political

hierarchies, and their invisibility in the discourse of war and violent conflict. Feminist scholars assert that it is through such classical interpretations of agency that a troubling masculine/feminine dualism is constructed, one that is relied upon to afford agency to men who are depicted as autonomous and rational beings capable of reason and conscious thought, and to deny it to women, who are described as lacking in such qualities, and as such lacking in personhood (Davis, 1991: 43). While feminist scholars have not yet produced a unified perspective on the concept of agency, significant contributions have led to the development of relational theories aimed at redefining the concept of autonomy to overcome its 'masculinist biases' (Seodu Herr, 2018: 195), as well as those that decentralize autonomy and instead theorise agency in terms of signification and performativity (cf. Butler, 1997; 1999).

My thesis understands agency as the capacity to act, to control one's life, and to make decisions, but argues that when social actors are not *seen* as powerful and complex in their actions, it is often the case that they are portrayed as non-agential. A central question in my thesis is what then occurs if the power and complexity of a social actor's agency exists, but is obscured in discourse? Does this mean that they are lacking in agency? I contend that it does not. In my investigation of UK news discourse representations of women in relation to Daesh, I argue that while the news media has failed to *recognise* the powerful agentic capacity and complexity of women in Syria and Iraq, thus shaping a perception of them in the public consciousness as lacking in agency, this does not mean that they are non-agential. While at first glance, this might appear to move away from Judith Butler's theory of performativity in which 'the question of agency is always posed in relation to the meaning of a performance, … [a] performance [that] must be interpreted and recognised by another' (Clare, 2009: 52), in reality, I draw heavily on the theory of signification as Butler does by arguing that to access agency, it must be *seen*, and this can be achieved by foregrounding the voices of women in the region, and relying on their stories (as told by them) to dismantle the representation that have been constructed.

My thesis draws from the tradition of feminist theorizing discussed in this introduction and aims to contribute to it. While feminist IR theory is the basis of my theoretical framework, I also draw on feminist political theory, feminist postcolonial theory and intersectionality research to bring together the themes of my thesis. This chapter commences this work by providing a detailed overview of the four core ideas that

shape this thesis. Paying particular attention to agency and the concept of voice as I defined them, I first introduce Orientalism (section 2.1), before expanding on its impacts from a feminist perception through a discussion of postcolonial feminism and intersectionality research (section 2.2). Next, I rely on feminist critiques of public/private dichotomy to highlight the importance of the concept of visibility in my research (section 2.3). Finally, I review feminist challenges to women's perceived subordinate roles in war and violent conflict, challenges that inform and support my efforts to deconstruct UK news discourse representations of women in Syria and Iraq that portray them as victims, passive participants and innately gendered beings (section 2.3).

## 2.1. The Concept of Orientalism.

One of the core ideas of my thesis is that the representations of women in Syria and Iraq that have been constructed in UK news coverage of Daesh (2013-2017), are replete with traditional Orientalist ideologies that perpetuate harmful stereotypes of Muslim societies and cement them in the Western public consciousness. My thesis contends that such stereotypes contribute to the construction of inherently problematic knowledge about Muslim masculinities/femininities through which Muslim men are portrayed as unsavoury and malevolent actors for whom violence and sexual deviancy is "natural", and Muslim women are represented as marginalised, oppressed, solely domestic and innately non-agential beings, who live at the mercy of their menfolk. To facilitate my discussion of these ideologies and their impacts on women in Syria and Iraq, and on understandings of their identities and agency, this section provides an explanation of the concept of Orientalism as it is described by Edward Said (1978).

Edward Said's 1978 book *Orientalism* is often depicted as one of the seminal texts of postcolonial theory (see also, Spivak, 1988; Bhabha, 1994; Choudhury, 2016), and as necessary literature for those seeking to undertake 'study of the Middle East' (Milton-Edwards, 2006: 8). This is because Said centres his work on what he perceives to be a disparity between the lived realities of 'the Orient', and especially 'the Islamic Orient' experiences (Mutman, 1992: 167), and the representations and perceptions that have

been constructed of that experience in 'western-based academic stud[ies]' (Milton-Edwards, 2006: 7), and in literature, art, and culture more broadly.

At the outset of his interview with Edward Said, Sut Jhally (2005) summarises the premise of Orientalism by asserting that Said sets out to answer this essential question:

> Why when we think about the Middle East, for example, [do] we have a preconceived notion of what kind of people live there, what they believe, and how they act even though we may never have been there or indeed even met anyone from there?

In his work, Said posits that the answer to this question can only be found through a consideration of the lasting impacts and legacies of European colonialization of Eastern civilisations. In particular, he argues that any effort to understand, criticize, and/or or to challenge the preconceived notions and assumptions that exist in relation to 'the Orient', must begin with an examination of the Orientalist narratives that were borne out of colonialization, their purpose, and their continued implications (1978: 3).

In explaining the foundations of Orientalism in the context of the Middle East as he perceives it, Said claims that as well as using military strategies and violent force to assert dominance over the 'East', the 'West' compounded their colonialization efforts by constructing disparaging and demeaning narratives of the 'Orient, its people, customs, "mind", destiny, and so on' (1978: 3). In these narratives, generalisations are discursively produced through which 'Orientals' are portrayed as a 'homogenous and monolithic mass' who exist in opposition to the 'West' (Milton-Edwards, 2006: 8).

In the context of the Middle East which is 'primarily Muslim in religious character' (Milton-Edwards, 2006: 8), Orientalist narratives constructed an image of 'backward, degenerate, uncivilized, and retarded … Orientals' (Said, 1978: 207), whose supposed inherent barbaric nature ensured that they were portrayed as inferior to the rational, developed, enlightened and progressive 'West' (see, Milton-Edwards, 2006). This enabled for the establishment of an 'us versus them' dichotomy between the 'civilized West' and the 'backward East' (Khalid, 2019: 44), through which the Islamic Orient could justifiably be conceived as a threat to the 'West', and/or in need of rescue, protection and direction of the 'West' (Said, 1978: 207), who could 'lift [them] into the realm of the civilized' (Khalid, 2019: 43). This is mirrored in the discursive constitution

of the female Oriental subject in Spivak's work which is discussed in the next section of this chapter.

Orientalist discourses can thus be viewed as being 'politically motivated' (Milton-Edwards, 2006: 8), because the resulting narratives were used by the 'West' to necessitate and legitimise colonialism, and to assert authority and dominance 'over the Orient' (Said, 1978: 3). In other words, Orientalism can be depicted as a tool of Western imperialism, used to justify colonialism in the eyes of 'western public opinion' (Ventura, 2017: 291), and to define and control the Orient by 'making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it [and] ruling over it' (Said, 1978: 3). Said further argues that 'because of Orientalism, the Orient was not (and is not) a free subject of thought and action' (1978: 3) but is instead constructed as an object through western discourse where they are 'studied and spoken about' (Ventura, 2017: 285).

Said further argues that Orientalism is not confined to colonialism, nor are those involved in colonisation the only ones who engage in it: 'anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient … is an Orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism' (1978: 2). This expanded definition provides scope for Said's 'principal operating assumption' (1978: 201): that imperialist representations of the 'Orient' did not disappear with the end of colonial rule, but have instead survived to the modern day in the work of 'poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, [and] imperial administrators' (1978: 2), who, whether intentionally or not, often rely on and perpetuate the colonial narratives that founded the basic distinctions between the 'Orient' and the 'Occident' (1978: 2).

In this context, Said asserts that because 'fields of learning, as much as the works of even the most eccentric artist, are constrained and acted upon by society, by cultural traditions, by worldly circumstance, and by stabilizing influences like schools, libraries and governments' (1978: 201), any knowledge constructed in relation to the 'Orient, its civilization, peoples, and localities' in today's society (1978: 203), will continue to reflect that which came before. This means that the past imperialist narratives upon which the dominant perceptions of the Orient have historically been built are engrained in 'Western learning' and 'Western consciousness' (1978: 203), and as such remain influential (at least in some form) in modern Western thinking.

Examples of this are evident across multiple disciplines and mediums, where the prevailing narrative of the Islamic world centres on 'images of predatory, conniving, and deceitful men (Sheikhs, despots, and terrorists) and passive women needing saving (belly dancers in harems with plenty of veils' (Metres, 2018). While Metres is primarily discussing the film and television industry in his analysis, exotic, racial and sexual representations of this nature are widespread, permeating 'scholarship, art, literature, music and public discourse', including news discourse, in the 'West' (Said, 1981: 13). Undeniably reflective of imperialist thinking, when representations of this nature appear, whether in latent or manifest forms, they not only aid in the distortion of the reality of the Islamic Orient experience as Said argues, but they also contribute to the continued perpetuation of negative and harmful stereotypes that disempower the Orient and situate them as the 'underdeveloped "Other"' (Khalid, 2019: 43).

Irrespective of the global context in which they situate their studies, the general aim of postcolonial scholars like Said, can be understood as an effort to expose 'Orientalist world views' constructed as part of colonialisation efforts (Shands, 2008: 5), and to deconstruct and dismantle them by recovering and foregrounding the voices of 'the marginalized, the oppressed, and the dominated' (McEwan, 2001: 95). In sum, postcolonial scholars set out to create awareness of Orientalism (and its implications) as it exists in social, cultural, economic, and political contexts, as well as to demystify the Oriental experience by helping to create conditions and spaces in which their voices can be heard and the reality of their experiences and agency acknowledged (see, Spivak, 1988; Sawant, 2011).

Relying on the work of Edward Said, I position the concept of Orientalism as central to my inquiry, arguing that UK news discourse relies on common Orientalist tropes in their coverage of Daesh and the conflict in Syria and Iraq. In particular, I argue that news agencies give space and credence to stereotypes like those discussed in this chapter as a means to normalise and reinforce Orientalist knowledge in the public consciousness, about Muslim societies, its cultures, and its people. In relying on Said's explanations of Orientalism, however, I also recognise that his work is not without issue. One such issue is that 'Said does not consider women and gender issues in his findings of a discursive production of orientalism as *the other* to Europe' (Wallaschek, 2015: 221). As Wallaschek states, '*The other is male* in Said's text' (2015: 221). It is necessary, therefore, to consider feminist perspectives of postcolonial theory and the

means through which the marginalisation of the Other is impacted or altered when the Other is female.

2.2. Postcolonial Feminism and the Intersectional Approach.

One of the foremost postcolonial theorists often depicted as being the first with 'a fully feminist agenda' is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Bertens, 2007: 211). Most notably recognised for her highly influential essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1988), Spivak critiques both imperialist and academic attitudes towards indigenous colonial subjects in India. Unlike Said, who refers to Orientals, Spivak centres her study on subaltern subjects (1988: 94), who she defines as sections of people who have been (and continue to be) disempowered and dispossessed as a result of colonialism, and whose characterizing feature is a lack of voice. It should be noted that Spivak is not asserting that the subaltern cannot speak, but rather she argues that their voices are not heard by wider society because hegemonic groups who assert and maintain their authority through discourse, disregard the meaningfulness of their speech. Reinforcing this position, Spivak alleges that if their voices were to be heard and considered, they would no longer be subaltern' (Thurfjell, 2008: 158).

Amongst the topics discussed by Spivak in her piece is the specific marginalisation and exploitation of subaltern women. In this context, Spivak posits that 'if, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has not history and cannot speak, the subaltern female is even more deeply in shadow' (1988: 83). In other words, if the assertion made by Said is correct, that the colonial subject has historically been ignored, distorted and/or exploited in discourse as a result of imperialist thinking and its lasting impacts, then the female colonial subject has been 'doubly exploited' (Sawant, 2011: 3). This is because subaltern women are subjugated and constrained not only by the systems and practices that constitute Orientalism, but by patriarchal traditions through which they are situated as subordinate to already subordinated men.

This notion of the subaltern is an echo of the feminine in the masculine/feminine dualism constructed in classical theories of agency. As I discussed at the outset of this chapter, feminist scholars have wrestled with this dualism for decades, arguing that it contributes to the exclusion of women from discussions of agency. In classical

theories, agency is depicted as being 'synonymous with personhood' and is linked to traits understood to be stereotypically masculine: 'freedom, autonomy, rationality and moral authority' (Davis, 1991: 42). Feminist theorists problematise this association by arguing that it enables men (who are associated with masculinity) to be classified as agential but denies agency to women who are constructed as feminine beings, who as a result of their femininity, lack the necessary capacities to be agential. Similar to Spivak's notion of the subaltern, the feminine (or women) in this dualism is subordinated, oppressed, and disempowered as their actions are constructed as without complexity. In linking agency to voice, my thesis contends that the agency of subaltern women, which commonly goes unrecognised in discursive practices, can be accessed by centering their voices and stories in the narratives of global events.

Spivak is not alone in her assertion that subaltern women are 'doubly subordinated'. Leila Ahmed makes the same argument in her 1992 study in which she explores the intersection between Orientalism and gender from a feminist perspective. In her work, Ahmed makes the argument that Oriental women, through imperialist narratives, are constructed as subordinate not only to the West (by virtue of their race), but also to men in the East (by virtue of their sex). Ahmed further argues that this 'double' subordination of Oriental women has historically been exploited by the West:

> Even as the Victorian male establishment devised theories to contest the claims of feminism and derided and rejected the ideas of feminism and the notion of men oppressing women with respect to itself, it captured the language of feminism and redirected it, in service of colonialism, toward Other men and the culture of Other men (1992: 151).

Ahmed is arguing that despite rejecting the legitimacy of feminism, and its claim about the realities of oppressive patriarchal structures in the context of Western societies, colonisers hijacked those same feminist ideas to accuse Other men of oppressing Other women in Other societies. Gendered oppression and patriarchal subordination are thus represented in Orientalist discourses as occurring only in societies 'beyond the borders of the civilized West' (1992: 151). Used frequently 'in the rhetoric of colonialism', this type of narrative was relied upon to compound previously discussed stereotypical images of Oriental men and women, and to 'render morally justifiable its project of undermining or eradicating the cultures of colonized peoples' (1992: 151).

In these Orientalist discourses, women are depicted as agentless and as the archetypal victims of violence, deviancy, and oppression at the hands of 'Oriental' men. Reflective of the beautiful soul/just warrior narrative developed by Jean Elshtain (1987), which is discussed later in this chapter, this apparent victimhood of Oriental women by Oriental men was exploited by colonisers to justify imperial force, thereby situating Oriental women as the cause of colonialism (see, Sjoberg, 2010; Sjoberg & Peet, 2011). Spivak, when speaking about the abolition of the Hindu rite of Sati, argues that such narratives have historically been a common trope in Orientalist discourses that marginalise women's voices, and can be understood as a case of 'white men saving brown women from brown men' (1988: 93).

Even forty years after the publication of Said's *Orientalism*, and after decades of academic writings aimed at confronting the West/East dualism that Said set out and the concept of voice introduced by Spivak, Orientalist tropes that rely on and contribute to Oriental women's subordination, continue to be disseminated and consolidated in present-day representations of the Middle East in which Oriental women's voices are marginalised, and the powerfulness and complexity of their agency is obscured. This is evident when considering news discourse of the 'War on Terror' after September 11th (see, Cooke, 2012; Ahram, 2015), and in more recent discussions of Daesh and the women 'in and around' the jihadist group (Sjoberg, 2018, see also, Bassil, 2019), in which monolithic and homogenising narratives of the lived realities of Oriental women are produced, narratives that ignore the voices of women in the region, and that reinforce gender-stereotypes and perpetuate women's perceived victimhood.

Part of the argument that I make in each of the three content chapters of my thesis (chapters 4-6) is that UK news media reporting of Daesh in Syria and Iraq (2013-2017), is influenced by and reflective of traditional colonial thinking. Specifically, I argue that despite seeming to make women "visible" in the narrative of events, the discourse fails to recognise the voices of women and instead selectively reports their stories in a war that obscures and oversimplifies the powerfulness and complexity of their experiences and actions. In doing, so, news discourse enables the perpetuation of harmful Orientalist tropes that cast women in the Middle East as weak, helpless, passive and inherently feminine beings, who are at the mercy of savagely violent and deviant Oriental men.

Reflective of the positions of Ahmed and Spivak, I posit that representations that rely on traditional stereotypes, particularly those constituted in the West, have been used in the past (and continue to be used) as a means through which the West can justify military intervention in the region and to reinforce Orientalist knowledge about the Islamic world. Rather than speaking for Muslim women impacted by Daesh, as my thesis will demonstrate is the case in UK news media discourse where women are made "visible" only superficially, my intention is to provide space for their voices and stories to be heard.

Prior to unpacking the concept of visibility more rigorously in the next section of this chapter, it should be noted that my thesis deals not only with postcolonial challenges to 'the imbalance of power existing between north and south, east and west' (Schutte, 2007: 167), and the intersection between gender and race from a transnational focus (see, Kerner, 2017: 847), it also addresses multiple intersecting inequalities faced by the women represented in the analysed news discourse. To accommodate such an analysis, my thesis integrates into its postcolonial discussion, reference to intersectionality scholarship, which 'is strongly focused on stressing, describing, and theorizing multiple forms of inequality among different subgroups of women' (Kerner, 2017: 847).

While the term itself would later be coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality research can be traced to 'the establishment of Black Feminism and Critical Race Theory in the 1970s' (Wallaschek, 2015: 222), and specifically, to activists and academics who, like postcolonial feminists, were critical of Western feminism which was predominately white, middle-class, and heterosexual (Bartels, Eckstein, Waller & Wiemann, 2019: 155). Specifically, they were (and continue to be) critical of the assertion often made that women's social and political subordination could be explained through reference to a single 'axis of differentiation, or to a single aspect of inequality' (Kerner, 2017: 848). Taking issue with the universalistic representations of women in Western feminism as a homogenous group subordinated by virtue of their sex, intersectional feminists argued that such a view contributes to the continued marginalisation of different subgroups of women, particularly women of color (Wallaschek, 2015: 222), thereby depoliticising them and making them invisible not only in scholarship, but also in the women's movement.

Explaining why a single-axis analysis of discrimination and oppression is essentially inadequate, Kimberlé Crenshaw states:

> Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction and it may flow in another. If an accident happens at an intersection, it can be caused by cars travelling from a number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination' (1989: 149).

This means that when considering different forms of oppression and their interplay, feminist who conduct intersectionality research argue that 'one form of oppression [should not be prioritised] over the other' (Bartels, Eckstein, Waller & Wiemann, 2019: 156). While this type of research began with a focus on what has been dubbed the 'master categories' of gender, race, and class (2019: 156), more recent scholarship has expanded to recognise a wide spectrum of intersecting identities including (but not limited to) gender, race, class, age, sexuality, and religion (cf. Wallaschek, 2015; Kerner, 2017; Bartels, Eckstein, Waller & Wiemann, 2019).

The importance of this expansion is highlighted in the content chapters of my thesis in which I analyse the representations of women that have been constructed in UK news coverage of Daesh. Relying on postcolonial theories and intersectionality research as part of this analysis, enables me to parse out and discuss the implications of, how the constructed representations of women in Syria and Iraq may differ based not only on the women's perceived experiences of, and roles in, the conflict, but also on depictions of their different intersecting identities. While postcolonial theories and intersectionality research are not always used together, I contend that in the context of my research which incorporates both a transnational and national focus on critiques of power imbalances in relation to gender and race, and an analysis of the multiple forms of inequalities faced by women, the approaches complement each other and can be considered together to construct a more fully developed analysis.

2.3. Invisible Women.

Feminist and gender scholars across multiple disciplines have long argued that in most intellectual disciplines 'knowledge, truth, and reality have been constructed as if men's experiences were normative, as if being human meant being male' (The Personal Narratives Group, 1989: 3). This is evident in International Relations, a field of study borne out of a need to 'study political phenomena at the global level' (Ghosh, 2013: 2), in which the important players, diplomats, legislators, heads of government and academics, have historically been men. As well as facilitating the invisibility of women in IR generally, this male-centred focus has contributed to the marginalisation of women from 'decision-making and institutional structures' (Smith, 2018: 63), and has reinforced the assumption commonly perpetuated, that 'the reality of women's day-to-day lives is not impacted by or important in international relations' (2018: 62). In overlooking the experiences and actions of a significant portion of the population, this means that incomplete knowledge about global events is constructed.

In response to the absence of women in traditional IR discourse, those engaged in feminist scholarship 'launched an important critique of the core issues of the discipline' (Blanchard, 2003: 1289), focusing on studies of global politics, war, peace and security (see also, Tickner, 1992; Reardon, 1993; Steans, 1998). Rather than simply employing an approach of 'add women and stir' (Sluga, 2014), feminist IR scholars propose to tackle the absence of 'women and an interest in issues of concern to women' by drawing on a broad archive of feminist theorising to investigate the sources of their exclusion (Blanchard, 2003: 1290; see also, Elshtain, 1987; Phillips, 1998; Skjelsbaek & Smith, 2011).

Focusing on the exclusion of women, feminist IR theorists engage with the work of feminist political theorists such as Anne Phillips, to draw a direct link between the women's relative invisibility in traditional discourse, and representations of their perceived position in the public/private divide (1998: 6). Stemming from social contract theory, the public and private domains are depicted as two distinct and opposing values of civil society (see, Yuval-Davis, 1997: 63). The public domain is traditionally portrayed as the domain in which social norms and regulations are constructed, political affairs and economics are debated, and wars are fought (see also, Phillips, 1998). Those who exist in this domain are considered 'high status' according to Phillips

(1998: 70). This is because its inhabitants are said to 'possess the capacities required for citizenship' (Pateman, 1988: 4), and therefore enjoy the civil freedoms, protections, and rights inherent in it, as well as the social and political powers that are perceived to come with it.

In contrast, while the private domain is acknowledged by some as a 'necessary prerequisite for political order', it has historically been deemed to be a space 'outside of what is considered political' (Åse, 2019: 279), and portrayed as separate from the public world. Rather, the private domain is constructed as synonymous with domestic and intimate life (see, Phillips, 1998: 117), with those relegated to it portrayed as being concerned solely with issues pertaining to the home and family (see, Galey, 1994), issues that have traditionally been devalued by society and characterised as non-political. Private domain actors are therefore presented not only as 'low-status' or inferior to their public domain counterparts (Phillips, 1998: 70), but as lacking in agency, and as subordinate to and dependent upon those who hold power in the public domain (see also, Pateman, 1988; Enloe, 1989).

The public/private divide has thus been a central tenet of feminist inquiry for decades, particularly in fields such as IR and Political Science, whose 'disciplinary boundaries are conventionally defined by [it]' (Phillips, 1998: 70). This is because the public/private domains are fundamentally gendered, with the public domain associated (like agency) with masculinity, and the private domain with femininity. Given the problematic conflation of masculinity with men and femininity with women, this means that men are presented as "natural" public domain actors, and women as "natural" private domain actors (see, Yuval-Davis, 1997; Sjoberg, 2010). In short, this both establishes and reinforces inequality between the sexes, as men are constructed as the power holders in world politics, and women are diminished as dependent and marginal actors who are concerned "only" with home-making, with 'bearing and rearing children' (Sjoberg, 2014: 55), and with supporting their menfolk. I return to this perceived domestic role in the next section (2.3).

Caron Gentry unpacks this gendered separation of men and women in the public and private domains in her recent work by arguing:

> Masculinity is associated with logic, rationality, strength/aggressiveness. Therefore, men are associated with these traits and from there it is assumed

that men are naturally included to be involved in the public sphere. Women are associated with opposing traits, emotions, irrationality or hysteria, and passivity, which excludes them from the public and shutters them in the private sphere (2019: 44).

In other words, men have traditionally been associated with "masculine" traits such as, toughness, courage, strength, rationality and independence, traits that are not only 'valorised and applauded in the public domain' (Tickner, 1996: 6), but are categorised as necessary to holding authoritative public roles. This means that the values, norms and assumptions that drive the contemporary international system are 'intrinsically related to concepts of masculinity' (1992: 17), thus reinforcing the view that it is only men who are equipped to exist in the public domain where global politics and war are situated. From this, feminist scholars argue that a patriarchal system of 'male power' is reified and entrenched (Weissman, 2019: 291), as men are depicted as legislators with the power to drive the political agenda, dictate policy, and declare wars, and as the military generals and soldiers who plan and fight wars (cf. Enloe, 1989; Blanchard, 2003; Welland, 2019).

In contrast, women have traditionally been depicted as possessing opposing traits that are associated with the private domain. Understood to be stereotypically feminine, these traits are depicted as: 'physical weakness, emotion, interdependence, passivity, innocence, need for protection, care, maternity, and risk aversion' (Weissman, 2019: 285). Feminist IR scholars argue that because these perceived feminine traits have traditionally been 'devalued by society' (Beckman & D'Amico, 1994: 8), and depicted as a 'liability' in the public domain (Tickner, 1992: 35), women have been constructed as fundamentally incompatible with the masculinised public world through the assertion that they do not possess the required physical or emotional capacities necessary to exist in it. Given that the private domain is often consigned to political insignificance (Dietz, 1985: 25), it is perhaps unsurprising that a system of unequal power has been established through which women's 'experiences and perspectives on global politics are more easily ignored and justified as marginal' (Smith, 2018: 65).

While it might appear, at first glance, that the women who are represented in UK news coverage in relation to Daesh, provide a counterexample to traditional representations of the public/private divide simply because they are made "visible" in the narrative of

events in a significant way. My thesis demonstrates, however, that they are only made "visible" insofar as their experiences reflect public/private dichotomy, and the gender-stereotypes that it perpetuates. In other words, women in Syria and Iraq might not be omitted from the discourse on violent conflict as has historically been the case, but they continue to be represented along public/private lines as innately feminine: as helpless, emotional, maternal, innocent and passive beings who typically occupy a 'subordinate position of dependence' (Young, 2003: 2), and for whom agency is the 'exception, rather than the rule' (Davis, 1991: 42). How women in Syria and Iraq are represented in UK news discourse, and the ways in which such representations reflect the masculine/feminine dualism constructed in public/private dichotomy, are unpacked in the next section.

2.4. Making Women Visible.

In the previous section, I explained how the public/private structure of politics and IR is mapped upon and generates gendered hierarchies, which, in turn, naturalises the public/private split and so renders women invisible. This section develops this discussion further by previewing how Orientalist and masculinist discourses produce a particular conception of the female subject during periods of war and violent conflict. In parallel with the content chapters of my thesis (chapters 4-6), this section first reviews feminist literature that addresses women's "visibility" as victims in traditional IR discourse, before concluding with a discussion on feminist challenges to classical representations of women's perceived roles in war and violent conflict.

Feminist scholars argue that the public/private divide and its categorisation of women as inherently powerless beings, has led to their portrayal as innocent and helpless civilians in times of war and violent conflict (see, Sjoberg, 2014: 5). In fact, in IR theory, it is often the case that women are situated as the archetypal victims of violence, with accounts of their pain and suffering used to underscore not only the necessity of war, but to justify its legitimacy (cf. Skjelsbaek & Smith, 2001; Ahram, 2015). Explaining how this occurs, scholars explain that during times of war, states rely on women's alleged passivity, innocence, domesticity, and emotionality to portray them as 'a symbol of the good and pure that requires the evil of fighting to save it' (Sjoberg, 2010: 56). In other words, women are portrayed as naturally subordinate and weak private

domain beings who require masculine protectors to aid them. Through this type of narratives women are situated as the catalyst of war, and as its victim (see also, Elshtain, 1987; Sjoberg, 2010; Åhäll, 2012a).

Jean Elshtain explains this phenomenon through the assertion that in times of war, men and women 'take on, in cultural memory and narrative, the personas of Just Warriors and Beautiful Souls' (1987: 4). Based on the patriarchal notions of masculinity and femininity already discussed in this chapter, these deeply entrenched archetypes are used to portray women a 'beautiful souls' who are innocent and 'naïve about the nature of war', and men as the 'just warriors' who fight to 'protect their innocence and quality of life' (Sjoberg, 2010: 56). Elshtain's language has been adopted by many feminist scholars over the decades, and is used throughout my thesis, not to suggest that women are innocent of wars, but to argue that they are 'portrayed as, defined as, and stereotyped as innocent of wars' (Sjoberg & Peet, 2011: 167), and to illustrate that this type of portrayal is a common trope in the discourse of war and violent conflict.

Feminist scholars argue that examples of beautiful soul narrative can be found in plentiful discourses throughout history: Laura Sjoberg states that the 'Trojan war was fought in part over the beautiful Helen' (2010: 56), Cynthia Enloe suggests that 'if there is an image that defines television's coverage of the Gulf crisis, it's a dishevelled white woman coming off a Boeing 747, and exhausted baby on her shoulder' (1993, in Sjoberg, 2010: 56), Annick T. R. Wibben points out that the Bush administration's call to action after 9/11 included repeated reference to 'a fight for the rights and dignity of women' as a means to justify the 'war on terror' (2011: 10), and more recently, Ariel I. Ahram examined, as I do in my thesis (see chapter four), the ways in which Barrack Obama and other world leaders, exemplified this trope by relying on narratives of the physical and sexual violence perpetrated against women, particularly Kurdish women, as a means to justify military action against Daesh (2015: 57).

The difficulties inherent in narratives of this nature are both plentiful and complex. Perhaps most obvious is that the traditional gender norms that are established through the public/private divide are reinforced. In particular, 'just warrior' men are depicted in such narratives as being 'empowered by their ability to protect… women' in the public world (Ahram, 2015: 58). Relying on their perceived innate masculine traits, men are thus situated as natural protectors who willingly sacrifice their lives in defence of

powerless women. Conversely, women are disempowered as their supposed feminine nature is emphasised as a way to argue that women are inherently dependent upon 'male heroes' for rescue and protection (see, Sjoberg, 2006). Similar to public/private dichotomy, this means that women in the discourse of war and violent conflict 'occupy a subordinate status' (Young, 2003: 2), as innocent and helpless civilians who are 'affected by, but themselves outside of, [war-fighting] and the politics of war-making' (Sylvester, 2011: 121), and are thus visible only in this way.

In chapter four of my thesis, one of the issues that I address with the 'beautiful soul' narrative and the masculine/feminine dualism that it relies upon, is that as well as contributing to women's social and political marginalisation and to the denial of their agency, it also has the perverse consequence of 'creat[ing] a stronger incentive [for those who fight in wars] to target women for violence' (Gentry & Sjoberg, 2015: 58). Building on feminist work that argues that women are disproportionately impacted by violence in war, and in particular, sexual and gender-based violence (cf. Enloe, 1989; Nordstrom, 1996), Laura Sjoberg and Jessica Peet assert that women are both protected in war, and intentionally targeted for violence 'not directly as women but as symbolic centres of state, nation, and the war effort of their enemies' (2011: 166).

In their theorisation, women are constructed as the 'symbolic centres' of nations and states because, as Nira Yuval-Davis argues, it is women 'who reproduce nations, biologically, culturally, and symbolically' (1997: 2, in Sjoberg & Peet, 2011: 138). This means that if wars are fought to defend nations or states, it follows that women, who are central to their reproduction, should be protected by just warrior men. Sjoberg and Peet argue that it is through this logic that women become targets in war for "enemy" combatants (men), who seek to destroy a nation or state. In particular, women are depicted as victims of sexual and gender-based violence which becomes a strategic and symbolic weapon in war-fighting efforts: 'rape in ethnic-national war in particular, becomes a powerful symbolic weapon against the "enemy". As women are seen as precious property of the "enemy", women and their bodies become territories to be seized and conquered' (Korac, 1996: 137, in Sjoberg & Peet, 2011: 169).

Wartime sexual and gender-based violence can therefore be understood as a tactic used in war to assert dominance over one's enemy, and more importantly, as a tool to achieve some political objective (Innes & Steele, 2019: 153). Relying again on the

assertion that women as the symbolic centres of nations and states crucial to their reproduction, feminist scholars argue that the political purpose that sexual and gender-based violence in war serves, is to destroy the nation, state and/or a specific group of people:

> The mass war rapes can be understood as an element of communication – the symbolic humiliation of the male opponent. By dishonouring a woman's body, which symbolizes her lineage, a man can symbolically dishonour the whole lineage… Thus, sexual violence against women became a tool of genocide for destroying the enemy's honor, lineage, and nation' (Snydar et al, 2006: 190, in Sjoberg & Peet, 2011: 170).

My thesis develops this scholarship through an analysis of UK news representations of Yazidi women in the aftermath of Daesh's assault of the Sinjar region of Northern Iraq in August 2014. In their reporting of this assault, the UK news media discusses the murder and torture that occurred, but focuses overwhelmingly on horrific accounts of the sexual and gender-based violence that the jihadist groups perpetrated as they abducted thousands of women and girls from the towns and villages in the region. Despite shedding a light on this phenomenon, the news media largely fails to recognise its significance and implications. Using language such as 'spoils of war' and 'war-booty' (BBC13/2014; DM39/2016), thus depicting such violence as a mere by-product of the conflict, or an advantageous way through which Daesh could express triumph over their enemies.[3] In chapter four, I rely on the feminist scholarship reviewed, to argue that Daesh's 'systematic and premediated use of rape and sexual slavery' in Syria and Iraq can be understood as a genocidal tool employed as a means to eradicate the Yazidi population (Goodman, Bergbower, Perrotle & Chaudhary, 2020). Rather than informing the public about the root causes and implications of wartime sexual and gender-based violence, my findings show that the UK news media instead constructs a selective, simplistic and sexualised narrative of women's perceived victimisation that relies on patriarchal and Orientalist ideologies to stoke public outrage and to justify retaliatory violence.

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[3] These references refer to two of the news articles that I analysed. Each article was assigned a code during the data collection stage of my research. For example, BBC13/2014 denotes the news agency, the order in which it article was downloaded, and the year that it was published. More information about this process can be found in Chapter three – 'Methodological Approach and Ethical Strategies'.

Contributing to narratives in which women are made "visible" as victims, traditional IR discourse also draws on the dualism constructed through public/private dichotomy to construct gendered social and political hierarchies that, in times of war and violent conflict, marginalise women as peripheral actors in the private sphere. Relying on gender-stereotypes that cast women as inherently peaceful, innocent and virtuous beings (see, Alison, 2004; Milton-Edwards & Attia, 2017), this IR discourse has historically defined women by their perceived domestic nature. In contrast to men who are portrayed as active participants in global politics, and as the stereotypical perpetrators of political violence (see, Crawford, Hoover, Green & Parkinson, 2014), women are depicted primarily as wives, sisters, daughters and mothers, whose caring and nurturing nature, and innate materialism, ensures that they are constructed as incompatible with war and the perpetration of violence:

> There is a tension between female bodies' capacities to give life and female bodies capacities to take life. The tension seems to indicate that, because of women's assumed capacity to give life, they cannot 'naturally' take life: seemingly, motherhood, with which women are 'naturally' associated, and killing, are juxtaposed. In this sense, killing is the most 'unnatural' feminine behaviour' (Åhäll, 2012a: 110).

In other words, it is often presented as normative in traditional discourse that men who are 'seen as life taking' play active roles in war and violent conflict, whereas woman who are associated with female identity and maternalism, are 'seen as life-giving' (2012a: 103), and are thus portrayed as playing passive roles in the private sphere. Relying on maternalist ideologies, traditional discourses situate women as inherently peaceful beings, and suggest that their contributions in war can be understood through primarily through their roles as mothers (2012a: 107), that is, their capacity to produce children, mainly sons, and their willingness to raise those sons as potential fighters. Using the term passive maternalism to define this type of representation, Caron Gentry explains that women are denied agency in maternalist narratives because their 'political importance is only written in the context of other people's claim on [their] socio-biological role' (Gentry, 2009: 238).

This notion of passive maternalism is more fully developed in chapter five of my thesis in which I analyse UK news media representations of "Jihadi Brides", that is, women

who migrated from Western societies to join Daesh and to live in the Caliphate. My findings in this context illustrate that in UK news discourse, migrant women's perceived contribution to the Caliphate are represented as being predicated on their willingness to marry, and to 'become a mother to the next generation of jihadism' (BBC03/2015). While this is largely portrayed as an example of passive maternalism in the UK news media and is thus used as a means to deny migrant women's agency and to portray them as marginal and politically irrelevant actors, my analysis sets out to deconstruct such representations and to highlight the complexities of this role through engagement with voices of migrant women sourced through social media.

Even in cases where women's participation in violent conflict is indisputable, gender-stereotypical ideas about femininity and maternalism continue to be perpetuated as a means to oversimplify their motivations and to obscure agency. Gentry, for example, describes 'twisted maternalism' or the manipulation of maternalism to make it applicable to politically violent women (2009: 248). In her analysis of Palestinian female suicide bombers, Gentry explains that maternalist ideologies are invoked to dismiss Palestinian women's decision to participate in self-martyrdom as being non-political and based in feminised emotionality. In particular, she argues that despite expressing political and/or ideological motivations for their actions, this is often ignored as the dominant narrative about such women constructs their violence as 'vengeance driven by maternal disappointments and humiliation (2009: 244).

Linda Åhäll in her work argues that as well as being a primary way through which women's agency in political violence is denied, motherhood is 'also fundamental in order to understand how female agency is enabled' (2012: 108). In her discussion, she introduces the 'vacant womb' and the 'deviant womb' to explain how this occurs (2012a: 110). Using the example of Jessica Lynch who is depicted as 'the first American heroine of the war in Iraq' (2012a: 111), Åhäll asserts that one of the reasons that Lynch was afforded agency in her actions while her female comrades were denied it, was because her comrades were mothers and she was childless. This means that unlike her comrades, in Lynch's story the 'tension between life-giving and life-taking' that exists in traditional maternalist ideologies is removed, and as such, Lynch can more easily be accepted as agential because her actions do not disrupt 'essentialist understandings of gender, agency and violence' (2012a: 111).

In her representation of the 'deviant womb', Åhäll describes women whose agency is enabled but characterised as monstrous (2012a: 111). Using an example from popular culture, the British television drama *Britz*, she explains that the 'deviant womb' represents women who are alleged to have denied proper gender roles and their perceived feminine nature to perpetrate violence, sometimes using their identities as women and the idea of motherhood and/or maternalism to their advantage:

> In Britz, Nasima is faking motherhood because the explosives that are strapped on her belly in the final scenes are making her look pregnant. In addition, she is wearing a maternity suit that functions to hide the explosives. The suit not only covers the explosives on her belly but also her breasts, giving the impression of a pregnant fullness to her body. This makes Nasima softer, as human and womanly as possible. The maternity suit makes Nasima look heavily pregnant, like an occupied womb symbolizing life-giving. However, Nasima is deceptive. Her identity of life-giving is an illusion. Instead, her identity is one of life-taking. Nasima is using motherhood as a political strategy in order to achieve her political goal of life-taking (2012a: 113).

In this narrative, because Nasima was childless and chose to simulate pregnancy as a means to take life, she is represented as almost non-human or, as Åhäll puts it, as a cyborg (2012a: 113). Despite agreeing that political agency is not necessarily denied in this example, I argue that the idea of female political agency is indeed diminished because Nasima is constructed as desexualised in order to explain her violence. In other words, rather than disrupting the principal ideas about gender roles in conflict and war, this narrative aids in upholding them because through the 'deviant womb' representation, Nasima is portrayed as "unnatural". In describing her as 'non-human' or a 'cyborg' (2012a: 113), the argument can be made that any political agency assigned to her is predicated on the assertion that she is somehow not "female". Irrespective of whether it can argued that "female" political agency is enabled in this case, what it shows is that maternalist ideologies are central in discourses that address women's participation in political violence as is highlighted in chapters five and six of my thesis.

Part of the issue with the maternalism narrative as it has been discussed, is that it differentiates violent women from violent men. Rather than fighting the same wars for

the same reasons as men, women are depicted as fighting a personal war for gender-specific reasons (see, Sjoberg, 2010). While this is particularly apparent in maternalist discourses, it is also prevalent in discourses in which the concept is not immediately apparent. Brigitte Nacos (2005), in her discussion about how female terrorists are framed in the news media argues that women who commit terrorist acts are often differentiated from men through a determined focus on physical appearance and depictions of gender-specific motivations. In particular, Nacos argues that in contrast to male terrorists, evidence of women's violence is often juxtaposed in the news media with depictions of their perceived femininity: 'their figure, their hair style, their make-up, their attire, their overall look' (2005: 437). Symbolic of patriarchal stereotypes, this is designed to emphasise their identities as women and to construct their actions as out of character, thereby situating them as non-credible actors.

Likewise, in news media reporting of the perceived motivations of politically violent women, it is often the case that femininity is emphasised. Nacos argues, for example, that in the case of terrorist women, the news media often focuses on family background and personal relationships as one explanation of their involvement. In this context, family influence and/or vengeance for the loss of a loved one are situated as primary motivators, thus suggesting that women's violence can be understood as situational and a result of personal grievance (2005: 440). Similar to this, Nacos asserts that it is common for the news media to suggest that women are 'drawn to terrorist groups by men they love' (2005: 441), and that naivety plays a role in their decision (2005: 445). Through this type of representation, the news media relies upon entrenched gender-stereotypes that subordinate women's agency and construct them as non-credible violent actors. In each of these narratives, any political or strategic motivation that women might express to explain their violence is ignored as the news media emphasises feminised emotionality to diminish their agency in political violence.

While this is not an extensive list of the ways in which women's participation in political violence is reconciled and made visible only in controlled ways, it provides an insight into the types of narratives that I invoke throughout this project, and in particular, in chapter six where I discuss the ways in which the agency of Kurdish female fighters is recognised in UK news coverage of Daesh, but is subordinated as exceptional and inherently gendered. From discussions about their hairstyles and make-up choices, to reporting on their family lives, including their status as mothers, and an intense fixation

on the perceived victimisation of women in the region, my thesis demonstrates that while Kurdish female fighters might be portrayed as remarkable on the surface, UK news discourse pays only lip-service to their agency as soldiers. Consequently, I argue that the UK news media obscures the voices of female fighters against Daesh and obscures the reality of their experiences and actions in the region, thereby contributing to the reinforcement of deeply harmful patriarchal and Orientalist ideologies, and to the construction of incomplete knowledge about women in war and violent conflict.


2.5. Conclusion.

While this chapter is not designed to provide a full overview of feminist theory, it is intended to provide readers with a snapshot of the key themes of my thesis and the framework through which they will be addressed. Drawing from the archive of feminist theorising, primarily feminist International Relations, feminist postcolonial, intersectionality research and also feminist political theory, the purpose of this chapter is to define agency in the context of my thesis and to highlight the patriarchal and Orientalist ideologies that are used in UK news discourse to inform their representations of the female 'Orientalist' subject. Discussed at length in my content chapters (chapters 4-6), the stereotypical tropes that I identify are rooted in traditional understandings of women's position in the public/private divide, and are emphasised in Orientalist and masculinist discourses as a means to generate gendered hierarchies and to construct Oriental women through imperial patriarchal imaginings. My thesis investigates the ideologies that permeate UK news discourse and their implications, and sets out to deconstruct them by centring the voices of women in Syria and Iraq who were impacted by the conflict.

Recognising that the theoretical framework set out in this chapter informs my chosen methodological approach, I return to the issue of agency/voice in the next chapter as I outline not only how I use critical discourse analysis to investigate the representations of women constructed in UK news media coverage of Daesh (2013-2017), but also the methods and strategies that I deploy in my efforts to highlight women's personal narratives. In particular, I discuss how my engagement with postcolonial feminist thought informed my decision to undertake a narrative analysis of the stories of women impacted by the conflict in Syria and Iraq, and provide an outline of the robust ethical

protocols that I designed to manage the risk associated with cross-language, sensitive research, and the steps that I took to ensure that through my project, I could empower women and provide a space from which their voices could be heard.

**Chapter Three: Methodological Approach and Ethical Strategies.**

As discussed in my introductory chapter, the aims of my thesis are two-fold. First, I critically analyse UK new media representations of women in Syria and Iraq in relation to Daesh (2013-2017), investigating what they do and why? Second, I examine the personal narratives of women in Syria and Iraq, to uncover how their lives are impacted and informed by the news coverage, and how their stories challenge and/or disrupt it. In other words, my goal is to uncover and examine the ideologies that inform UK news media representations of women in Syria and Iraq as victims of, participants in, and fighters against Daesh, and to analyse the ways in which such representations impact women in the region by shaping the public's perception of them and of the conflict more broadly. This means that I engage with two methods of analysis that reflect the macro (social and institutional) and micro (personal) dimensions of my study: UK news media discourse and personal narratives. To facilitate this, my methodological framework comprises of both critical discourse analysis (UK news media), and narrative analysis (personal narratives).

This chapter begins with an outline of the epistemological position of my thesis where I explore both critical discourse analysis and narrative analysis as my chosen research methodologies and justify their combined use (3.1). Next, I outline the data collection techniques used to gather relevant examples of UK news articles, and to access the personal stories of the women I discuss (3.2). Finally, I provide a systematic outline of the data analysis stage of my research, looking first at critical discourse analysis and second, at narrative analysis (3.3.) These sections are underpinned by discussions of my theoretical framework, the challenges that I faced, and the ethical framework that I devised and implemented most notably in the context of interviews with refugees.

3.1. Theory and Method.

My thesis displays an interpretivist epistemological position in that it rejects the notion that there is a single universal truth about reality that exists in 'some external and readily discovered form' (Chesebro & Borisoff, 2007: 11). Instead, I argue that reality is socially constructed through the 'thoughts and ideas of the people involved in it' (Jackson & Sorensen, 2006: 161). In other words, reality does not exist independently of the interpretation of social actors. Rather, it is this interpretation and understanding

that produces so-called 'knowledge and thus shapes the social world' (see also, Marsh & Furlong, 2002; Grix, 2010; Livholts & Tamboukou, 2015).

Reality in the interpretivist tradition is viewed as being subjective in that it 'differs from person to person' (Scotland, 2012: 11). This is because human beings interpret reality in very different ways based on their perceptions and beliefs (Walliman, 2015). As such, interpretivist researchers begin from the position that 'to understand actions, practices, and institutions, we need to grasp the meanings, beliefs, and preferences of the people involved' (Bevir & Rhodes, 2002: 134). It is also important to recognise that the ideas and beliefs of social actors are not neutral, nor are their preconceptions disembodied (see also, Heracleous, 2004; Walliman, 2015). Rather they are viewed as being 'established and understood within discourse' (Marsh & Furlong, 2002: 2). Thus, discourse has a central in the interpretivist tradition.

In its most basic sense, discourse refers to the language in use in bodies of written text and spoken communication (see, van Dijk, 1993; Hewitt, 2009). However, discourse can also be considered a platform through which 'various meanings, ideas, and versions of the world' are constructed and reinforced (Mogashoa, 2014: 105). This is because alongside words, discourse is imbued with the beliefs, ideologies, and social attitudes of those who construct it (see, Rymes, 1995; Gee, 1996). Social actors then draw on the representations of reality that are produced through discourse to 'make sense of their world and to construct social actions and relations' (Mogashoa, 2014: 105). Similarly, discourse can contribute to changes in people's beliefs, attitudes, and identities (Fairclough, 2001: 8). This reinforces the idea that rather than simply mirroring outcomes, discourse aids in the construction of social reality, and thus holds power (see, Georgaca & Avdi, 2011; Scotland, 2012).

One example of such discourse, and the discourse relied upon in my thesis, is news media discourse. As Aaminah Hassan argues: 'it is a well acknowledged fact in contemporary society that people turn to different sources of information like print and electronic media to keep themselves updated with the happenings of the world' (2018: 1). This means that news discourse plays an important and powerful societal role because it is a window through which people develop knowledge and opinions about particular events and/or topics (see, Xie, 2018: 399). Thus, news media discourse, like all forms of discourse, holds power because as news agencies, journalists and editors

select 'which topics to cover, frames to feature, and speakers to recognize' (Jungherr, Posegga & An, 2019: 409), they set the 'public agenda' by focusing the attention of consumers on specific issues and by influencing their social and political attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs about 'the latest events' and/or the 'larger environment beyond [their] immediate experience' (McCombs, 2004).

I reflect this position in my thesis by arguing that the UK news media, as it constructs representations of women as victims of, participants in, and fighters against Daesh, has the power the shape public perception of such women, and through them, Daesh and the conflict more broadly. My research problematises this by contending that the window through which news consumers receive this information, and thus form their attitudes, opinions, and beliefs, is not undistorted. This is because despite the deeply held assumption that the news media is (or should be) 'an objective, neutral purveyor of the events around us' (Baleria, 2021), in reality, the view of the world produced through news discourse is not unbiased. It is not as Gina Baleria states 'a view from nowhere' (2021), rather it is constructed by humans who are products of their histories and experiences, who hold opinions, beliefs, and ideologies of their own and who are influenced and informed by the editorial stance of the organisation for whom they work (Robertson, 2021).

Consider Rodger Fowler's assertion:

> News is not a natural phenomenon emerging straight from 'reality', but a product. It is produced by an industry, shaped by the relations between the media and other industries, by the bureaucratic and economic structure of the industry, and most importantly by relations with government and with other political organisations (1991: 223).

In the context of my thesis, this means that those consuming news discourse about Daesh and the conflict in Syria and Iraq, do not receive objective, neutral or unbiased information about events occurring in the region, but instead consume interpretations of those events that are imbued with the social and political ideologies of the journalists who construct such discourse, journalists, who in turn, are influenced by others. It is necessary, therefore, to consider the social, political, and cultural contexts in which the news discourse is constructed, to uncover the opaque and transparent ideologies and values that permeate it, and their purpose (see also, van Dijk, 1995; Fairclough,

2003; Souto-Manning, 2014). My thesis employs a critical discourse analytical framework to undertake this analysis.

### 3.1.1. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).

Critical discourse analysts argue that the 'purpose behind… ideologically driven information [found in discourse] is to reproduce and strengthen the social relations of oppression and exploitation' (Hassan, 2018: 1), and to 'construct versions of reality that favour their interests' (McGregor, 2010). To do this, dominant groups and social institutions establish conventions based on ideological and political assumptions that reflect their own agenda, which are then reproduced through discourse and normalised over time to establish a status quo that appears 'commonsensical and natural' (Heracleous, 2004). Norman Fairclough asserts that this status quo may include the reproduction of class and race relations, gender roles, as well as broad social structures (2001: 33).

This means that in the framework of CDA, discourses are neither neutral nor unbiased (see, Heracleous, 2004; Burck, 2005), but rather they are sites of power and struggle where interpretations of social reality are constructed, influenced, undermined, or contested (Mumby & Stohl, 1991; Fairclough, 2001). Discourse, therefore, has the power to contribute to the construction and entrenchment of unequal power relations by situating social actors in the social order, influencing the construction of identities, and/or promoting or discouraging particular knowledge and belief systems (see, Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Ainsworth & Hardy, 2007).

The primary aim of analysts who employ CDA, therefore, is to scrutinise discourse to examine 'structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language' (Wodak, 1995: 204). They do this through an investigation of how social events are depicted, the points of view that are included or omitted, the statements, meanings and insinuations that are conveyed, and the tone used (see, Fairclough, 2003; Burck, 2005). The aim of such an approach is to 'reveal what is implicit, hidden or otherwise not immediately obvious in relations of discursively enacted dominance or its underlying ideologies' (van Dijk, 1995: 18), and to make social actors aware of the ways in which they are positioned through discourse in the

hope that it may empower them to recognise oppressive social structures and to challenge and/or resist them (see, Heracleous, 2004; Georgaca & Avdi, 2011).

As stated, my thesis takes as its case representations of women constructed through UK news media coverage of Daesh. Central to my inquiry are the ideologies that are constructed, reproduced, and legitimised through this news discourse, and the ways in which such ideologies shape public perceptions and the construction of knowledge, and how this impacts the women at the heart of the news coverage.  With this in mind, I examine how events related to Daesh and their actions in the region are described, how women are situated in the narrative of such events, and the voices that are included and/or omitted from UK news stories. Most importantly, I analyse the types of statements that are made, the ideologies that they propagate, and their function. Through this analysis, I argue that the ideologies imbued in UK news discourse are designed to produce and maintain powerful patriarchal and Orientalist worldviews.

CDA is an appropriate methodological framework in the context of my research because it will enable my study of the existence of taken-for-granted gender and Orientalist ideologies and norms perpetuated in macrolevel discourse, i.e., UK news discourse, and to examine the role that this discourse plays in the construction of hegemonic power relations (see, Lazar, 2007; Livholts & Tamboukou, 2015). However, I contend that CDA does not adequately facilitate the analysis required for my second aim: to explore and analyse the personal narratives of the women represented in UK news discourse. This is because CDA concerns itself primarily with the analysis of macrolevel discourses, and as such, it gives little serious attention to narratives (Gavriely-Nuri, 2017: 124). In other words, CDA has the propensity to remain at an abstract level of analysis, thus failing to provide an avenue through which analysts can examine the ways in which specific populations recontextualise discourse (Forchtner, 2021: 308, see also, Hodges, 2011).

In the context of my research, this means that while CDA enables me to conduct an abstract analysis of UK news discourse, it fails to provide an avenue through which I can examine the lived experiences of women to determine how their everyday lives, perceptions, beliefs, and identities are impacted and/or informed by news discourse, and the ways in which they challenge and/or resist the patriarchal and Orientalist worldviews that are constructed. It is for this reason that I incorporate both critical

discourse analysis and narrative analysis in my thesis, arguing that a more fully developed understanding of macrolevel discourse and its implications, can be gained through an analysis of those who are represented by it (see also, Fairclough, 2001; McKenna, 2004; Souto-Manning, 2014).


*3.1.2. Narrative Analysis.*

Barbara Johnston describes narrative analysis as 'one of the major themes in humanistic and social scientific thought since the mid-twentieth century' (2001: 635). This is due to its effectiveness as a method of 'systematizing human experiences' (Souto-Manning, 2014: 162). Researchers in the narrative tradition contend that personal stories (or narratives) are the primary way through which human beings 'make sense of the world… produce meanings, articulate intentions, and legitimize actions' (Wibben, 2011: 2). As a mode of inquiry, it accepts the idea that 'knowledge can be held in stories' (Anderson & Dunn, 2013), knowledge that can provide useful insights into both the individual and the social world (Robert & Shenhav, 2014: 4).

Researchers focus on gathering thick descriptions of the lived experiences of societal actors, as told by them (Geertz, 1973; Creswell, 2006). These are then conceptualised, interpreted, and/or critiqued to uncover the ways in which individuals interpret social events and practices, and give meaning to their experiences, and construct and reconstruct personal identities (Peterson & Langellier, 1997; Grant & Giddings, 2002; Souto-Manning, 2014). Narrative analysts often focus their research on the voices of perceived marginalised social actors (Riessman, 2005), as a means to 'unearth hidden or subordinate ideas' (Chataika, 2005: 10). These can then be used to transform the experiences of individuals (Hunter, 2010: 44), and shared to create a deeper and more meaningful understanding of the individual and society.

There are three key approaches in the narrative tradition: the anthropological approach; the sociolinguistic approach; and the functional approach (Mishler, 1995; Riessman, 2005; Chadwick, 2017). In the anthropological approach, researchers often refer to entire life stories with specific focus on content (Riessman, 2005). Sociolinguistics concerns themselves with stories or narratives that are centred around a specific phenomenon. The focus here is on the 'micro analytics of language and the

ways in which narratives are put together' (Chadwick, 2017: 7). Finally, the functional approach to narrative analysis strives to explore how social actors 'understand, making meaning of, and relate experience' within broader social, cultural, and institutional settings (Caine, Estefan & Clandinin, 2013: 576). The key questions that functional narrative analysts consider according to Rachelle Chadwick relate to what narratives 'do', their 'functions for storytellers, audiences and society', and the ways in which they are 'implicated in reproducing or subverting normative relations of power' (2017: 7).

Researchers who adhere to a functional narrative approach, as I do in my thesis, argue that narrative analysis should focus not only on the question of how individuals 'understand and interpret their own social reality' (Bryman, 1988: 8), but on how narratives 'follow, are constrained by, or resist, larger social patterns of social and cultural storytelling' (Andrews, Squire & Tamboukou, 2013: 6). To do this, researchers must first consider the ways in which dominant ideologies are perpetuated through discourse, and how they construct the 'story-lines' that social actors 'draw on in explaining personal and collective realities' (Bonilla-Silva, Lewis & Embrick, 2004: 556-557). In other words, while social actors 'make their own lives, they do so 'under conditions not of their own choosing' (The Personal Narratives Group, 1989: 5), but rather under conditions that are established, justified, and reinforced through discourse.

Relying on this description of a functional approach to narrative analysis, I argue that critical discourse analysis and narrative analysis are interrelated, and when used together, can 'inform one another to provide a more complete analysis' (Souto-Manning, 2014: 161). In my thesis, a combined approach of CDA and narrative analysis enables me to study both the macro (UK news discourse), and micro (personal narrative) dimensions of my research. As stated, a critical discourse analytical framework facilitates an examination of the ideological assumptions and norms that UK news media representations of women in Syria and Iraq perpetuate, and the ways in which such ideologies shape public perception of the conflict and the women in it. Complementing this, however, a narrative methodology allows me to provide space for the voices of the women represented, and perhaps marginalised, through UK news discourse, and to examine how UK news discourse impacts and/or informs their identities, perceptions and social identities, and the ways in which their

stories may challenge and/or resist the patriarchal and Orientalist ideologies that are perpetuated.

## 3.2. Data Collection.

As this chapter has so far shown, my thesis engages with UK news media discourse and personal narratives. As such, the data required is sourced through several types of artifacts: documents, semi-structured interviews with refugees, survivor (auto)biographies, online social media postings and third-party interviews. The data collection procedures that I employed, the challenges faced, as well as the ethical implications considered, are laid out in this section.

### 3.2.1. Documents (CDA).

The types of documents that can be used in qualitative research are plentiful. They can be hardcopy or electronic (Helm, 2000), and may be more than fixed and static text. This means that as well as words, documents may include pictures, diagrams, emblems, sound, and/or video (Prior, 2003: 5). Given that documents are said to be created or produced largely 'at the time of the events described, or sometime later' (Gidley, 2012: 265), scholars often label them as 'social facts' that reflect elements of the social world (Atkinson & Coffey, 1997). As part of research design, documents 'can be used as the sole focus for data collection and analysis, or they may be used as tools within another data collection method to complement that approach' (Given, 2015: 52). In other words, documents can be examined as a primary source through which researchers can attempt to 'elicit meaning [and] gain understanding' about particular events, or they can be used as a means to triangulate and corroborate research findings based on other forms of data collection (Bowen, 2009: 28).

The documents relied upon in the context of the first aim of my thesis are news media articles produced by news media agencies based in the UK, in which representations have been construct of women as victims of, participants in, or fighters against Daesh. Having decided for manageability and accessibility purposes to focus on UK news discourse exclusively, my next step in the data collection stage was to determine the type of news platform that my thesis would centre on, as well as the news agencies

that would be selected for inclusion. One of the critiques of critical discourse analysis, is that analysts may conduct a non-representative or selective analysis that is aligned with their biases and/or preconceptions, through their choice of discourse (Sriwimon & Zilli, 2017: 136). To avoid this, the platforms and news agencies selected for analysis in my research were included based on their popularity with the UK general public.

To achieve this, I consulted Ofcom news consumption reports for 2013-2016 and the Reuters digital news reports from the same timeframe but extending through 2017, focusing on their varying statistical analyses of news consumption across four platforms – television, newspaper (print), radio, and online news media content. From the statistics available, I immediately discounted print newspapers and radio as likely data sources for my thesis. This was because their popularity with the UK general public as a main source of news is not only significantly lower than that of both television and the internet, but also has seemingly continued to decrease year-on-year as audiences turn to other platforms of news coverage.

According to Ofcom reports for example, those indicating that they primarily consulted newspapers dropped significantly from 40% to 29% between 2013-2016, while those who indicated radio, decreased from 35% to 33% (2017). Following this pattern of decline, those who stated that they used television as a primary news source also decreased in the same timeframe from 78% to 69%. Despite television remaining the most popular choice, I elected to study online news content. As well as being a more convenient data source given its global accessibility and largely text-based format which reduces the need for lengthy transcriptions, online news consumption is the only platform of the four highlighted that is depicted as having grown steadily in popularity each year from 32% in 2013 to 48% in 2016 (Ofcom, 2017: 8).

In the UK, the 'media environment' is depicted as being 'characterised by a vigorous and highly competitive national press' that includes 'a strong tabloid sector' and multiple well-known broadcasters who produce daily online news content (Reuters Institute, 2013: 19). To avoid an overwhelming data sample therefore, it was necessary to limit the news agencies selected for analysis, and to set realistic and justifiable parameters that would aid in controlling the volume of collected articles. Using statistics provided by both Ofcom and Reuters, I chose to limit my analysis to four news agencies: the BBC, the Daily Mail, Sky News, and the Guardian. This

decision was based in a practical sense on the reported popularity of each news agency with UK digital audiences evidenced by their consistent position amongst the top five most accessed news agencies between 2013-2017 (see figure 3.1).

**Figure 3.1: News Agency Engagement by % use.**
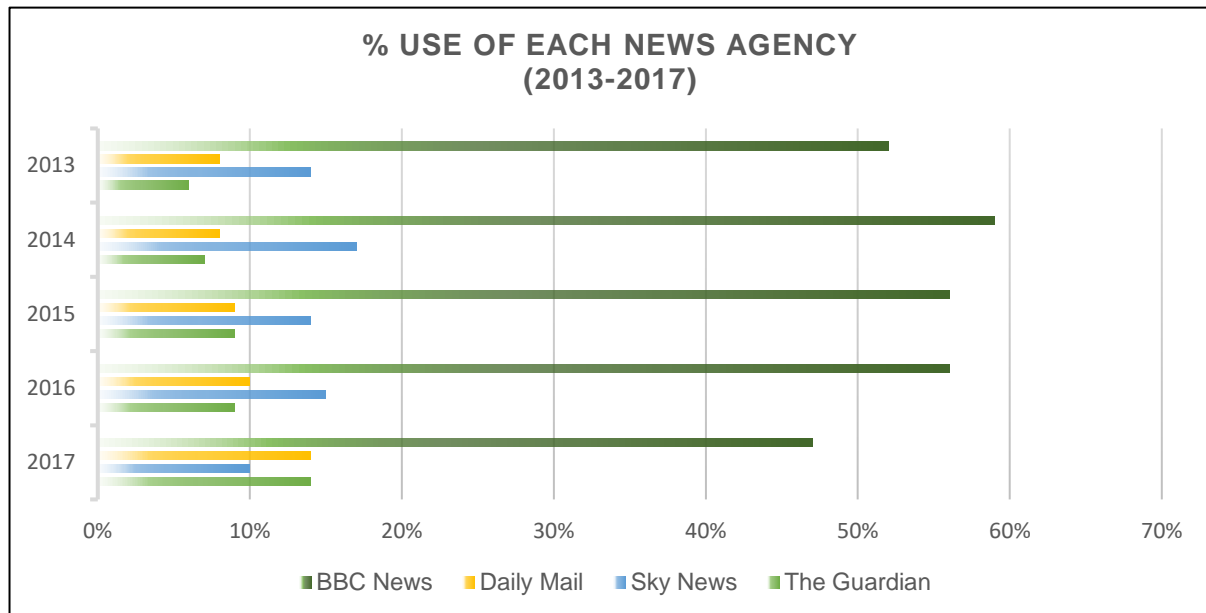


Central to my thesis is the assertion that news media discourse is not objective or unbiased, rather it is influenced and/or informed by the social and political ideologies, opinions, and beliefs of those who construct it (see section 3.1). In this beginning phase of the data collection process, I therefore considered it necessary to understand and to document possible ideological differentiations between the news agencies selected for analysis: the BBC, the Daily, Sky News, and the Guardian. Specifically, I determined that this type of understanding would enable me to incorporate into my thesis a discussion of whether the analysed representations of women that have been constructed in UK news discourse differ between news agency, if such differentiations are a result of what is considered to be the political and ideological editorial stance of the news agency, and what impact (if any) this might have on news consumers and their views and opinions of women in Syria and Iraq, and the conflict more broadly.

In the chart below (figure 3.2), I rely on statistics sourced from four recent YouGov public opinion surveys to demonstrate how the UK general public perceives each of the selected agencies in relation to their favourability towards 'Labour/the left or the Conservatives/the right' (Ofcom, 2021). Specifically, the surveys question whether

respondents believe that a particular news agency is much more favourable or a little more favourable towards Labour/the left or Conservatives/the right, or whether they feel that the news agencies are neutral. The resulting analysis shows that while the BBC and Sky News are generally considered to be in the centre (or slightly to the left and right respectively), respondents classify the Daily Mail as ideologically right-wing and the Guardian as left-wing. Based on these statistics it appears that the studied news agencies span the political and ideological spectrum in the United Kingdom, thus reinforcing their relevance in my thesis not only as representative of the most popular news sources, but also as an appropriate sample through which I can analyse potential differences in the types of representations that are constructed and perpetuated.

**Figure 3.2: Perceived ideological stance of each of the selected news agency.**
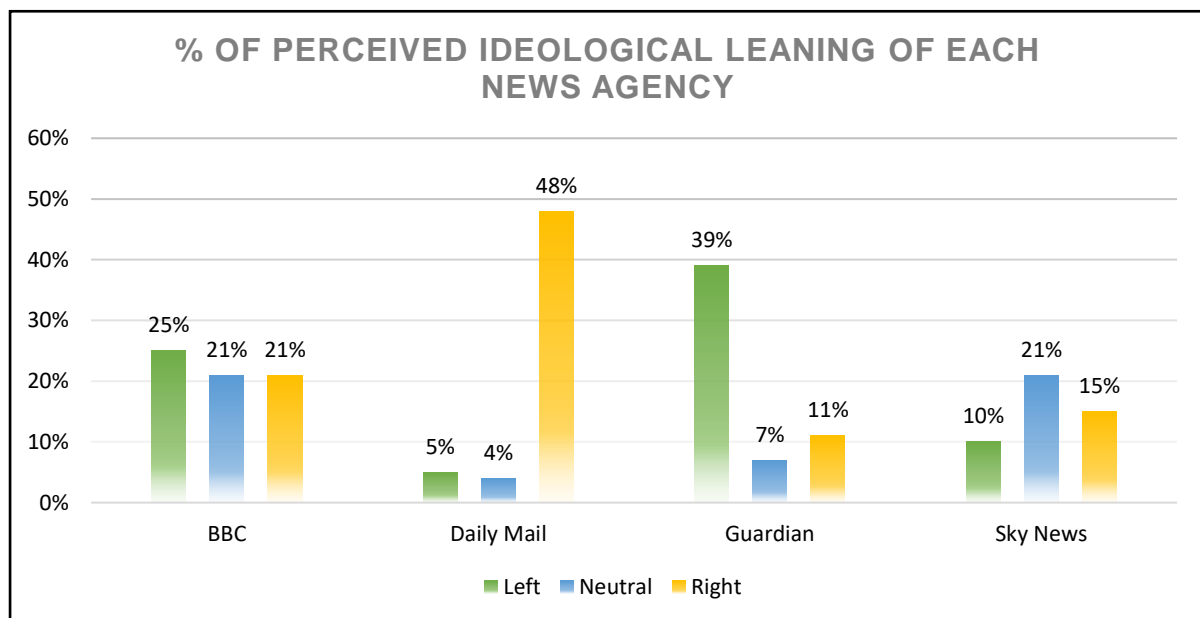


With news agency selection complete, I then considered the best way to source relevant articles. After attempting to use Nexis and finding that it returned insufficient results for each of the news agencies (with the exception of the Daily Mail), I turned to Google and its advanced search feature. Using this, I was able to set specific parameters to filter relevant articles including: 1) limiting search results to specific domains (the BBC, the Daily Mail, Sky News, and the Guardian), 2) selecting English as the desire language, and 3) narrowing results to the United Kingdom and the required timeframe (2013-2017). Using this feature, I was also able to isolate specific key words and phrases to further narrow results. In this context, I chose to search

specifically for 'Woman OR Women OR Female AND Islamic State OR ISIS OR Daesh OR ISIL AND Syria OR Iraq'.

Based on the number of results returned, I employed further inclusion and exclusion criteria at this stage. Specifically, I included all articles from the chosen domains with the term "women" and "Daesh" (or some variant of both), included in the title or more than once in the body of the text. I included articles written only in the specified timeframe (2013-2017). After an initial reading of the articles, I also excluded any articles explicitly pertaining to countries outside of Syria, Iraq, and the United Kingdom. Finally, I excluded video news content, choosing instead to remain consistent across each of my chosen domains.

By incorporating these parameters, I was able to download a large data sample of 245 news articles (BBC, 55; Daily Mail, 77; Sky News, 36; The Guardian, 77). Each article was given a code as it was downloaded for easy reference. This code was based on the domain from which it was sourced (BBC, SN, DM, TG), the sequence in which it was collected, and the year that it was published. For example, one reference code used was BBC01/2015. This means that it was sourced from the BBC, it was the first article downloaded from the BBC, and the article was written in 2015. These codes are used to reference specific articles throughout the findings chapters of my thesis (chapters 4, 5, and 6), and the full title and URL of each news article can be found in appendix one. The data analysis procedures that I employed are discussed in section 3.3 of this chapter.

*3.2.2. Personal Narratives.*

One of the main goals of qualitative research is to 'preserve and analyse the situated form, content, and experience of social action' (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002: 18). Researchers therefore 'attach primary important to the perspectives of conscious actors' who are familiar with the studied event (Devine, 2002: 201). It is by 'gather[ing] descriptions of the life-world' of key actors as told by them (Kvale, 1983: 174), and by exploring how they interpret specific events, as well as the 'meaning that [they] attach to experiences (Devine, 2002: 199), that researchers in this context shed light on social reality and uncover forms of knowledge (Marsh & Furlong, 2002). In their

discussions of qualitative research, scholars point to 'observation, participant observation, intensive individual interviews, and focus group interviews' as appropriate data collection techniques (Devine, 2002: 197). It is also argued that data sources can reasonably include personal artefacts, such as letters and diaries, (auto)biographies, and third-party interview transcripts, when direct access to participants is not feasible (Roberts, 2002).

As with all research, the data collection techniques selected for use are dependent upon the studied subject. In the context of the second aim of my thesis, I explore the stories of women portrayed in UK news discourse as victims of, participants in, or fighters against Daesh. Given this focus, the most appropriate data collection technique would be to conduct interviews with women. At the time of writing however, the violent nature of the conflict, the unpredictability of security threats, and the restrictions on social movement, made it impossible for me to undertake fieldwork. Thus, it was necessary to consider other means by which stories could be sourced. After research, I determined to use a combination of methods including in-depth interviews with a semi-structured format, (auto)biographies, social media and blog postings, and interviews conducted by third parties.

*Face-to-Face Interviews.*

Despite being unable to travel to Syria or Iraq to interview participants, I identified a way to overcome this obstacle in the context of women impacted by violence in the region. As studies on similar subjects have demonstrated (Sideries, 2003; Pessar, 2010; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2010), it is valid when exploring the ramifications of violent conflict to interview those who have travelled from war-zones as refugees and migrants. Women from both Syria and Iraq have travelled to the UK to escape the escalating violence, and as such, I reasoned that it might be possible to conduct interviews with refugee and migrant women. Before beginning this process however, there were a number of considerations that I was required to make: Who would the research participants be? How would I gain access to participants? What type of ethical strategies would be required to manage risk? What type of interview model would be appropriate, and how would interviews be structured?

Beginning with participant parameters, I elected to use purposeful selection. This type of selection is particularly suited to qualitative research like mine in which the

theoretical focus is placed on a particular phenomenon (Patton, 2015). It means that participants were consciously selected based on 'preconceived conceptual categories' (Sprague, 2016: 154). Based on the narrow focus of my research, I set out three key inclusion criteria: 1) that all potential participants were women; 2) that they journeyed to the United Kingdom after 2013 as a result of the conflict; and 3) that they lived in conflict affected areas of Syria or Iraq prior to their migration. At this stage, I also determined that a sample size of 10-15 participants would be appropriate for my thesis because it would enable me to gather a suitable amount of relevant data and would facilitate the triangulation of stories. I recognised however that participants might be difficult to locate, as we will be shown later in this section, I reviewed my sample size throughout the interview process (Malterud, Siersma & Guassora, 2016).

Once these details were established, I next had to consider how I would gain access to participants relevant to my study. I decided from the outset that I would use snowball sampling through gatekeepers. This means that I reached out to a number of key organisations and individuals based primarily in the United Kingdom, who work with refugee and migrant populations, to determine whether they were in a position to facilitate access, or whether they could name other organisations that might be able to assist (Ellsberg & Heise, 2005: 106). Defined as those with the authority to control and/or limit access to participants (Jupp, 2006: 49), the gatekeepers contacted included:

- Members of political parties in Northern Ireland, including: Sinn Féin, the Alliance Party, the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), and the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP).
- The vulnerable Syrian Refugee Consortium, including: Bryson Intercultural, Barnardo's, the British Red Cross, Extern, and the South Belfast Roundtable.
- Other organisations, such as: the Refugee Council, the Refugee Action Group, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, and Amnesty International.
- Religious-led organisations, including: Embrace NI, the Islamic Centre, and Churches Together in Britain and Ireland.
- Local community and education groups, including: Conway Education Centre, Women's Resource and Development Agency, Fall's Women's Centre, the

Northern Ireland Muslim Family Association, Blackie River Centre, and the Northern Ireland Community for Refugees and Asylum Seekers.

Before contacting the named organisations, I devised a standard script in which I introduced myself and set out the context and requirements of my thesis, as well as its parameters and potential benefit (see appendix two). This was then emailed to each organisation and followed-up with further contact (by telephone and/or email) approximately one week later. Keeping in mind the practical issues associated with using gatekeepers (see also, Lee, 1993; Feldman, Bell & Berger, 2003), I strived to be as open and honest as possible about the nature of my study, and to make myself available for in-person meetings. My hope was that through continued contact I would be able to build a rapport with key figures in each organisation, figures who would be in a position to facilitate access to women who fit the parameters of the research (Holloway & Galvin, 2016).

This was perhaps the most difficult and lengthy part of my research because the back-and-forth communication was often prolonged. While I was successful in reaching out to almost all of the listed organisations, many were not in a position to work with me. Some simply did not have the time or resources available and/or did not have access to potential participants. Others, however, were apprehensive about the research and despite repeated discussions and assurances about my proposed ethical procedures and planned interview style, stated that "the feeling was that [we] shouldn't get involved". It should be noted that these same organisations often provided indirect assistance by putting me in contact with education facilities that refugee and migrant populations availed of.

Based on this, it seems likely that rather than denying access to potential participants due to concerns for the women, the gatekeepers were perhaps most concerned with imagined ramifications for their respective organisations. Regardless of their reasoning however, within a few months of initial contact, two organisations signalled that they would be willing to facilitate access to potential participants. While I was able to recruit participants from both of these organisations, I do not name them in the study because doing so could inadvertently identify the interviewed women.

While ethical protocols had been established prior to reaching out to gatekeepers, they were revised and strengthened prior to the commencement of interviews as I began

to set out how interviews would be structured. There were two factors that I considered: 1) that the interviews would be cross-language, and thus I required an interpreter, and 2) that the interviews would be sensitive in nature. This determination was based on the participant parameters set out, and knowledge of the topics that would be discussed during interviews. Specifically, I considered that the women had likely experienced violence and oppression, marginalisation and discrimination, and trauma associated with forced displacement. My ethical framework, therefore, had to include appropriate safeguards to protect all those involved in the research from risk, including: the interviewees, the researcher, and the interpreter (see, McAuley, 2020).[4]

In relevant literature pertaining to cross-language research, scholars set out four key groups of people when evaluating suitable interpreters: 'family members or friends of the interviewee, local organisation or community representative, professionally trained and certified interpreters, and bilingual assistants or colleagues' (McAuley, 2020; see also, Edwards, 1998; Browne & Moffett, 2014). After consideration, I determined to employ a female bilingual/bicultural post-graduate student based at my institution of study, Sarah.[5] My decision was based on five factors:

1. Given the exclusive focus of my research on women and sensitive personal stories, I determined that a female interpreter would be appropriate.

2. Sarah and I had no relationship prior to the commencement of the research, thus avoiding risks associated with bias and/or potential influence.

3. Sarah had no prior relationship with the interviewees. This was necessary because I considered that interviewees may not be willing to discuss sensitive topics or provide accurate accounts of their experiences if someone known to them was present, i.e., family members, friends and/or local organisation or community representatives.

4. Due to the cross-language nature of my research, I required an interpreter fluent in both Arabic and English. Sarah is both bilingual and bicultural. This ensure that any translation provided authentically captured the voice of the

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[4] The section of my research discussing the development of an ethical protocol has been published elsewhere: McAuley, M. (2020) 'Cross-Language, sensitive research with refugees', in Schippers, B. (eds) *The Routledge Handbook to Rethinking Ethics in International Relations*. London: Routledge. Parts of that discussion are also included in the thesis proper.

[5] Sarah is a pseudonym designed to protect the identity of the interpreter, and to add an extra layer of protection for interviewees.

women interviewed. It was also beneficial as a means to prevent researcher bias. Recognising my own social positioning as a white woman living in the West, and educated through a Western world-view, I was aware of possibility that I may have presuppositions related to unintentional engagement with or influence from traditional Orientalist narratives discourses. With Sarah present, any cultural misunderstandings were more easily avoided (see my discussion in section 3.3.2).

5. Sarah is a doctoral student based at my institution of study. I determined that this would be beneficial not only because she is governed by the same ethical committees, but because she has academic training and experience.

The ethical framework of my study as it pertains to issues of sensitivity, and the style and structure of the interviews I conducted are closely interconnected. In other words, they informed one another. The primary considerations that I made in this context, centred on the following topics: informed and voluntary consent, confidentiality and anonymity, quality of data, and strategies for risk management. While I discuss these below, they are developed more fully in my recent publication, *Cross-Language, Sensitive Research with Refugees* (McAuley, 2020).

*Informed and Voluntary Consent* – From the outset, I determined that interviewees would only take part in my research after consenting to do so in written form. As such, a letter of informed consent was produced in both English and Arabic, explaining the nature of the research, and the procedures governing it. Each potential participant was provided a copy of this letter during our initial meeting and were invited to ask questions before deciding to participate, in which case the letter had to be signed (see appendix three).

*Confidentiality and Anonymity* – To ensure confidentiality and anonymity during the interview process and beyond, I determined that participants would not be named in the study or in any notes or transcriptions. Instead, Sarah and I devised culturally appropriate pseudonyms which were allocated to interviewees. Furthermore, to ensure privacy, all hard copy research data including consent forms, transcriptions, and interview notes were stored in a locked and secured storage cabinet accessible only to me.

*Quality of Data* – Several factors were considered to ensure quality of data. First, I opted to conduct in-depth interviews using semi-structured questions, designed to elicit information from interviewees in a manner that would aid in the development of a holistic understanding of their experiences, perceptions and actions. I reasoned that by employing a flexible method, participants would be able to speak at length, thus enabling me to capture as much of their voice as possible. It was also designed to give interviewees a sense of control over their own stories by allowing them to steer the conservation. Often used in feminist studies, I determined that this approach was necessary in my research given its postcolonial and intersectional dimensions (see my discussion in chapter two).

Next, I considered the setting and layout of the interviews. Specifically, I determined to ensure that all interviews were conducted in a naturalist setting. This means that interviewees largely determined the location and time of the interview to ensure both privacy and comfortability. In all cases, interviews took place in private rooms provided by gatekeepers. I also determined to use a triangular seating arrangement during interviews (see, Edwards, 1998). This enabled me to observe both the interviewee and the interpreter, as well as their interactions with each other.

The final consideration that I made in relation to quality of data was associated with the role Sarah would play in each interview. As I discussed in my recent publication, my intention when employing Sarah was to work *with* her rather than *through* her (2020). This was facilitated through my flexible approach to the interviews. In the interviews, Sarah had the freedom to ask an interviewee to expand, and to follow-up with interviewees in an answer and/or phrase that required clarification. This enabled us to avoid misunderstandings and ensured that interviewees became both familiar and comfortable with Sarah's presence in the interviews.

*Strategies for Risk Management* – As a result of the sensitive nature of my research, and the topics likely to be discussed, there were several factors that I considered to ethically manage risk. The first relates to "guilty knowledge", which is described by Brewer as 'disclosure in interview of respondents; knowledge of or participation in illegal activity' (2016: 12). To avoid this, I highlighted both in the letter of informed consent, and prior to each interview, that I would not elicit such information, and that

if such information were to emerge, the audio recorder would be turned off, and the interviewee would be advised against any further disclosure.

Next, I considered the emotional labour that the interviews would entail for all research participants. In particular, I was mindful that during the disclosure of sensitive and personal experiences of violence, there was a risk that interviewees could be retraumatised, or that Sarah and I could experience vicarious traumatisation (see also, Wood, 2006; Zelizer, 2008; Spangaro et al, 2013; McAuley, 2020). Recognising that this risk could not be removed entirely, in the cases of interviewees, I attempted to minimise it by ensuring that the interviewee was in control of the interview as much as possible. In other words, interviewees were made aware that they could stop the interview at any time, and that the accounts they revealed were at their discretion. Other steps taken included ensuring that interviews were conducted in a comfortable setting and keeping in contact with the women after interviews were complete.

As defined in my recent publication, vicarious traumatisation (sometimes referred to as secondary traumatisation), refers to 'any psychological impact that interviews and the experiences shared could have on those conducting the interview, in this case on Sarah and I' (2020). Ethical literature in this context is scarce, with much of the focus often placed on risks to the interviewee. As such, I drew from the work of McCosker, Barnard and Gerber (2001), to devise five strategies that would aid in managing such risk in my research:

1. To prevent emotional fatigue, I determined that Sarah and I would conduct no more than two interviews per week, and preferably in the morning hours.
2. To ensure safety, I determined to conduct the interviews in facilitates provided by gatekeepers as long as privacy could be ensured.
3. To provide opportunities to conduct briefing and debriefing session, Sarah and I elected to travel to interviews together. This gave us time to discuss potential issues prior to interviews, and to review our emotional well-being after.
4. For reflective purposes, I determined that both we should remain in contact with support structures at our institution of study, and that we should keep a journal. This journal was for therapeutic purposes and did not contain information pertaining to interviewees.

5. To ensure the transparency, validity and reliability of the study, as well as to protect Sarah and I, I determined that all decisions taken during the interview process should be recorded for discussion in my thesis.[6]

Despite initially setting the goal of interviewing 10-15 women, after months of contact with gatekeepers, I was only able to secure four. Had I continued to reach out to gatekeepers, I might have been able to secure more. However, this was not possible due to time constraints. I therefore had to consider means by which I could fill this gap. In this context, I chose to consider narratives provided by women impacted by Daesh violence sourced through (auto)biographies published during 2013-2017. These include autobiographies by Nadia Murad (2017), and Farida Khalaf (2016), as well as Cathy Otter's work With *Ash on Their Faces: Yezidi Women and the Islamic State* (2017), in which the stories of multiple Yazidi women are told.

Despite revising the number of participants, I do not view this as a weakness of my research. Rather, it enabled me to conduct more in-depth interviews for longer periods of time, and to develop closer associations with interviewees. This means that I was able to generate data that provides an 'authentic insight' into the fullness of the lived experiences of the women interviewed, thus enhancing the reliability and validity of my study (Silverman, 1993: 91; see also, Crouch & McKenzie, 2006: 491). It was also advantageous because it introduced me to Yazidi women's personal stories through written texts. The inclusion of Yazidi women's first-hand narratives is important in my research because much of what has been reported in the UK news media of women as victims of Daesh focuses on Yazidi women.

*Online Postings.*

In the news articles that I study in my thesis, when reporting on women as participants in Daesh, much of the focus is placed on migrant women who travelled from the UK to Syria or Iraq to join the jihadist group. From the outset, it was clear that interviews in this context would not be feasible. Alternative sources were therefore required to gain to access to their stories. I determined that the most appropriate and substantial data source would be social media and blog sites. Since 2013, migrant women have posted hundreds of thousands of posts, comments, and messages using a wide-range

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[6] The ethical choices that I made, as well as the challenges that arose, are developed more fully in the publication cited. What is included in this section is a summary of this information.

of online applications (see, Berger & Morgan, 2015). As well as providing evidence of their stated motivations for migrating, these self-narratives detail the journeys women undertook to reach Daesh-held territories and shed light on their later roles and actions. Migrant women's online activities, therefore, offer insights into their values, perceptions, opinions and attitudes, and as such were 'full of potential for data mining and analysis' (Felt, 2016: 1).

Academic studies using social media content as data in qualitative research are relatively new. This means that guidelines setting out best practice, or highlighting its methodological advantages and limitations remains in its infancy (see, Lafferty & Manca, 2015). In my study, I relate the use of digital communications as analysable data to letters, memoirs, diaries, and other personal artefacts that qualitative researchers have relied on as vital data sources for decades (see, Cucu-Oancea, 2013). This is because like the personal artefacts mentioned, online posts and/or comments represent a 'self-revealing record that intentionally or unintentionally yields information regarding the structure, dynamics, and functioning of the author's mental life' (Allport, in Cucu-Oancea, 2013: 233). By focusing on posts and/or comments made by migrant women at the time of their migration, I therefore had access to snapshots of their lived experiences as told by them, as well as information pertaining to their feelings, perceptions and attitudes of the world around them (see, Branthwaite & Patterson, 2011; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Given these similarities, I argue that the advantages and limitations of using online communications as analysable data are similar to those associated with the use of personal artefacts. Like personal artefacts for example, online communications are largely written and posted as the described event is occurring or immediately after (Crozier & Cassell, 2016). Rather than analysing accounts or memories that participants in interviews are asked to recall which might by hazy or incomplete, social media comments and/or posts are therefore more likely to reflect the reality of the event (from the point of view of the author), as well as their physical and emotional responses to it. While information gathered in this context is subjective and its accuracy questionable because the aspects of events discussed and the manner in which they are portrayed, are selected solely by the author of the post, it will reveal what aspects of the event are most important to the author, their perceptions and beliefs in relation to it, and the ways in which they make meaning of their personal

experiences, which are crucial elements of my study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016: 166-167).

There are further advantages of this type of data source. First, because my analysis centres on social media posts occurring over a protracted period of time (2013-2017), it is possible to track and isolate changes or developments in the authors thinking over time, and to contextualise them by studying events occurring in their lives (or globally) at that time (Crozier & Cassell, 2016: 299). Next, unlike traditional personal artefacts that are produced using pen and paper which may be difficult to source, social media and blog posts are available globally (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016: 167). Despite social media platforms attempting to remove accounts that support Daesh, online posts have been captured and used in news discourse, as well as in academic publications, thus ensuring that they remain accessible. Finally, alongside text, online communications on social media can be 'accompanied by image[s], video[s], and/or emoticon[s]' (Franz, Marsh, Chen & Teo, 2019). These added visual and/or audio elements could provide evidence to support and/or contextualise the written words, and provide additional 'emotional information that would otherwise only be found in traditional face-to-face interactions' (2019).

While outlining the advantages of using online communications as a data source is important, one must also acknowledge its limitations. The most obvious limitation in the context of my study relates to the volume of online communications and how time-consuming it would be to locate and analyse them all. To significantly reduce the volume, I focused primarily on the women discussed in the analysed news articles, and on those most prolific on social media during the specified timeframe. Related to this limitation is the difficulty in ascertaining the identity of the authors of online communications. This is because migrant women who travelled to join Daesh typically adopted pseudonyms upon their arrive in Syria or Iraq, particularly online. Given the focus in my thesis on giving voice to women represented in the UK news media in relation to Daesh, it was important to 'properly' identify the authors of social media posts to provide authentic accounts. To do this, I searched for multiple posts by the same authors, and studied the timeframe of the communications, the personal details included in them, as well as the images included to triangulate identification. Employing such procedures, I accessed the social media accounts of eight migrant women who left the UK to travel to Syria or Iraq between 2013-2017.

*Third-Party Interviews.*

The most difficult narratives to source for my research were those of women fighting against Daesh in Syria and Iraq as members of military forces. Research shows that frontline soldiers are often a difficult-to-reach population not only because of their isolation in training camps, or on the frontlines of active war-zones, but because being identified through interviews, carries the risk that specific soldiers could be targeted by enemy combatants (see, Merriam, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This is particularly true in the context of my research because as I highlight in chapter six, female soldiers were often targeted by Daesh with significant force.

Coupled with my inability to conduct personal fieldwork, the scarcity of data in this context limited the sources available. Unlike women participants in Daesh, female fighters were not as prolific on social media, nor were they reported on in the news media with the same intensity. I elected, therefore, to search for third-party interviews with female fighters. Despite recognising the practical implications of relying on data produced for a purpose other than my research, specifically that I had no control over the topics discussed, I determined that third-party interviews, like social media posts, can provide valuable insights in the lived experiences of the interviewee.

In searching for third-party interviews, I used purposeful selection. This means that the interviews were searched for, and included/excluded, based on their relevancy to my study. For example, in my searches, I relied on key phrases: female fighters Iraq, female fighters Syria, female Kurdish Peshmerga, YPJ, and Yazidi Peshmerga. Results were then included or excluded based on the timeframe in which they were produced, and the topics that were discussed. In others word, I only included interviews conducted with women fighting against Daesh in both Syria and Iraq, that were produced between 2013-2017.

From this sampling, I was able to source on-camera interviews conducted with female fighters, as well as documentaries in which they tell their stories. Some examples include: a BBC documentary in which a British journalist embeds herself with the Yazidi Peshmerga in Iraq (Dooley, 2016), a lengthy on-camera news media interview with Col. Nahida Ahmed Rashid, a commander in the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga (Shevardnadze, 2015), and a documentary following the life and militarism of Jiyan Tolhildan, a commander in the YPJ (Ünal: 2020). All of the interviews relied upon were

on-camera, thus I had the opportunity to verify to identity of the interviewee. This is particularly important in my research where I employ a feminist and postcolonial framework that emphasises the concept of voice. This is discussed in more detail in the next section where I outlined data analysis procedures.

3.3. Data Analysis.

As this chapter has shown, my thesis incorporates both critical discourse analysis and narrative analysis, and while I consider both approaches to be interrelated (see section 3.1), the data analysis procedures differ and as such are discussed separately.

*3.3.1. Critical Discourse Analysis.*

Jane Ussher and Janette Perz argue that when asking how discourse analysis is done, there is no simple answer (2014: 225). This is because, whether it is discourse analysis or critical discourse analysis, researchers across disciplines have analysed discourse in different ways (cf. Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Parker, 1992; Fairclough, 2003; Willig, 2008). This has led Ussher and Perz to conclude that (critical) discourse analysis 'cannot simply be learned as a procedure' (2014: 225). In other words, it is informed by the project in which it is being employed. After a review of the procedures set out in the cited works, I devised an analytical framework appropriate to my study that incorporates five phases.

**Phase One: Pre-analysis.** At this stage, I undertook an initial reading of the articles downloaded during data collection. This enabled me to familiarise myself with the data and to make initial observations. From this I was able to set aside any non-relevant articles (based on key terms), ensure that each article was assigned a code to assist with trackability and later reference, and to make note of any data that may require transcription.

**Phase Two: Initial analysis.** While conducting the initial analysis of the selected news articles including a full reading of each of the 244 articles, I began by identifying the 'object' and 'subject' of each article (Parker, 2012), and by categorising them with a descriptor (Hill, 2012). From this, units of analysis were established, classified and

coded in three broad categories which were then renamed using quotes from the news articles that best described the content (see figure 3.2).  After a second reading of the news articles, each unit of analysis was further narrowed (see figure 3.3).

**Figure 3.3: Total news articles downloaded per category.**
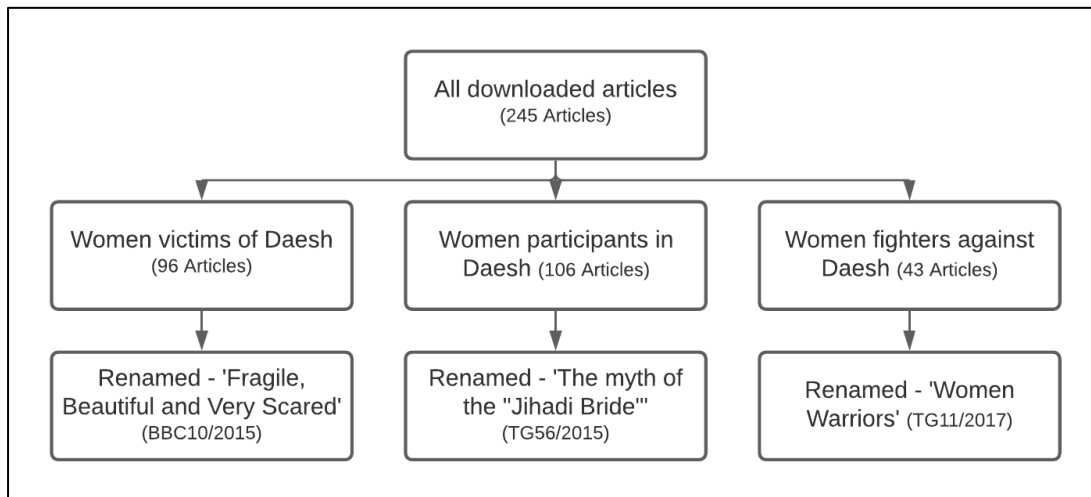


**Figure 3.4: Categorisation of downloaded news articles.**
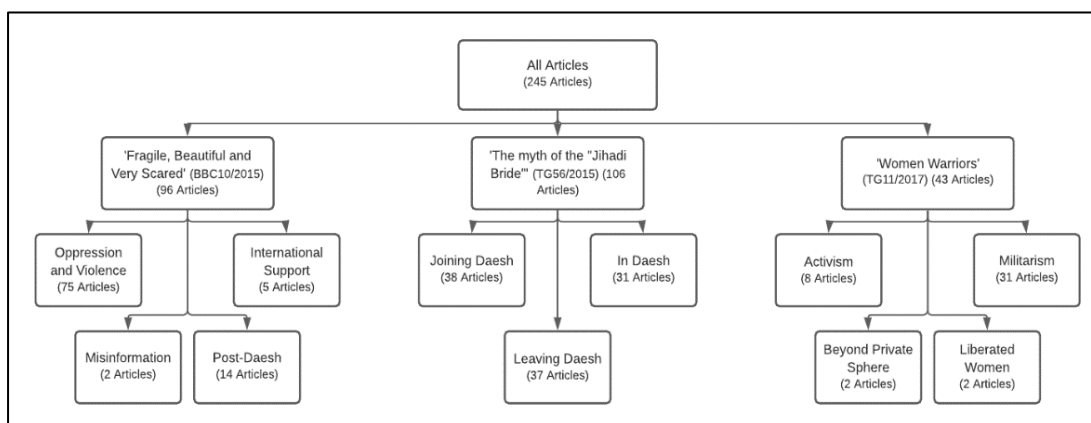


**Phase Three: In-depth analysis.** At this stage, my analysis moved beyond the language in use in the selected news articles, to the underlying meaning of the words (McGregor, 2010; Mogashoa, 2014). This allowed me to uncover and investigate the ideologies, beliefs, and attitudes that 'permeate and manifest' through discourse (Heracleous, 2004: 186).  I focused on:

1) The ways in which events are described, i.e. Are they described fully or are elements omitted?

2) Whose voices are included in the news discourse and whose (if any) are significantly excluded?

3) What types of statements are made in the articles? How are they presented? And, what tone is used to express them?

4) How are social actors situated and represented in the events and in the social order more broadly (Fairclough, 2003: 193).

**Phase Four: Contrasting.** In this phase, I began to contrast the various discourses (Hill, 2012), identifying points of overlap and variability amongst the news articles (Fairclough, 2003; Burck, 2005). This was a crucial step because 'the structure and force of particular discourses can only be described by showing other instances of that discourse' (Parker, 1992). Focusing on how the same events are depicted across multiple news articles and media agencies, I was able to map the contiguous representations of women that have been constructed, and the ways in which they were reinforced.

**Phase Five: Why?** Finally, I questioned what the selected news articles achieved, and what their function was (Livholts & Tamboukou, 2015: 5). Specifically, I examined the complex relationships that exist between language, discourse and power (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000; van Dijk, 2003), and how those relationship are evident in the analysed news articles. This enabled me to highlight how news discourse can contribute to the reproduction of orientalist stereotypes, and patriarchal social power and dominance (van Dijk, 1993: 254).

*3.3.2. Narrative Analysis.*

In a narrative model, interview transcriptions constitute data (Devine, 2002: 198). Researchers contend that transcriptions and analysis should occur simultaneously and immediately after each interview (Riessman, 1993). In my research, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed as a rough draft immediately after the interview. This means that I transcribed 'all spoken words, plus the major paralinguistic features, like laughing or crying' (Sprague, 2016: 168). Transcribing interviews is a time-consuming process that generates large volumes of qualitative data. Beginning this process at an early stage enabled me to effectively organise and manage my thesis.

When data collection was complete, I read the draft transcriptions multiple times to immerse myself in the stories. From this, I was able to grasp the context of the personal

narratives and begin to make notes about the structure in which the stories were told, (see, Riessman, 1993; Fraser, 2004). I also began to generate themes in the data, and to isolate topics that required further clarification or investigation. This helped to avoid researcher bias because it ensured that, at an early stage in the analysis, I could engage in participant validation, and what I term interpreter validation. In other words, if I was unsure about a word or a phrase, I could clarify with the interviewee and/or interpreter, whom I remained in contact with. This generally occurred in the cases of placenames.

A second transcription then took place, where I transcribed selected sections of data paying particular attention to 'components of expression' (Sprague, 2016: 169). Through this, I was able to isolate silences, pauses, points of emphasis, or inaudible sounds, and analyse them in terms of what they mean in the context of the overall stories (see also, Fraser, 2004). During this process, the data was reduced into summaries. Narrative analysts refer to this as 'narrative smoothing' (Polkinghorne, 2015: 6), or 'cleaning up the speech' (Fraser, 2004). It entailed combing through the transcriptions and removing any non-crucial elements, including: interviewer questions and comments, and any incomplete sentences or obvious repetition (see, Emden, 1998; Fraser, 2004).

Finally, I began to code the data. At this stage, plots and subplots, themes and subthemes, were categorised using computer folders and key words or phrases, including: 'early life', 'experiences of gender', 'family life', 'Daesh', 'immigration', and 'future'. This allowed me to isolate trends and patterns in the stories at the manifest and latent levels (Boyatzis, 1998: 4), and any contradictions or variations that existed. I was grouped the narratives together according to core concepts, including: interpretations of social reality and gender, and constructions of identity, values, perceptions, and attitudes.

The analysis procedures employed for third-party interviews followed along similar lines as those laid out above. As stated in section 3.2.2, when collecting third-party interview data, I focused on on-camera interviews because it enabled me to confirm the identity of those interviewed. This means that data analysis began with writing a complete transcription of the interview, including: all words spoken by the interviewee and interviewer, and all descriptive captions that appeared on-screen, i.e., names of

those interviewed, placenames etc. In reading transcriptions multiple times, I focused on understanding the social, political and cultural contexts in which the interviews were conducted, and any implications this may have on the narratives told. At this stage, I also began to generate themes, and made notes of any areas of discussion that would require further clarification, including: the names of female fighters, accounts of the history of fighting forces in the region, and details about specific battles with Daesh.

Summaries were then produced from the transcription by removing all non-crucial elements. Unlike with face-to-face interviews, however, I did not remove interviewer questions and comments. Instead, I included them in the margin of the summary to keep in mind the context in which specific sections of the narratives were given. From these summaries, I coded the data by identifying themes and subthemes that enabled me to group the narratives together according to core concepts. While these concepts largely mirrored those of the face-to-face interviews, they were defined further to enable me to groups narratives based on specific geographical location (Syria or Iraq), and the military force to which the interviewee belonged (YPG, Kurdish Peshmerga, Yazidi Peshmerga).

In my literature review, I discussed the concept of voice, and its importance in the feminist and postcolonial framework of my thesis. Through engagement with feminist IR scholarship, I argued that women have often been omitted from academic and public discourses as they relate to matters of war, violent conflict and global politics. In such discourse, women are largely "invisible" as they are situated as subordinate to men, and this "invisibility" ensures that their voices are marginalised as patriarchal power relations are maintained. Relying on Gayatri Spivak's work, I then explained that 'lack of voice' is not homogenous amongst women, but rather different women experience it differently based on how gender intersects with other social and cultural characteristics (1993).

Based on this, I argued that subaltern women are subjugated not only by the systems and practices that constitute Orientalism, but by patriarchal traditions through which they are situated as subordinate to already subordinated men. Thus, their lack of voice is profound. My thesis applies the concept of 'lack of voice' as raised by Spivak (1993), to women in Syria and Iraq who have traditionally been constrained by patriarchal and Orientalist power relations. As well as informing my choice of narrative analysis, this

means that, throughout the interview process, I had to ensure that the women's voices with whom I was engaging, were heard without distortion (Chamber, 2015: 10).

In the data collection stage, this was achieved primarily through my work with Sarah, a bilingual/bicultural interpreter who helped me to 'bridge the cultural [and language] gap' that existed in my research (Obijiofor, Colic-Peisker & Hebbani, 2018: 230). This ensured that during interviews, the women's stories, and thus their voices, were captured authentically (see my ethics discussion in section 3.2.2).

This effort also extended to the data analysis stage. Based on my ethical framework as it pertains to confidentiality and anonymity, I determined to use pseudonyms for interviews. These were chosen during the data analysis stage as I began to prepare transcriptions. Rather than simply choosing 'Western' names to hide the identities of participants, I determined from the outset, that all pseudonyms would be culturally and religiously appropriate to the women. Therefore, I worked with Sarah to devise names that would ensure that, despite not being named in the study, the women's cultural and religious identities were respected and maintained.

I also used low inference descriptors when categorising summaries and excerpts of the women's narratives in the data analysis stage of my research. These descriptors reflected the women's own language as they told their stories in interviews with me, through social media platforms, and in third-party interviews. This step was designed to foreground the women's voices continually throughout the analysis of data, and to prevent my own personal views and perceptions, which are informed largely by a Western worldview, from overdetermining how the women's stories were analysed or interpreted (Johnson, 1997: 284).

3.4. Conclusion.

In this chapter, I described the methodological approach and various ethical strategies deployed in my thesis. Beginning with research methods, I discussed critical discourse analysis and narrative analysis, and justified their combined use in my research. Specifically, I argue that as methods of research CDA and narrative analysis are interconnected, and when used together can contribute to the development of a more complete analysis. This is because they enable macro and micro levels of analysis.

In the context of my research, I define this as being able to analyse the ideologies that underpin the representations of women in UK news discourse and the ways in which they shape public perception, whilst also investigating how the women represented understand and challenge them. Through this discussion, I identified the contents of analysis in my thesis, UK news discourse and personal narratives, and set out the data collection and analysis techniques that I devised and implemented.

Finally, in my discussion of narrative analysis in particular, I highlighted the rigorous ethical protocols that I developed as a means to guide research that is both cross-language and sensitive. Stemming from the feminist and postcolonial framework of my thesis, and its focus on providing a platform through which women can be heard, I incorporated in my ethical protocols strategies that would foreground the women's voices and avoid research bias, thus enhancing the validity and reliability of my research findings. I begin to set out these findings in the next chapter.

**Chapter Four: 'Fragile, Beautiful and Very Scared'.[7]**

Before August 2014, there had been plentiful news coverage reporting the 'harrowing' details of Daesh's activities as 'they advanced through huge swathes' of territory across Syria and Iraq (BBC10/2015). However, my findings show that it was after the jihadist group launched a major offensive on the Sinjar region of Northern Iraq, that the news media began to explicitly focus on the perceived victimisation of women in this conflict. Specifically, it was Daesh's treatment of Yazidi women, and their stories of sexual and gender-based violence, that attracted worldwide attention. While there is evidence suggesting that this type of violence was not confined to Sinjar or the Yazidi population that lived there, the UK news media quickly situated Yazidi women as the archetypal targets and victims of Daesh violence, and used their experiences to shape the public perception of the conflict, and UK responses to it. In this chapter, I argue that this news reporting is problematic for two main reasons.

First, in their focus on the perceived victimhood of Yazidi women, the news articles associate them with characteristics and values understood to be stereotypically feminine: weakness, helplessness, innocence, and vulnerability (Eichler, 2019). Through such representations, Yazidi women were constructed as 'in need of protection' (Leigh & Weber, 2019: 86), and accounts of their victimisation were used as a catalyst and justification for violence. Yazidi women are thus situated as both the cause of war and its victim (Elshtain, 1987; Sjoberg, 2010). Moreover, to maintain this narrative, the news articles recount sensationalist stories of Yazidi women's pain and suffering, but in doing so, ignore their stories of resistance, stories in which they describe protecting themselves and others, and instigating their own escapes. With these representations, Yazidi women are depicted in the UK news media as agentless.

Second, as the news articles selectively focus media attention on Yazidi women as the archetypal victims in this conflict, and more specifically, the archetypal victims of sexual and gender-based violence, they construct only partial knowledge. This is because they fail to report on accounts from other populations who have suffered similar violence across Syria and Iraq (see, International Rescue Committee, 2014; Davis, 2015; Yasmine & Moughalian, 2016). In their omission of non-Yazidi voices in

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[7] This title is based on a quote from an article by the BBC (BBC10/2015). See appendix one, section one for full reference details.

this context, I argue that the news articles contribute to the marginalisation and continued suffering of other victimised populations because global attention, and thus resources, are directed elsewhere (Crawford, Hoover Green & Parkinson, 2014; Forestier, 2017).

To explore these issues and to challenge the representations constructed by the UK news media, I rely on several types of artefacts in this chapter: interview data, biographical narratives, and reports from the UN and various NGOs. I structure this chapter around four key areas of reporting in the UK news media: the initial attacks of Sinjar (4.1); women's experiences in so-called slave markets (4.2); the representations that have been constructed of women's escapes and rescues from Daesh (4.3); and discussions of wartime sexual and gender-based violence (4.4). Throughout each of these sections, I examine the selective nature of the representations that have been constructed, and the patriarchal and Orientalist ideologies that inform them. Moreover, I introduce the personal narratives of women to challenge and/or disrupt them.

4.1. The Assault on Sinjar.

As stated, it was in the summer of 2014 that Daesh attacked Sinjar. After first capturing Mosul, the jihadist group began to advance on the villages surrounding Mount Sinjar in Northern Iraq (DM14/2014). According to the news articles that I analysed; this is where 'most of the several hundred thousand members of the [Yazidi] minority live[d]' (DM53/2017). As Daesh advanced, it was reported that confused and chaotic information about Daesh's movements and intentions coupled with the abrupt withdrawal of Peshmerga fighters from several villages, caused a mass exodus of Sinjar's residents (DM31/2014). Of those who escaped, it is estimated that '40,000' fled into the mountains (TG05/2014), where the civilians are reported to have become stranded in dire conditions, with Daesh hunting them down (DM31/2014; DM33/2014).

Images of primarily Yazidi civilians dotted around the desolate and rugged mountains were broadcast globally by the news media as their plight was quickly labelled a 'humanitarian crisis' (DM31/2014; TG05/2014). According to the news articles, these images provided a 'catalyst for American intervention' in the region (DM31/2014). This military intervention included airdrops of fresh drinking water and food, but also

targeted airstrikes of known Daesh positions, vehicles and weapons caches. Though many died on the mountains are a result of starvation and dehydration, it is reported that 'most were able to escape with help from Kurdish fighters' (DM33/2014). The Daily Mail suggests, that the same cannot be said for those 'who remained trapped behind Isil lines' (DM94/2014). While those who remained in the villages below, primarily Yazidis, were not the immediate focus of global news attention, that soon changed.

By all accounts, Daesh's assault on the Yazidi population in Iraq was swift, strategic and methodical. Prior to capturing the villages, it is reported that armed fighters blocked roads with their trucks to prevent escape and took up offensive positions to dissuade retaliation (BBC04/2014). While tens of thousands had already escaped and some managed to slip past Daesh checkpoints undetected, the news articles suggest that many other thousands of civilians were left behind (DM94/2014). Similar descriptive language is used across the analysed news articles to describe the suffering of those trapped by Daesh. Reportedly, the residents faced 'harrowing ordeals' (DM02/2014), and experienced 'extreme brutality and violence' (TG93/2016), and 'bloodshed and cruelty' (TG34/2014). The specific details of what occurred, however, remain underreported and largely condensed into only a few sentences in the timeline of events.

The news articles that I examined for my thesis explain that after surrounding villages, Daesh first demanded that residents 'convert or die' (DM02/2014). Specifically, they reportedly demanded that Yazidis 'renounce [their] belief[s] and acknowledge Islam' (Khalaf & Hoffman, 2016: 49). When residents refused, the militants are said to have ordered them to gather in the villages with their valuables, which Daesh pillaged. At this stage, it is reported that the men were separated from the 'women and children under 12' (DM02/2014; see also, Amnesty International, 2014). Eye-witness accounts reveal that the men were taken away and 'gunned down' (DM66/2017). The women on the other hand, were 'shunted off in buses or trucks' to various Daesh controlled cities across Syria and Iraq (DM33/2014).

It is at this stage of the reporting that we first see its selective nature. As women were taken away from Sinjar, the analysed news articles shifted their focus from the Yazidi population in and around Sinjar, to reporting predominately focused on women. Thus, knowledge about the reality of men's experiences during this time remains limited. At

first glance, it could be argued that because a significant number of the trapped Yazidi men were 'executed' by Daesh, details of their experiences were lost, thus making it difficult for news agencies to report effectively and reliably what occurred (DM94/2014). This is further compounded by the secretive nature of the killings. Men were reportedly taken to secluded areas of their villages to be shot and their bodies 'bulldozed into mass graves' (DM94/2014), thereby reducing the possibility of eye-witnesses. However, in narratives told elsewhere, it has been revealed that several men and boys survived these mass executions and have shared their stories.

For example, in her biography *The Last Girl: My story of captivity and my fight against the Islamic State* (2017), Nadia Murad provides a detailed account of what happened to her brothers after Daesh's initial attacks on Kocho in the Sinjar region (see image 4.1). She explains that after being separated from their female relatives and taken to different parts of the village, Saeed and Khaled were 'lined up and shot' by a 'firing squad' of Daesh militants. Despite their gunshot injuries however, they both 'survived by playing dead' and were eventually able to escape the region (2017: 104-105). Relying on Saeed and Khaled's experiences, Nadia is able to paint a picture of what happened to the men of her village, thereby highlighting that their stories have not been lost. It is necessary to ask, therefore, why men's stories are largely absent from the news coverage?

**Image 4.1: Map of Iraq and Syria (Sinjar).[8]**



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[8] This map is used continually throughout this chapter to highlight the areas discussed. It was sourced from Google Maps: https://www.google.com/maps/@33.1493647,39.2212011,6z. Last Accessed: 11/04/2019.

I suggest that it is likely that men's stories are underreported because the focus of the new articles is placed elsewhere. Specifically, it is placed on the perceived victimhood of women. In the case of Yazidi women, this focus is perhaps unsurprising. This is because the particularly cruel and protracted nature of the violence perpetrated against Yazidi women offered a rich source of content for news platforms with new stories developing almost daily. However, I would also argue that women's perceived victimhood is recounted more often in the analysed articles and in more specific detail than 'crimes against men and boys' (Foster & Minwalla, 2018: 53), because women's suffering represents the 'richer seam' in narratives of wartime violence (Ward, 2006: 163), because its perceived shocking nature provides a way through which retaliatory violence can be justified.

By this I mean that when women are constructed through the lens of patriarchal understandings of femininity, any violence committed against them in war is viewed as somehow more horrific that violence committed against men. In other words, if women are fragile, innocent, and peaceful beings as traditional discourse suggests (cf. Sjoberg, 2010; Alsaba & Kapilashrami, 2016; Chatterjee, 2016), then acts of intentional violence committed against them can be portrayed as particularly shocking and depraved (BBC04/2014). This has been the case throughout history as those who fight in wars seek to communicate the ruthlessness of their opponents through stories of women's suffering and their perceived victimhood. In doing so, adversaries attract fighters to their cause and justify their violence as a means to protect women (see, Skjelsboek & Smith, 2001; Alison, 2004; Ahram, 2015).

This type of narrative, which is rooted in Orientalist assumptions, is evident in the political media discourse of the global north in which the defence of seemingly 'oppressed Muslim women' has been used as a 'major trope' in the fight against Daesh (Ahram, 2015: 57). As we have seen in chapter two, this is not a new phenomenon. It was captured by the phrase coined by the post-colonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: 'white men are saving brown women from brown men' (1993: 92). While Spivak was discussing the British abolition of the 'rite of widow self-immolation' by Hindu women (1993: 92), other authors have adopted this phrase in their discussion of the war on terrorism.

According to Miriam Cooke for example, images of the mistreatment of Afghan women by 'uncivilized brutes' (Taliban) in the aftermath of 9/11, as well as stories of their victimisation and oppression, were perpetuated through American news discourse (2002: 228).  The outrage that developed as a result of such images led to a call for military action 'to alleviate [Afghan] women's suffering and secure their human rights' (Welland, 2019: 130).   In her work, Cooke describes the narrative that was constructed: 'to defend our universal civilization we must rescue the [brown] women. To rescue these [brown] women we must attack these [brown] men' (2002: 227).  For such a narrative to work, however, Cooke states Afghan women were depicted as passive and vulnerable and thus in need of protection (see also Butler, 2004; Butler, Gambetti & Sabsay, 2016).  As such, they were 'deprived of agency' (2002: 228).

This is evident in the case of Yazidi women as is evidenced by President Obama's statements in 2014. Specifically, he announced America's plans to 'degrade and ultimately destroy Isil', and included as a motivating factor for this intervention Daesh's treatment of women: 'They enslave, rape and force women into marriage' (2014). Repeated in UK news discourse, this statement (and others like it) construct women in Syria and Iraq as defenceless victims who need to be saved and protected from Daesh's perceived savagery.  Like Cooke's example, a sense of moral outrage developed through which military intervention including airstrikes, could be more easily justified.  Through both Orientalist and patriarchal narratives, Yazidi women were thus denied agency, whilst simultaneously being cast as both the victims of war and its cause (Elshtain, 1987; Sjoberg, 2010; Åhäll, 2012).

This notion of violence in defence of vulnerable women is not confined to the global north.  It is also prevalent in Daesh discourse where it is used to justify their actions. In the publication *Women of the Islamic State: A Manifesto on women by the Al-Khanssaa Brigade*, the perceived oppression of Sunni women is discussed at length. Specifically, it argues that Sunni women have been 'subjected to the worst forms of torture, mental and physical, at the hands of Shiite militias' and others (Winter, 2015: 29).  This 'torture' is said to include intimidation, imprisonment and rape (2015: 28), and the loss of women's 'chasteness and purity' (2015: 39).   According to the manifesto, it is only through the actions of Daesh that Sunni women began to see their rights restored: 'When the Islamic State fully undertook administration of the land, the people regained their rights, no more so than women' (2015: 29).  As such, Daesh's

violence is constructed as a legitimate and as a just way in which to protect women's rights and restore their dignity.

In UK news discourse, as well as Daesh discourse, women are therefore portrayed as 'beautiful souls' (Elshtain, 1987; see my discussion in chapter two, section 2.3), inherently peaceful and innocent beings, yet also the targets of 'masculine political violence' (Sjoberg, 2018: 297). Like Spivak's example, women in this context are cast as archetypal victims who, as a result of their perceived passivity and lack of agency, naturally inhabit a 'subordinate position of dependence' (Young, 2003: 2). Specifically, they are depicted as being dependent on 'just warrior' men *(masculine militaries or male jihadists)*, who use women's suffering as a catalyst for war (Elshtain, 1987; Sjoberg, 2006).

In other words, when UK news agencies and/or Daesh, depict women as vulnerable and helpless victims of political violence and repression, they can more easily justify their own violence as a means of protection. Moreover, given that 'media framing' often influences the perceptions and attitudes of the general public (Smith et al, 2016: 40), by framing women as naturally passive and helpless, the depicted discourses contribute to the social acceptance of gender differences as normative. As a result of representations of this nature, patriarchal and Orientalist structures are reinforced and women's continued marginalisation and oppression is enabled (Tickner, 1992; Auchter, 2012; Gentry & Sjoberg, 2015). As we see in the next section, similar patriarchal and Orientalist ideologies are present in UK news media representations of Daesh's so-called slave markets.


4.2. Daesh Slave Markets.

When recounting women's experiences in the aftermath of the attacks on the Sinjar region, the news articles that I analysed typically begin by depicting scenes in which women, 'crying [and] begging', were separated from male relatives (BBC04/2014). Unsure of Daesh's intentions, the women were reportedly taken by force alongside their children to 'big house[s] in Mosul' (BBC13/2014 – see image 4.2), or 'sports hall[s]' and/or 'wedding hall[s]' in other Daesh-held cities (BBC04/2014; DM43/2014). Such places would soon become known as 'slave markets' (TG77/2015): they were

'makeshift detention centres' (DM94/2014), in which women and girls, 'some as young as nine' (BBC06/2015; see also, Amnesty International, 2014), were imprisoned and eventually sold to Daesh fighters and their sympathisers (DM52/2017), or handed over to jihadists as what the Daily Mail terms 'concubines' (DM94/2014).

In these markets, captured Yazidi women 'under 35 years old' (TG70/2014), were imprisoned in 'poor living conditions' (BBC06/2016), and without access to 'adequate food and water' (TG53/2016). Treated like 'cattle' (TG01/2014), it is alleged that up to '200 women and girls' were typically confined to one space (BBC04/2014). As the news articles that I analysed report on such stories, they emphasise the violence, and in particular, the sexual violence that occurred: survivors describe being 'violently beaten' (BBC13/2014), and 'touched and violated' continuously during this time (DM39/2016). Furthermore, the articles report that in an effort to 'escape the abuse' (BBC06/2016), some women and girls committed suicide (or attempted to) by cutting or hanging themselves (BBC13/2014).

The news articles also discuss the process through which Yazidi women were sold. Some journalists focus on accounts of women being 'stripped naked and washed', before having their worth evaluated by groups of men (TG77/2015). These same men would later facilitate Daesh militants as they arrived at the markets to take 'whomever they wanted' (BBC04/2014). The news articles report that the 'most beautiful and youngest' girls were selected first (BBC10/2015). Other journalists focus on the price for which women were supposedly sold. Varying amounts are depicted in the articles ranging from 'as little as a pack of cigarettes' (TG77/2015), or '$25' (DM04/2014), and upwards, reaching 'between $500 and $2,000' (TG19/2016).

In their 'search of shocking details' of life in the so-called slave markets (Shackle, 2015), the journalists whose work is quoted undoubtedly establish a picture of 'the brutality of [Daesh]' (Foster & Minwalla, 2018: 53). However, they do so at the expense of the women whose stories they purport to tell. This is because despite including women's voices in the articles, each of the four news agencies that I studied selectively focus on sensationalist details through which women are portrayed as emotional, powerless, and largely submissive victims of Daesh abuse. Women's stories as they have been told elsewhere, however, cast doubt on this narrative by highlighting the ways in which women resisted attempts to force them to convert to

Islam, and protected themselves, and others, against Daesh violence. Some of these stories are highlighted below.

To protect themselves, survivors describe making 'themselves unattractive to potential buyers' to avoid selection (Otter, 2017: 2014). They did this by 'rubbing ash onto their faces' (2017: 104), or by 'barely wash[ing]' (Khalaf & Hoffmann, 2016: 76). Some women lied to their captors to protect themselves and others by claiming children as their own (Murad & Krajeski, 2017: 114), or by asserting that they were not virgins: 'A few insisted that in fact they were not virgins, that they were spoiled, thinking it would make them less desirable, but the militants could tell they were lying' (2017: 136). Other accounts highlight the incredible forethought of the women. When recounting the story of Khulka, a Yazidi woman from the Sinjar region, Cathy Otter explains:

> While in the jail, Khulka tattooed herself with the names of her husband and father so that her body could be recognized and returned to them if she was killed…She mixed the breast milk from a lactating woman with ash, and used a needle she smuggled inside the jail. With the same needle and some thread, she began embroidering her underwear with the names and numbers listed in her phone in case ISIS found it and took it away (2017, 113-114).

Furthermore, women physically fought against their captors and actively attempted to escape from captivity. For example, Farida Khalaf describes biting a militant who attempted to touch her: 'instinctively, and out of the blue, I bit him as hard as I could. The man yelped and pulled his hand away. The sausage finger was bleeding' (Khalaf & Hoffmann, 2016: 73). She also recounts using pliers 'to get rid of the bars' on the windows so that she and others with whom she was imprisoned could 'all escape together at night' (2016: 78). Despite being ultimately unsuccessful in her efforts, this account (as with the others mentioned) highlights the agency and resilience of the kidnapped women. One must question therefore, why these details have been confined to the margins of UK news articles, or omitted entirely, in favour of sensationalist details of women's suffering? And, what impact does this have?

Adhis Chetty argues that 'the media often employs cognitively dissonant images (brutal pain and suffering which can be disturbing) to provoke desired reactions or responses for certain causes as well as to sell itself through the arousal and creation of interest' (2004: 34). By applying this logic to my analysis, it could be argued that

there are two main reasons why the UK news media articles that I analysed focused on the distressing and sometimes lurid details of Daesh's abuse of women in so-called slave markets.

The first reason is that news agencies may simply wish to increase viewership by 'grab[bing] people's attention' with bold and shocking stories (Minwalla, 2015). This is evidenced by the dramatic headlines employed such as: 'Hundreds of Yazidi women held in Islamic State prison where they are held as sex slaves or sold off as Jihadi brides for as little as $25' (DM04/2014); 'ISIS slave markets sell girls for "as little as a pack of cigarettes", UN envoy says' (TG77/2015); 'IS Issues Rape Rules for Women Slaves' (SN63/2015); and, 'Raped, beaten and sold: Yazidi women tell of IS abuse' (BBC10/2015). In this scenario women's stories are exploited for a seemingly profit related agenda.

The second reason, however, is that journalists hope to provoke a sense of moral outrage at the unfolding events. While moral outrage may be warranted considering the 'horrific sexual violence and enslavement' that took place (Foster & Minwalla, 2018: 53), I argue that by singularly focusing on details of 'brutal pain and suffering', as Chetty puts it (2004: 24), the news articles risk harming women further. What I mean by this is that given that women's agency often emerges in their stories of resistance and in the telling of those stories (Foster & Minwalla, 2018: 59), by only partially reporting on them, the articles contribute to women's disempowerment (Chetty, 2004: 35). Not only do they deny women's agency, but in doing so they perpetuate 'sexist stereotypes and gendered power relations' that enable women's continued subordination (Chetty, 2004: 35).

The selective focus of the studied news articles is also evident when considering the 'victim groups' who are discussed (Crawford, Hoover Green & Parkinson, 2014). Daesh represented a threat to all 'non-Arab and non-Sunni Muslim communities, as well as Sunni Muslims who opposed them' (Amnesty International, 2014: 4), most of whom did not end up in 'slave markets'. Even if the focus is limited to Yazidi women (as it as in the articles), it is stated that Daesh imprisoned women and girls under 35 years old (TG70/2014). While I have already touched upon the likely reasons for Yazidi men's invisibility, it is reasonable to ask, what happened to women over 35? Of the ninety-six news articles analysed for this chapter, none explicitly discuss the lived

experiences of such women after the initial attacks on the Sinjar region.  A snapshot is available, however, in the biographies of Farida Khalaf (2016) and Nadia Murad (2017).

According to their accounts, women and girls in Sinjar were not only separated from their male relatives as the news articles suggest, they were also separated from each other.  In particular, Daesh fighters separated married women and children (young children and boys) from unmarried women and girls (Khalaf & Hoffmann, 2016; Murad & Krajeski, 2017).  For both Farida and Nadia, this meant being separated from their mothers before being transported to 'slave markets'.  It was only after their eventual escape from Daesh captivity, that both women learned what had happened to their mothers and the other women they were forced to leave behind.

Farida's story describes being forcibly separated from her mother in her village schoolyard: 'I looked at her with sheer horror and she tried to grab me too.  But I was wrenched from her grasp by an armed man and shoved over to the group of unmarried women and girls' (2016: 59).  Farida later learned that after she had been taken, her mother and two young brothers were transported to Tal Afar where they too were kept in captivity in a 'slave market' (see image 4.2).  In the telling of her story, Farida's mother does not recount any details of abuse she may have suffered during this time (although that is not to say that it did not occur).  Instead, she focuses on the fears that she had for her sons who were being forcibly trained by Daesh.  Like other women and girls, Farida's mother escaped from Daesh captivity by running across dangerous 'battle zones' and required hospital treatment when she arrived in the Dohuk governorate of Iraqi Kurdistan (2016: 189 – see image 4.2).

Nadia, on the other hand, was initially transported with her mother from her home in Kocho to the Solagh institute, east of Sinjar city.  Once there, however, Daesh fighters began to forcibly separate the women and girls: 'He shoved his hands under my armpits and picked me up off the floor, tearing me away from my mother and pushing me toward the garden wall' (2017: 113).  Nadia was then transported to Mosul where she spent three months in Daesh captivity (see image 4.2).  What happened to her mother however would not be discovered until December 2015, when a mass grave containing 'around eighty bodies, women' was found in Solagh near the institute where they had been separated (2017: 287).  It is reported elsewhere that after the younger

women were taken the 'loud screams of the elderly were heard amongst gunshots as they were murdered' (Rota, 2016).

**Image 4.2: Map of Iraq and Syria (1. Tal Afar, 2. Dohuk, 3. Mosul).**



Based on these accounts, it is unquestionable that Yazidi women over 35 suffered abuse and violence at the hands of Daesh.  Yet, their voices are largely silenced, and their stories omitted from the analysed articles.  While it is difficult to explain the reasons for their absence with any certainty, it could be theorised that their stories simply didn't fit the highly sexualised content being produced at a time when the focus of the UK news media was largely on accounts of rape and sexual violence.  It could also be argued that women over 35 were neglected in the UK news media because of what Maria Edström refers to as gendered ageism (2018).  In her discussion of the intersections between gender and age in news media Edström argues that:

> Youth and youthfulness is an important form of capital especially for women in the media.  The younger a woman is the more likely she is to have a place within the media…After the age of 30 women become more invisible as they grow older (2018: 85).

In the context of my research, this would mean that regardless of what happened to women over 35 their perceived lack of 'youthfulness' impacted upon the level of attention they received in UK news discourse.  Given the focus often placed on the age of the women and girls depicted across the analysed articles: 'Yazidi woman, 24'

(DM61/2017); 'Yazidi girl, 11' (DM52/2017); 'teenage girls' (TG77/2015); 'three young Yazidi women' (BBC10/2015), and the overwhelming focus on sex attacks, it seems likely that both were factors in the reporting. Whether it was intentional or not is difficult to assess. What is clear, however, is that by omitting women over 35 from the discussion, the news articles give the impression that their stories 'do not matter or are lowly valued', thereby adding to the disempowerment of Yazidi women (Edström, 2018: 89). This disempowerment of Yazidi women is also evident in UK news media representations of their escapes from Daesh captivity.

4.3. Escaping Daesh.

While the BBC reports that 'traumatised and exhausted' women 'seized every opportunity' to escape Daesh captivity (BBC10/2015), each of the four news agencies, in their depictions of escapes and rescues from Iraq and Syria, largely reinforce the patriarchal and Orientalist images of the women depicted in the previous section: helpless, vulnerable and passive women, 'in need of masculinized protection' (Zalewski & Runyan, 2019: 110). In particular they do this by overlooking the significant actions women took to secure their own freedom, focusing instead on the actions of predominately male others, such as Iraqi forces (DM52/2017); Kurdish groups (SN48/2016), and/or networks of (male) smugglers BBC60/2015; TG34/2017; DM76/2017).

For example, Sophie Williams recounts Noura's story in her article 'Yazidi mother-of-four, 24, who was bought and sold as an ISIS sex slave FIVE times is finally free' (DM66/2017). Noura was reportedly held with her children in Daesh captivity for three years. According to the news article, it is 'thanks to Kurdish fighters' and an 'unidentified man' that Noura is now free (DM66/2017). After all, it was they who orchestrated her rescue, smuggled her to safety, and reunited her with her family. Given this narrative, one would be forgiven for assuming that Noura herself played little to no role in her own rescue. However, briefly mentioned in the article is that Noura managed to communicate with her family using her captor's mobile phone without his knowledge. This means that rather than helplessly relying on rescuers, Noura risked her safety to inform her family of her location. As such, the depicted 'rescue' could not have occurred except for the actions of Noura herself.

That is not to say that third-parties do not play a significant role. However, by reducing women's actions to a single sentence in the narrative of events, the articles diminish women's agency and cast them as bystanders in their own stories. In my efforts to gather the lived experiences of women in Iraq and Syria, I uncovered many stories of escape. I return to the story of Nadia Murad, a Yazidi woman, whose experiences have been recounted her own memoir (2017). However, I also recognise that despite the articles focus on Yazidi women as the most "visible" victim group in Iraq and Syria, other women experienced similar victimisation and as such fled the region (Crawford, Hoover Green & Parkinson, 2014). To reflect this, I also include Lina's story as she described it to me in an interview in 2018.[9]

*4.3.1. Nadia's Escape.*

Nadia had been in Daesh captivity for three months and was about to be transported from Mosul to Syria when she began to contemplate her second escape attempt. Despite being recaptured and severely punished the first time she attempted to leave; Nadia explains: 'the promise that I was going to go to Syria had reignited the urgency to flee' (2017: 200). Leaving through an unlocked front door, Nadia jumped over a garden wall and began to navigate the unfamiliar streets of Mosul. She describes the fear that she felt during this time: 'all I could think about as I walked was the moment they would catch me, what their weapons and their voices would sound like, and then what their hands would feel like dragging me back to the house I had fled from' (2017: 206).

Fear is a common characteristic stereotypically assigned to Yazidi women in the news articles that I analysed (Eichler, 2019). Associated with weakness, it is typically used to perpetuate an image of women as inherently vulnerable and in need of protection (Young, 2003; Butler, Gambetti & Sabsay, 2016; Eichler, 2019). Nadia, however, describes how she used her fear and vulnerability to determine her movements and to avoid recapture, thereby dispelling classically negative and gendered connotations attached to such descriptors in the UK news media: 'I didn't walk in a straight line. Instead I wove between parked cars, turned corners at random, and crossed and

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[9] Lina is a pseudonym designed to protect the anonymity of the interviewee.

recrossed the same streets over and over, hoping that a casual observer would think I knew where I was going' (2017: 205).

Nadia also displayed rational and strategic thinking during her journey through Mosul, traits commonly associated with masculinity (see, Blanchard; 2003; Gentry, 2019).  In what she perceived to be a poor neighbourhood, Nadia weighed her options and determined that 'if any Sunni in Mosul was going to help me, it was most likely to be a poor Sunni' (2017: 208).  Using this logic, she knocked on a door and convinced the family inside to help her. Rather than attempting to lie to the family, however, Nadia determined that 'the more they knew, the more likely they were to help' (2017: 210).  In telling her story, Nadia demonstrated her agency and her power to create change as she not only convinced the family to help her, she also inspired them to help others:

> After I arrived at Nasser's family home, they told me that they had started thinking about their own role in ISIS.  They said they felt guilty that it had taken me showing up on their doorstep, desperate and begging, for them to help a sabiyya (a captive woman); they knew that their survival, and the fact that they had not been displaced, was in some way a collusion with the terrorists…They told me they were changed forever (2017: 231).

Like many other women, Nadia was not naïve about the dangers she faced when Daesh militants first attacked her home.  Prior to be taken, she memorised the telephone numbers of family members.  This enabled her to contact her brother and led to the development of an escape plan.  Nadia and Nasser, a member of the family whose home she was now in, would travel to Kurdistan together pretending to be husband and wife.

Despite spending twenty-four pages of her autobiography discussing her final escape from Iraq, the news articles depicting Nadia's story typically reduce her journey to one line in which her agency is diminished: 'Murad was lucky that the strangers she found in Mosul helped smuggle her to a refugee camp' (DM61/2017).  In truth, however, Nadia and Nasser helped each other to escape.  It was in Nasser's interest, as well as Nadia's, to leave Mosul:

> Young men like him were prime recruits for ISIS, and his family thought the terrorists wanted Nasser to join their police force.  He was already fixing the sanitation systems in buildings around Mosul and everyone worried that even

that job, although it was not violent, could brand him a terrorist later on (2017: 228).

Both Nadia and Nasser took on the role of protector at various times during their journey, thereby disrupting the assumption that women, as a result of their inherent helplessness, are naturally the protected (Zalewski & Runyan, 2019). As a Sunni man, Nasser could pretend that Nadia was his wife and help her to travel through Mosul with little suspicion. At Daesh checkpoints for example, Nasser would take the lead when speaking to militants. Once in Kurdistan, however, the roles were reversed. When confronted with Peshmerga soldiers, Nasser was largely dependent on Nadia to protect him from assumptions regarding his identity.

This was because they understood that 'the peshmerga were trained to be suspicious of Sunni men' (Murad & Krajeski, 2017: 245), and would be 'particularly suspicious of Nasser, who was the right age to be an Islamic State fighter' (2017: 259). Despite knowing that she would almost certainly be permitted entry as a Yazidi woman, Nadia demonstrated her resilience through her determination to protect Nasser even at great personal risk: 'I wouldn't leave Nasser in Islamic State territory, even if it meant going back to Mosul' (2017: 245).

Fortunately, however, through her negotiations with Peshmerga soldiers and by explaining Nasser's position, Nadia was able to ensure their entry into Kurdistan. It was here that Nadia and Nasser parted ways as she was reunited with her family (2017: 274). Since then Nadia has used her lived experience as a weapon against Daesh as she aims to shed light on their crimes, raise awareness of minority issues, and attempts to protect the human rights of others. When explaining the power of her story, she states:

> The terrorists didn't think that Yazidi girls would be able to leave them, or that we would have the courage to tell the world every detail of what they did to us. We defy them by not letting their crimes go unanswered. Every time I tell my story, I feel that I am taking some power away from the terrorist (2017: 303).

*4.3.2. Lina's Escape.*

Unlike the women depicted to this point, Lina is not Yazidi. She is a Shia woman from Mosul in Iraq. Despite not being kidnapped and held captive by Daesh in the same way as those from the Sinjar region, she was equally impacted by Daesh's violence and fled her home as a result, leaving her family behind. Her journey would take her from Mosul to Iraqi Kurdistan to Lebanon to France to the United Kingdom and finally to Belfast. At each stage of her journey Lina discusses the steps she took to protect and advocate for herself. Her story is included to highlight the selectivity of UK news media reporting as it focuses on Yazidi women, and to challenge the patriarchal and Orientalist representations that broadly construct women in Syria and Iraq as agentless.

In her own words, Lina describes the day that Daesh entered her home as 'the worst day of [my] life'. Similar to the accounts of Yazidi women, after shooting her brother, Daesh militants raped Lina in her own home. Promising to return and kill her, Lina and her mother took action. They decided that to protect herself, Lina should hide in an empty water tank on their property. Showing me a picture of a similar water tank, Lina explains: 'I hid in it for a month, the whole of Ramadan…so when Daesh would come back they wouldn't find me'.

Knowing that Daesh would eventually return, Lina explains: 'I would stay [in the tank] the whole time except for various things like going to the toilet, have some food, do one of the prayers…but then I would go back immediately into the tank'. Lina describes the tank as 'a grave', a small space in which she had 'a small mattress and I had a few books, a Koran just to read while I was in there'. Daesh militants returned for her twice but they didn't find her. After their second return when they made threats: 'they started threatening that they would burn the house', Lina and her mother decided that she 'should escape from Mosul'.

Like Nadia, Lina's escape was complex. She began her journey to Belfast by contacting a Kurdish smuggler who could get documents to 'prove that we are Iraqi'. After paying him, the smuggler helped Lina leave Mosul:

> When he smuggled us, we were a group of girls. The man asked us, all the
> girls to meet at one house in Mosul. But of course, because I couldn't actually

walk [alone], no woman could do that...he took me in his car and put me in [a] house where the other girls would be coming to or would be meeting. He gave us all the same costume or clothes which were black. They would usually be worn by Daesh women which was the black veil, the black headcover, the black Hijab or the long dress. Then we got in the car with him. We were almost around ten girls. Then we reached the checkpoint and the man spoke to Daesh and he told them, this is my family and of course because they didn't see us because of the veil, they believed him.

Once in Erbil (see image 4.3), the smuggler applied for a Polish Visa for Lina, which she used to travel through Lebanon to Calais, France. Once there, she slept in a tent in a forest for 'around a month'. When asked to explain what life was like during her time in Calais, Lina explains: 'I was scared the whole time because it was a new situation for me...I didn't know anyone...life was difficult'. Like Nadia, however, Lina used her fear to protect herself and adopted to her circumstances by using the nearby facilities to her advantage:

If I wanted to wash my hair, wash my body, I would go to McDonalds. I would go to the disabled toilet because it was a big one. I bought some shampoo for myself. I would go into that disabled toilet to wash my hair.

**Image 4.3: Map of Iraq and Syria (Erbil).**

Like Noura's story discussed at the beginning of this section, Lina had help from a male smuggler in her escape. In Noura's case, this was used as a way to devalue her agency by focusing on those who aided her, rather than her own participation in her escape. It seems likely that had Lina's story, or stories of other women like her (non-Yazidi women), been included in the news coverage of the conflict, similar representations would be made. I argue, however, that as Lina discusses reaching out to a smuggler and travelling through several countries, she displays and emphasises her agency, and situates herself as the central actor in her escape.

Returning to Lina's story, she explains that her intention while in Calais, was to sneak aboard a lorry on its way to the United Kingdom. She explains that she would 'sleep during the day [and] wake at night' to go the carpark of a nearby gas station because 'truck drivers would use the station for their nights rest'. Lina explains that she was 'targeting only the lorries that would be carrying or transporting things like for example medications, or stuff like that. Not meat, because those would be freezing, and they [smugglers] told us that you would freeze in there and die'.

Lina eventually found a suitable lorry and with several others she began her journey to the United Kingdom. She explains that while in the lorry she stayed quiet to avoid detection and would even 'breathe quietly' because 'they used dogs to inspect the cars and search for things.' She listened to the noises of the lorry and the outside world so she could track her journey and recognise when she had arrived. Only then did she start 'knocking on the lorry from the outside so they [the driver] would hear and open it'. Through this story, Lina's rational and logical thought process is clear, she knew how to keep herself from being caught before she reached the UK, and exercised her agency in doing so.

Once in the United Kingdom, Lina's attempts to ensure her safety and freedom continued. She explains that after arriving 'somewhere near Manchester' a smuggler took her in his car until he received word that her family in Mosul had paid for her release. Only then did he return her passport and let her go. When asked what would have happened to her had her family not paid, she replied: 'I don't know'. After leaving the smuggler and contacting police, Lina spent over a year living between detention centres, hostels and shared homes while she fought against deportation. Eventually, she met with doctors and Home Officials with whom she shared her story. It was the

agency she displayed as she used voice to tell her story and advocate for herself, that finally secured her release.

Lina's story is similar to the stories of other women in the region whose agency is devalued in the UK news media through the perpetuation of gendered and Orientalist assumptions. Like Nadia, her journey to escape was long and entailed devising ways in which she could keep herself hidden from Daesh. Where Nadia travelled through poor neighbours under the cover of darkness, Lina hid in a water tank. Lina also had to contend with officials and plead her case to be granted entry to territories outside of Daesh control. One must ask therefore, were Lina's story included in the news articles, would her escape be relegated to one sentence in the body of the text like Nadia's? I argue that it likely would, and thus like Nadia, her agency would be diminished.

As well as illustrating the existence and significance of women's agency in Syria and Iraq, Lina's story also demonstrates that despite UK news media efforts to situate Yazidi women as the archetypal victims of Daesh violence, other populations were also targeted. In omitting such stories, I argue that each of the four UK news agencies studied marginalise women like Lina by ensuring that their voices are not fully heard. This means that only partial knowledge of the conflict is constructed through the UK news media. I argue that this partial knowledge prevents meaningful responses aimed at understanding and/or preventing instances of violence, and supporting those impacted by it. This is expanded upon in the next section as I discuss representations of sexual and gender-based violence in Syria and Iraq.


4.4. Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War.

As outlined earlier in this chapter, in news articles pertaining to wartime sexual and gender-based violence in Iraq and Syria from 2013 to 2017, journalists focus on women who were 'bought and sold' by Daesh and recount stories of 'horrifying violence [and] physical and mental abuse' (SN48/2016). Focusing on Yazidi survivors in particular, the articles describe women's experiences of being forcibly married to their captors (DM33/2014), and/or taken as servants and forced to 'cook' (BBC04/2014) as well as perform other 'household tasks' (TG53/2016). According to reports, women experienced savage beatings, torture, and taunting by the militants

who bought and imprisoned them: 'they beat us with cables, staved us and made us wash our faces with petrol' (BBC13/2014). Moreover, Yazidi women were reportedly sold, re-sold and at times 'exchanged as gifts' (DM39/2016), as Daesh members were killed or simply grew 'bored' of them (BBC10/2015; DM39/2016).

While it is clear that the abuse suffered by Yazidi women took many forms, most prominent in the news articles are details of the sexual violence that they experienced. Of the ninety-six news articles included for analysis at this stage, over half (fifty-six) focus almost 'obsessively' on details of sex attacks (Shackle, 2015). Through these articles, graphic and sometimes lurid depictions of 'seemingly endless rapes' are constructed (DM61/2017). Using language 'bordering on salacious' (Shackle, 2015), the articles describe women being raped and gang-raped 'in every imaginable' (DM89/2017), sometimes up to '30 times in just a few hours' (DM29/2014). Moreover, while it is typically suggested that Yazidi women were 'locked in [the] homes' of Daesh members (TG53/2016), other articles depict brothels in which women were frequently raped by 'countless' militants (DM29/2014; DM39/2016), and '3ft cells' in which 'sexual stimulants, contraceptives and narcotics' were given to women to aid in their 'torture' (SN05/2016; DM12/2017).

These stories are undeniably horrific, and it is important that they are told. In particular, it is important that they are told in the news media where they can 'galvanize the supporters of activists and humanitarians, cut through donor fatigue and spur policy changes' (Crawford, Hoover Green & Parkinson, 2014). However, like the articles describing so-called slave markets, I argue that the narratives constructed around SGBV in Iraq and Syria serve a broader political focus: to reinforce patriarchal and Orientalist ideologies in relation to women as a means compound Daesh's perceived ruthlessness and position intervention as necessary to protect helpless and victimised women. This explains why the news articles that I analysed selectively focus on sensationalist stories from Yazidi women. Apart from the harmful ideologies that such narratives perpetuate, a further ramification of this selective coverage is that similar stories from other women and girls, as well as some men and boys, are omitted (UNAMI, 2017). As a result, the suffering of other victimised groups is compounded as they receive 'neither attention nor needed resources' (Crawford, Hoover Green & Parkinson, 2014). This is developed more fully in the next section through the stories of Abeer and Haya.

*4.4.1. Sexual and Gender-based Violence Against Other Women.*

In the interviews that I conducted in Belfast in 2018, the issue of the selective reporting of instances of sexual and gender-based violence in the UK news media became apparent to me. Lina for example, whose story of escape was detailed earlier in this chapter, was targeted by Daesh before their assault on the Sinjar region. Her account illustrates that Daesh perpetrated sexual violence against other populations in Iraq, and that despite the UK news media intensifying their coverage as a result of the assault on Sinjar, the violence that occurred there was already happening elsewhere:

> One day they entered our house and that was the worst day of my life. They attacked us and they started saying that we are *Kafir* or disbelievers. They started arguing with my brother and saying very nasty things to him and then they killed him. So, I started verbally attacking them. My mother just had a meltdown, she fell when saw my brother being shot in front of her. There were three of them, only one was Arab. The other one was probably speaking Pakistani and the third one was Chechen. I kept fighting with them and then two of them raped me. After they raped me, they left the house while threatening me that they would come back and kill me.

Of the news articles that I analysed, only three discuss attacks of this nature perpetrated against women other than Yazidis (DM04/2014; BBC48/2015; BBC26/2017), thus giving the impression that such abuse was not commonplace. This is disputed by another interviewee, however, Abeer from Homs in Syria, who argued that Daesh frequently raped and gang-raped anyone they considered not sufficiently religious: 'one of the practices of Daesh against women was gang-raping, especially those who are non-religious women, [these] may be non-Muslims, or not conservation Muslims, or non-religious Muslims'.[10]

Moreover, Abeer stressed that Daesh were not the sole perpetrators of sexual violence during this time (2013-2017). In explaining why she left Syria, she states that it was 'not only because Daesh practices raping women or gang-raping women but also because [of] the [Syrian] regime themselves – inside their prisons women are also raped on a daily basis'. This narrative was further supported by Haya, another

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[10] Abeer is a pseudonym designed to protect the anonymity of the interviewee.

interviewee from Syria.[11]  In her story, Haya describes how she was detained after her husband's murder and sexually harassed:

> [I] was taken to the military police department and was questioned for six hours [and] sexually harassed.  They [Syrian government forces] asked for sex.  They of course did not ask that peacefully or gently [at this stage the interviewee gestured by pulling at her arms and clothes] …I tried to make them understand that [I felt] disgusting right now and that [I had] been travelling for a long time without changing clothes and that they will feel you know disgusting if they have sex with [me] and then they got convinced.

Only one of the analysed articles specifically discusses sexual violence perpetrated by Syrian government forces (BBC37/2013).  Noting this lack of attention in her work, Marie Forestier argues that 'the disproportionate attention of political leaders and media on Yazidi women and ISIS's crimes convey the wrong impression that sexual violence was committed only by one party to the conflict' (2017: 1).  In reality, sexual violence was (and continues to be) perpetrated against women in Syria and Iraq on multiple fronts: 'women were on both sides tortured and raped, killed, and killed after being raped' (Abeer, 2018).

This lack of reporting also extends to displaced Iraqi and Syrian populations and to instances of sexual violence perpetrated against men and boys, both of which are underreported in the news articles that I analysed.  Haya discusses both issues in a later segment of her interview in which she describes the sexual harassment perpetrated against her son while they were displaced in Lebanon (see image 4.4). She explains that at this time her children were attending night school and would routinely be transported home in a taxi. One night however, her eldest son didn't return:

> I was concerned and then I received a phone call from one of my friends who lives right opposite to the school.  On that night there was no electricity which means that there were no lights, and it was after night, after 9pm.  What [my] friend saw and heard was my son yelling and crying so loudly.  There were some men, young men, and they all had their faces covered…this was a very

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[11] Haya is a pseudonym used to protect the identity of the interviewee.

frequent thing to happen…they spot one child, they put one child in their minds, these young men, and they decide to rape him.  On that night my son was picked.

He was thirteen years old at this time, now he is fourteen…the neighbours heard him crying and calling for help while these young men were trying to drag him inside the car.  He even bite one of them on his hand and that person just left him.  And then [my] friend started to make like a fuss and some noise just to scare these young men out.  They were actually kicking him just to force him to surrender to give in [and] get in the car…He was screaming and calling specific names…and then the gang just left him after they were desperate that he would go in the car…and my friend took him'.

According to Haya, sexual harassment of this nature was commonly perpetrated against displaced Syrians:

This is not the first time such a thing happens…with other boys who were raped, some of them would be raped and then thrown in the forest…for example, between trees, in a farm or something like that. Others would be killed after being raped.

**Image 4.4: Map of Iraq and Syria (1. Syria, 2. Lebanon).**



While accounts such as those depicted by the interviewees are included in broader scholarship (see, International Rescue Committee, 2014; Davis, 2015; Yasmine & Moughalian, 2016), they are largely invisible in the UK news media.  As such, the full

scale and scope of wartime SGBV in Iraq and Syria is not conveyed to the general public. Whether intentional or unintentional, this has very real consequences for those who have been victimised by such abuse. Crawford, Hoover Green and Parkinson discuss these consequences in their Washington Post article (2014). They argue that because news media reports influence the public's understanding of wartime SGBV and their reactions to it, the selectivity of reports 'inevitability feeds into policy responses'. In other words, if UK news reports focus only on the 'most visible groups' (in this case Yazidi women), other survivors 'who may be equally in need of help' will continue to be marginalised and victimised and their needs will remain unmet (2014). Moreover, as such stories are omitted, the causes of SGBV cannot be fully studied.

*4.4.2. The Causes of Sexual and Gender-based Violence.*

As well as limiting our understanding about the extent of wartime SGBV in Iraq and Syria and those impacted, the selective nature of the reporting results in simplistic and conflicting explanations of its causes. For example, in the news articles that I analysed, an orientalist image of Daesh and wartime rape is constructed through the suggestion that Daesh militants were merely sexual deviants (Said, 1987; Khalid, 2014), seeking to 'satisfy their animalistic urges' (DM31/2014; TG70/2014). This common Orientalist trope often seen in traditional discourse, is further compounded in articles that suggest that 'abducting girls has become a key part of ISIS strategy to recruit foreign fighters' (TG77/2015). The implication of this is that more often than not, those who joined Daesh were motivated by sexual desires rather than any political or ideological reason.

This narrative becomes increasingly problematic when Daesh's justifications for sexual violence on religious grounds are discussed. In such narratives Daesh fighters are depicted as claiming: 'we can sell Yazidi women and children as sex slaves because it's God's law' (DM75/2014). Specifically, it is argued that because the Yazidi people 'follow an ancient religion' (DM93/2016), that is 'neither Muslim nor Christian' (BBC10/2015), they 'may be killed or enslaved with impunity' (BBC06/2016). By identifying Daesh fighters as typically Sunni Muslim men (DM31.2014; BBC13/2014; BBC06/2016), such statements construct Islam as a 'contributing factor in 'rapists' attitudes and behaviours' (Dagistanli & Grewal, 2016: 123).

To refute this, some articles include quotes from Islamic scholars who argue that Daesh are 'deliberately misreading centuries-old [Islamic] verses and sayings' (Abdel Fattah Alawari, in DM08/2015). However, such statements are limited in comparison to the continual communication of Daesh's perceived religious motivations and/or justifications. Given the influence that news discourse has in shaping public perceptions and 'understandings of and reactions to' such issues (Crawford, Hoover Green & Parkinson, 2014), narratives that conflate Islamic practices with Daesh's actions serve only to perpetuate traditional 'orientalist connections made between Islam and violence', including SGBV (Dagistanli & Grewal, 2016: 119).

In other articles, terms such as 'spoils of war' (BBC13/2014; DM29/2014; BBC06/2016), and 'war booty' (DM39/2016) are used to describe the sexual victimisation of women. In feminist discourse, such terms are linked to historical narratives in which wartime SGBV was considered to be an 'inevitable by-product of war' (Ochab, 2017). Specifically, acts of SGBV were depicted as being perpetrated against 'the women of the vanquished (the male enemies)' as a way to seek 'revenge' for wartime activities or to express 'triumph' (Baaz & Stern, 2009: 498). In the context of Daesh, the use of such terms implies that Yazidi women were simply a 'reward' for Daesh fighters (DM08/2015), and a means for them to send a 'symbolic message of dominance to the conquered (men)' (Baaz & Stern, 2009: 498), and to other men and women who might 'compromise their vision of a new caliphate' (BBC10/2015).

Despite the common use of such language, there is some evidence of knowledge about the complexities of wartime SGBV in the analysed articles. In particular, several journalists and contributors have depicted SGBV as a tool or weapon or war (DM29/2014; TG79/2015; TG70/2014; TG83/2016). To illustrate this, the news articles perpetuate two primary narratives. First, it is argued that Daesh perpetrates SGBV as a form of 'psychological warfare' DM04/2014): to 'subordinate and degrade' their enemies through humiliation (Ahram, 2015: 59), so that they may exert power and control over them (TG79/2015).

Secondly, the news articles construct SGBV as a 'genocidal tool used instrumentally to bring about a political objective' (Innes & Steele, 2019: 153). Specifically, they argue that Daesh perpetrated SGBV to 'break up the Kurdish-speaking (Yazidi) group's bloodline' by forcibly impregnating women (DM14/2014). In this case, Yazidi women

are intentionally targeted because of their 'vital importance in constructing and maintaining the ethnonational group' (Alison, 2007: 80). This means that because Yazidi women biologically reproduce the Yazidi collectivity, reproduce its boundaries and actively transmit Yazidi culture (Yuval-Davis & Anthias, 1989: 7), Daesh targeted them as a way to eradicate the collectivity (Alison, 2007: 80).

While such narratives represent a positive shift in understandings of wartime SGBV (Welland, 2019: 133), they remain oversimplified and incomplete. In particular, they fail to address causes of wartime rape linked to 'fighting forces' internal practices' (Crawford, Hoover Green & Parkinson, 2014). This may include rape performed as a 'bonding function' (Alison, 2007), through which group hierarchies can be reinforced and loyalty ensured (see, Alison, 2007; Wood, 2009). Sexual violence may also be used as a method of 'forced recruitment' (Crawford, Hoover Green & Parkinson, 2014). Ariel Ahram discusses this specifically in context of the sexual violence committed against men and boys. She suggests that 'sexual violations against male victims' can be used as 'a form of initiation or induction to news recruits' or as 'blackmail should the recruit try to desert or escape' (2015: 68).

In addition to the causes depicted, I argue that in their preoccupation with Daesh perpetrated sexual violence, the UK news media largely ignores and thereby limits understandings of the causes of wartime rape committed by state forces and other armed groups in Iraq and Syria (International Rescue Committee, 2014; Davis, 2015; Yasmine & Moughalian, 2016). Moreover, they fail to properly address sexual violence perpetrated against displaced populations such as Haya's case (4.3.1). These oversights, as well as those depicted above, silence the voices of victimised populations, thereby enabling their continued marginalisation. Moreover, they ensure that only partial knowledge of wartime SGBV is constructed, through which meaningful social and political change cannot be actualised.


4.5. Conclusion.

In their reporting of the violent conflict in Iraq and Syria (2013-2017), UK news agencies have focused primarily on the indisputably horrific accounts of 'sexual slavery, forced marriage, kidnapping and rape' (TG83/2016), perpetrated against

women (predominately Yazidi women), by Daesh militants. In these accounts women are constructed through a stereotypically gendered lens as helpless, fragile and passive victims who require protection (Eichler, 2019; Leigh & Weber, 2019). This is not a new phenomenon. Relying on Spivak's classic example relating to Hindu women (1993) and Cooke's analysis of post 9/11 representations of Afghan women, I argue that Yazidi women in particular are purposefully depicted as defenceless as a means to enable and justify military intervention (see Obama, 2014). Furthermore, while wars are justified through this narrative, so too are gendered hierarchies (Sjoberg & Peet, 2011). This is because, as I highlighted in my literature review, men are cast as the just warriors who fight in wars to protect naturally subordinate women (see, Elshtain, 1987; Sjoberg, 2010).

To underscore the necessity of war as a means to protect helpless women, the news articles that I analysed, selectively focus on sensationalist stories of pain and suffering in which graphic language is used to convey a traditionally Orientalist image of Daesh militants as ruthless and bloodthirsty perpetrators of SGBV (DM08/2015). In their search for such narratives, however, the journalists whose work is quoted in this chapter, largely exclude women's stories of resistance, thereby contributing to their disempowerment (Chetty, 2004). Even in articles that purport to recount women's escapes from Daesh, they are often deprived of agency as the news articles focus on the activities of predominately male third-parties and limit women's role to one sentence in the narrative of events.

Through the stories of Nadia, Farida, Khulka and Lina, however, such narratives are refuted. Rather than helplessly waiting to be rescued as some news articles report was the case, each of these women took on the role of protector in multiple and varying ways (Zalewski & Runyan, 2019: 109). Their accounts show that they protected themselves against victimisation by physically fighting against their captors, they protected others by deceiving militants, and they took decisive and deliberate action to secure their freedom, thus highlighting the existence and significance of their agency (see, Khalaf & Hoffmann, 2016; Murad & Krajeski, 2017; Otter, 2017).

The selectivity of the analysed news articles is also evident in the voices that they exclude. Overwhelmingly, the articles focus on accounts of SGBV committed against Yazidi women under 35. Yazidi women over 35, as well as other women and girls

(and men and boys), are largely omitted, thereby giving the impression that they somehow alluded the widespread violence occurring at the time (2013-2017). In reality, however, Daesh represented a threat to all people who opposed them and to all religious minorities they deemed unworthy of a place in their self-declared caliphate (see, Amnesty International, 2014). Through the stories of women impacted by Daesh, we learned that while some women over 35 were also kidnapped and held in captivity (Khalaf & Hoffmann, 2016), others, mothers and grandmothers in particular, were shot and killed by militants and buried in mass graves (see, Murad & Krajeski, 2017). By failing to reflect such stories in favour of sensationalist accounts of sex attacks, journalists devalue the experiences of other victimised groups and mask 'other forms of physical and structural violence that women might experience during armed conflict' (Welland, 2019: 133).

Furthermore, in their focus on Daesh as the 'stereotypical perpetrators' of SGBV in Iraq and Syria (Crawford, Hoover Green & Parkinson, 2014), the news articles ignore accounts of SGBV perpetrated by state forces and other armed groups, as well as SGBV committed outside of war against displaced populations. Both of these issues are reflected in the lived experiences of Abeer who describes systematic sexual abuse by Syrian government forces, and Haya who recounts her son's experience of attempted rape while displaced in Lebanon. By side-lining such narratives, the news articles compound 'the challenges that survivors face' in multiple ways (Crawford, Hoover Green & Parkinson, 2014). In particular, because news discourse has a 'direct influence' on the public's understanding of these issues and 'in turn on the policies and actions the public expects and wants in response (Smith et al, 2016: 40), if the experiences of less visible victim groups are not conveyed, it seems likely that 'they will go unrecognised and acknowledged' in foreign policy responses (Gopsill, 2018).

Equally important is the public's understanding of the causes of wartime SGBV. After all, in order to actualise change, one must first understand the problem. The causes depicted in the included articles illustrate that while knowledge in slowly changing on the issue it remains incomplete (Crawford, Hoover Green & Parkinson, 2014). This is because as the articles move away from depictions of rape as purely sexual and opportunistic to more meaningful narratives in which it is described as a strategic and intentional weapon of war, they continue to fail to recognise that wartime SGBV can have multiple causes simultaneously, including causes linked to the internal practices

of the group (Alison, 2007; Crawford Hoover & Parkinson, 2014).  As such, the analysed articles fail to reflect the complexities of wartime SGBV, thus ensuring that public perceptions of the issue will remain limited.

Given the sensationalist and selective way in which the stories of violent conflict in Iraq and Syria were reported, they undoubtedly grabbed the reader's attention.  However, it is important to ask what the reporting achieved? And, how did it impact the survivors and wider understandings of war and wartime violence?   I argue that while the accounts presented may have led to increased activism and support for specific victimised groups, they equally contributed to the marginalisation and continued oppression of others.   Moreover, by failing to adequately reflect 'the full range of perpetrators, tactics, victims, survivors, causes and consequences' of wartime sexual and gender-based violence in particular (Crawford, Hoover Green & Parkinson, 2014), the constructed narratives did little to contribute to knowledge of the specific and complex issues involved or to spur beneficial long-term change.

**Chapter Five: 'The myth of the "Jihadi Bride"'.[12]**

UK news media representations of women in relation to Daesh are not only about those victimised by Daesh violence, but also about women reported to be aligned with the jihadist group. This discourse largely omits women 'from' the region and is instead dominated by attention to the reported 145 migrant women from the United Kingdom who travelled to Syria and/or Iraq to join Daesh after 2013.[13] With this shift in attention to migrant women, the concept of 'radicalisation' and how it occurs has been introduced as a central topic of inquiry in UK news discourse. In particular, much of the news media's coverage of Daesh aligned migrant women has focused on how and why they made the decision to travel to Daesh-held territories, and the ways in which they reportedly contributed to the Caliphate upon their arrival. How the UK news media answers these types of questions and addresses the concept of radicalisation in the context of migrant women forms the basis of this chapter.

Two interconnected representations of migrant women can be found in the 106 UK news articles analysed for this chapter: naïve victims and passive participants. In discussions of radicalisation and women's motivations for travelling to Syria and/or Iraq, the UK news media describes migrant women in a stereotypically gendered way as passive, weak, naïve and emotional beings who were 'deceived [and] brainwashed by malevolent radicals [and] seduced by promises of romance' (Loken & Zelenz, 2017: 47). Rather than being motivated to migrate for political or ideological reasons, the 'naïve victims' representation suggests that women from the UK were misled, tricked or forced to make the journey by jihadists who preyed upon their feminine nature, their perceived vulnerabilities and their "innate" desire to become wives and mothers, as a means to radicalise them and to lure them to the region (BBC17/2015; DM552017).

Once in the region, migrant women are then represented as passive participants in the UK news media, with their roles largely depicted as supportive and confined to the domestic and private sphere of the home. Even in representations in which their roles are extended beyond the family, they continue to be diminished as subsidiary actors. This includes migrant women who are portrayed as recruiters who spread Daesh propaganda (BBC01/2015; TG04/2014), and enforcers who punish those who oppose

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[12] Quote taken from an article by the Guardian (TG56/2015). See appendix two for full reference details.
[13] Statistics sourced from: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news-middle-east-47286935. Last accessed: 29/08/2019.

Daesh and/or violate their 'code' (DM64/2017). Despite alluding to their active participation, neither role is described as being indicative of women's membership of Daesh. Instead, the UK news media casts such women as mere 'cheerleaders' of Daesh (Strømmen, 2017), who glorify the activities of their male counterparts from the side-lines (Carter Center, 2017), or as puppets of male jihadis, perpetrating gender-specific violence under their direction (DM74/2017; DM85/2015; DM90/2015).

Focusing on the profile of migrant women found in UK news coverage of Daesh (5.1), representations that have been constructed of their motivations (5.2), and depictions of their eventual roles in Daesh-held territory (5.3), I explore both the 'naïve victims' and 'passive participants' representations and challenge the gender-stereotypes that they perpetuate. Through engagement with social media and other online postings, as well as Daesh's own narratives, I illustrate that in their reporting the UK news media obscures and oversimplifies the diversity of migrant women and the existence and significance of their agency with potentially dangerous ramifications. Specifically, it constructs a confusing narrative rooted in patriarchal and Orientalist assumptions that lessens the culpability of migrant women in the eyes of readers, hindering their ability to recognise the dangers that migrant women who are aligned with Daesh might pose, and to understand how radicalisation occurs and to respond appropriately to it.

5.1.    A Profile in Radicalisation.

In recent decades, the concept of 'radicalisation' has become a central topic of inquiry for academics and policy makers seeking to explore the root causes of 'terrorism' (see, Schmid, 2013: 2), and to establish an 'analytical grounding for preventive strategies' (Kundnani, 2012: 4). The centrality of this topic is also reflected in news discourse where terms such as 'radicalisation' and 'terror' appear frequently. Prior to beginning my analysis of the news coverage of women who travelled to Daesh-held territories, it is important to first acknowledge that this terminology is not unproblematic. This is because there is 'no scholarly consensus on how to understand radicalisation' and the concept of 'terrorism' (Crone, 2016: 587), both of which are terms whose perceived meanings have shifted over the decades to become synonymous with indiscriminate political (and extremist) violence that is often primarily connected to the Middle East. (see also, Sotlar, 2004; Stuurman, 2019).

The lack of consensus around this key terminology has enabled 'everyone to conceive of radicalisation (and terrorism) as they like' (Crone, 2016: 587), thereby creating a challenge for those who seek to study, understand and/or explain any phenomenon that has been labelled as such (2016: 587; see also, Sotlar, 2004; Reinares, 2008). In acknowledging the problematic nature of this terminology and the challenges that it often generates, my use of terms such as 'radicalisation', 'terror' and 'terrorism' in this chapter reflects only the manner in which they have been used by the BBC, the Daily Mail, the Guardian and Sky News in their coverage of the women in and around Daesh.

Considered to be a mainly male phenomenon, much of the focus on 'radicalisation' in public discourse has been on men (see, Bakker & de Leede, 2015). The issue of 'female radicalisation' on the other hand, has received comparatively less attention (Pearson, 2015: 5). This began to change in the years after 2013, however, as the news media became increasingly fascinated with stories of Western women who left their homes to travel to Syria and/or Iraq in support of Daesh, a group that gained 'considerable attention for its barbarity against women' (Peresin & Cervone, 2015: 499). Since then, countless news stories have been written about radicalised women (and girls) in which reporters ask: 1) who are these women (and girls)? And, 2) what was the catalyst for their perceived radicalisation?

To answer such questions, the UK news media has adopted what Chapman, Hobbs, Homan and Mahlouly et al call a 'positivist approach' (2018). In other words, news agencies assume that by logically analysing the backgrounds of those radicalised, identifiable and interconnected factors can be isolated through which empirical knowledge about the causes of radicalisation can be generated. Using this approach in news coverage of Daesh, UK news agencies report on the personal histories of known radicalised women and point to perceived patterns in age, family and religious background, and educational attainment, to explain how radicalisation occurs and to construct a broad psychological profile of those they deem to be susceptible (see also, Milton & Dodwell, 2018). This profile is best exemplified in an article for the BBC by James Longman in which an anonymous Home Office intervention officer sets out three primary factors that she perceives to be most common amongst those radicalised: age, educational history, and personal upbringing (BBC07/2015).

Beginning with age, the intervention officer states that women radicalised by Daesh are typically aged between 16-25 years old (BBC07/2015). This assertion, which is repeated across each of the four news agencies analysed in my thesis, is used to justify the continual use of the term 'young women' as a catchall for those known to have migrated (BBC03/2015; DM54/2014; SN23/2015; TG13/2016), and to suggest that their radicalisation is rooted in the naivety of their apparent youth (DM50/2015; SN08/2015; TG33/2016).[14] This means that as UK news agencies perpetuate this age range and include the prefix 'young' throughout their reporting, they tell readers that radicalised women (and girls) are simply impressionable youngsters who don't know any better. In reality, however, girls as young as fifteen as well as women in their fifties made the same journey to Daesh-held territories (see figure 5.1).

**Figure: 5.1: Names and ages of migrant women most cited in the UK news media.**

| 15 and under | 16-25 | 26 and over |
|---|---|---|
| Amira Abase (15) | Kadiza Sultana (16) | Tareena Shakil (26) |
| Shamima Begum (15) | Yusra Hussien (16) | Amal El-Wahabi (27) |
| | Salma Halane (17) | Khadija Dawood (30) |
| | Zahra Halane (17) | Shukee Begum (33) |
| | Aqsa Mahmood (19) | Tania Georgelas (33) |
| | Lena Mamoun Abdelgadir (19) | Zohra Dawood (33) |
| | Rajia Khanom (21) | Sugra Dawood (33) |
| | Khadijah Dare (22) | Sally Jones (45) |
| | Rowan Kamal Zine El Abidine (22) | Minera Khatum (53) |

In the 106 news articles that I analysed for this chapter, only twenty migrant women (and girls) who travelled to Syria or Iraq are identified by name. From the figure above, two key observations can be made in relation their ages. First and perhaps most obvious is that the number of those aged between 16-25 is equal to the number of those aged 25 and over. This suggests that the age bracket given by the intervention officer, which is repeated in multiple news articles, is not consistently accurate, nor is age a significant contributory factor in radicalisation (see, Chapman, Hobbs, Homan & Mahlouly et al, 2018: 6). As the UK news media relies on the 'young women' label,

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[14] While the phrase 'young women' is most commonly used in news articles, it is at times substituted with 'young British women' (TG13/2016); 'young Muslim women' (DM51/2015); 'young female jihadists' (TG04/2014); 'young girls' (TG09/2015); and 'young individuals' (BBC71/2015).

therefore, it is my contention that they construct a profile that is not reflective of the reality of radicalised women's diversity.

Furthermore, as the news articles group all of those named in the 16-25 age range together under the label 'young women', they make a troubling equivalency between the radicalisation process as it occurs in adolescents versus adults. Consider Kadiza Sultana (16) and Rowan Kamal Zine El Abidine (22): because both fit into the 16-25 age bracket, the language used in UK news articles constructs them as equally naïve, vulnerable and impressionable. This suggests an equivalency between Kadiza and Rowan's perceived susceptibility to radicalisation and their decision to migrate based on age, thereby implying that there is no apparent difference in the maturity and decision-making capabilities of a 16-year-old post-primary adolescent and a 22-year-old medical student.

This is contradicted in scientific research which has shown that although adolescents aged 16 and over might exhibit similar cognitive maturity to adults, their psychosocial capacities are likely to be less mature (Steinberg, Cauffman, Woolard & Graham et al, 2009: 583). Therefore, while adolescents aged 16 and over might possess 'abilities that permit logical reasoning about moral, social and interpersonal matters' that are similar to an adults ability to do the same (2009: 586), their capacities pertaining to 'impulse control, sensation-making, resistance to peer influence, future orientation and risk perception' are expected to be significantly less mature (2009: 592). By failing to differentiate between adolescents and adults, I argue that the UK news media underestimate the decision-making capabilities of migrant women who joined Daesh by likening them to the capacities of an adolescent.

Closely linked to depictions of naïve and impressionable 'young' women (and girls), are characterisations of their perceived lack of intelligence or ignorance, particularly in the context of 'Islamic texts, traditions and interpretations' (TG10/2015). Going back to Longman's article, the intervention officer asserts that radicalised women typically "know nothing about [Islam]" (BBC07/2016). Echoing this view, Sara Khan, the director of Inspire, explains that "the internet is awash with thousands of extremist websites – all claiming to speak in the name of religion", and as such it is possible that someone who "doesn't know their faith that much… won't be able to distinguish what groups like IS and other extremists are saying" (BBC51/2015). Katherine Brown is quoted in an

article for the BBC making a similar statement: "quotes from the Koran are woven into [the women's] accounts [but] there is very little sign of deep knowledge about the conflict itself, or indeed about Sharia law or Islam" (Brown, in BBC02/2014).

It is my contention that such statements construct a harmful and homogenising image of radicalised women as ignorant, suggesting that they do not (or could not) understand the dangers inherent in their decision to migrate and to support Daesh. If it is their youth and naivety that compels women (and girls) to seek out information about Islam, this part of the profile suggests that it is their ignorance and/or lack of education that ensures that they are drawn in by extremist narratives masked as religious texts. This is evidenced in UK news articles in which recruiters are portrayed as taking advantage of women by preying on their supposed ignorance to convince them of a 'black-and-white worldview, in which the ingroup [Daesh] becomes understood as wholly noble, righteous and oppressed, and the enemy [Western countries] as devious, cruel and domineering' (TG20/2015).

Reflective of traditional gendered stereotypes that cast women as innately naïve and irrational (see, Sjoberg, 2010; Gentry, 2019; see also my discussion in chapter two), UK news articles that rely on this profile of radicalised women tell readers that those known to have migrated were easily brainwashed and taken in by the 'utopian vision of caliphate life' that Daesh perpetuated (Milton-Edwards & Attia, 2017; Milton & Dodwell, 2018), because they lacked the intelligence and/or maturity to recognise the violent and harsh nature of the conflict that they would likely be exposed to in the region. This is further exemplified in news articles that claim that recruiters were able to persuade women that reports of sexual and gender-based violence in Syria and Iraq were largely 'exaggerated by the western media' (TG10/2015; SM04/2017), thereby insinuating that recruiters exploited women's perceived naivety and inability to recognise falsities to fuel their distrust of the West and to encourage their radicalisation.

The argument that radicalisation is made possible due to youth, ignorance and/or lack of education is not a new one (see also, Tahiri & Grossman, 2013; Angus, 2016). Ruth Manning and Courtney La Bau, for example, argue that 'the absence of critical thinking and digital literacy skills seems to enhance susceptibility to extremism' (2015: 12). Based on their analysis of the testimonies of ten men who overcame Islamist and far-

right extremism, the authors claim that radicalised persons 'consume and regurgitate [extremist] material without critically engaging with the underlying arguments' (2015: 12), because their lack of education prevents them from doing so effectively. Through an analysis of the educational histories of migrant women known to have travelled to Syria and/or Iraq, I assert that this is a simplistic generalisation and that its applicability in this context is questionable despite its prevalence in news articles that set out to explain how women from the UK became radicalised (see figure 5.2).

**Figure 5.2: Educational milestones reached by the migrant women named in the UK news media.**

| Educational attainment | Number of women (and girls) |
| --- | --- |
| Did not complete secondary education | 7 |
| Completed secondary education | 8 |
| Undertook further education | 6 |
| No known information | 5 |

The information highlighted in the figure 5.2. shows that of the twenty women named in the 106 news articles that I analysed, eight are known to have completed secondary-level education, with six of those subsequently choosing to enter further education including university and college level courses. This suggests that rather than lacking education, several of the women discussed excelled in their schooling. Shukee Begum from Manchester, for example, graduated with a law degree (DM23/2015); Lena Mamoun Abdelgadir and Rowan Kamal Zine El Abidine were studying medicine at the time of their migration (TG43/2015); and Aqsa Mahmood and Tereena Shakil both achieved grades sufficient enough to enable their acceptance to a university degree in radiography and a Hospitality HND course respectively (BBC02/2014; TG04/2014).
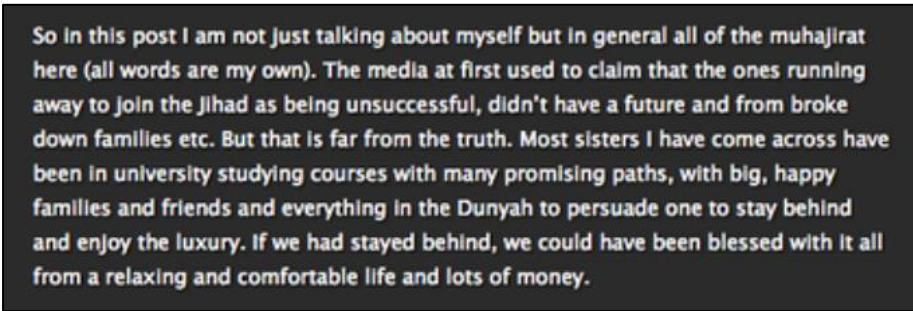
Even in the cases of those who did not complete their education, six out of the seven cited are said to have left school only as a means to facilitate their migration. Moreover, it is reported that up to the point that they left the United Kingdom, they had been achieving good grades: Zahra and Salm Halane, for example, reportedly had '28 GCSE's between them', and aspired to become doctors (BBC57/2015; DM07/2015; DM54/2014). Amira Abase, Shamima Begum and Kadiza Sultana, known as the 'Bethnal Green schoolgirls' (TG78/2015), are similarly depicted in UK news coverage as 'all-star GCSE pupils' (BBC68/2015). Furthermore, while there is no reported information about the formal education of five of the women named, evidence shows

that at least three attended religious classes throughout their adulthood. Sisters, Khadija, Zohra and Sugra Dawood, are depicted as having attended 'Arabic education classes' in Bradford (BBC19/2015; TG46/2015), where their classmate referred to them as 'very intelligent' (see, Halliday, Pidd & Elgot, 2015).

All of this shows that rather than being ignorant or uneducated, the radicalised women (and girls) named in the analysed news articles have diverse secular and religious educational histories. This is a view shared by the migrant women themselves in social media and blog postings. In an extract of a blog post by Aqsa Mahmood who travelled in Syria in 2013 (see image 5.1), she argues that contrary to media reports, in her experience, those who migrated typically left behind promising futures and university courses to join Daesh. Likewise, women identified on twitter as 'Al Britaniyaa' and 'Umm Irhab' challenge claims that migrant women are "stupid" victims (see image 5.2), and argue that rather than being "brainwashed" by radicals, they made a rational choice to migrate for religious purposes (see image 5.3).

Despite referencing details of the migrant women's educational histories and including their social media posts in the news coverage of Daesh, however, the UK news media largely discounts the relevancy of such information and ignores the voices of migrant women and the explanations that they have provided for their own radicalisation and migration. Based on this, it is my contention that the narrative of radicalisation constructed through UK news coverage of Daesh is incomplete, oversimplified and gender-stereotypical. Rooted in patriarchal ideologies that portray women in violent conflict as agentless victims, I argue that rather than educating the general public, the "knowledge" of radicalisation that has been constructed is likely to hinder their ability to understand the phenomenon and how it occurs, and to counter is effectively by calling for appropriate governmental strategies aimed at tackling it.

**Image 5.1: Blog post by Aqsa Mahmood (Hall, 2014).**



> So in this post I am not just talking about myself but in general all of the muhajirat here (all words are my own). The media at first used to claim that the ones running away to join the Jihad as being unsuccessful, didn't have a future and from broke down families etc. But that is far from the truth. Most sisters I have come across have been in university studying courses with many promising paths, with big, happy families and friends and everything in the Dunyah to persuade one to stay behind and enjoy the luxury. If we had stayed behind, we could have been blessed with it all from a relaxing and comfortable life and lots of money.

**Image 5.2: Al Britaniyaa (Hall, 2014).**

**Image 5.3: Umm Irhab (Hall, 2014).**





Alongside age and educational attainment, the final characteristic that the UK news media relies upon to construct a profile of radicalised women relates their personal histories. Going back to Longman's article, the Home Office intervention officer claims that radicalised women will have typically experienced difficult personal upbringings (BBC07/2015). While she does not elaborate on the types of difficulties that they might have experienced, an analysis of the demographic details set out in other news articles sheds light on a number of possibilities. These include: 1) a chaotic homelife due to complex family issues such as divorce and/or domestic abuse (BBC05/2016; BBC51/2015), 2) a lack of opportunities in education and/or employment and possible financial struggles (DM20/2017; DM36/2014), and/or, 3) bereavement due to the death of a close family member or friend (TG16/2015).

In this context, UK news representations suggest that women (or girls) who experience difficulties like those outlined, often feel empty, lonely and isolated (BBC70/2016; TG10/2015; TG16/2016; TG84/2015). Consequently, they are depicted as searching for 'something in their lives' (BBC07/2015), to improve their personal circumstances in a meaningful way, or to fill a void they perceive within themselves (BBC51/2015). The news articles argue that this increases women's vulnerability leaving them susceptible to 'grooming' by extremists who prey on any perceived emotional weakness and/or unfulfilled desire with tailored representations of life in the Caliphate (BBC57/2015; BBC70/2016; SN08/2015). To exemplify this, the news articles claim that if someone is isolated due to fractures in their family, extremists might describe the Caliphate as a "big happy family" (Khan, in BBC51/2015); or in cases where women feel empty or lonely, Daesh recruiters might make declarations of love and proposals of marriage (DM54/2014; TG04/2014; TG48/2016).

The claim that radicalised women (and girls) experienced difficult upbringings is problematic for several reasons. First, it reinforces the familiar gender paradigm of 'men-as-perpetrators' and 'women-as-victims (Strømmen, 2017), traditionally found in International Relations scholarship that constructs women as inherently passive and innocent beings who are always the victims of political violence and/or the pawns of its male perpetrators (see, Alison, 2004; see chapter two). Using language such as: naïve, vulnerable, and groomed (DM17/2015; SN08/2015; BBC57/2015), the UK news media reinforces a subordinating image of radicalised women that legitimises gendered social and behaviour expectations, and denies the existence and significance of radicalised women's agency by suggesting that they do not act based on their own convictions.

Second, through the 'difficult upbringings' narrative, radicalised men and women are differentiated in terms of their agency and their perceived culpability. Where women are depicted in the news media as being susceptible to radicalisation because of 'difficult upbringings' (BBC07/2015), men with similar personal backgrounds are frequently portrayed as simply 'making the wrong choices' due to 'anger and hot-headedness' (Pearson & Winterbotham, 2017: 65), or due to frustration based on their 'own societal positions… or that of their ethnic group' (Bakker & de Bont, 2016: 845). This means that men are ascribed agency in their radicalisation in a way that women are not. It also suggests that women are somehow 'less liable' for their actions and 'less dangerous' than their male counterparts, thus impeding the ability of the general public to understanding of the threat that radicalised women might pose.

Next, the 'difficult upbringing' narrative fails to reflect women's role as Daesh recruiters (see section 5.3). While the constructed profile assumes that women are radicalised by men, evidence shows that women have played an active role in encouraging other women to migrate (see, Hoyle, Bradford & Frenett, 2015: 33). Moreover, it appears that regardless of their initial point of contact, migrant women often reached out to other women to 'ascertain the realities of life in the caliphate' (Milton-Edwards & Attia, 2017), and to seek out practical advice prior to leaving the UK. Tareena Shakil, for example, is alleged to have decided to migrate after speaking to Sally Jones and Aqsa Mahmood, 'two key British women inside the Islamic State' (BBC05/2016). This means that rather than being radicalised and recruited by men, women were also recruiters, thus calling into question the 'men-as-perpetrators'/'women-as-victims' dichotomy that

the articles rely upon, and that is often perpetuated in traditional International Relations discourse (see, Strømmen, 2017; see also my discussion in chapter two).

Connected to this is the fetishized account of radicalisation that the 'difficult upbringing' narrative produces. Reflective of stereotypical Orientalist ideologies, as the UK news media claims that migrant women experience personal difficulties and ignores women recruiters, it facilitates the construction of an image of dangerous men who 'groom' young women and lure them to Syria and/or Iraq with declaration of love and promises of marriage (DM54/2014; TG04/2014). In perpetuating an 'unsavoury image' of jihadi men as 'morally bankrupt' deviants (Dagistanli & Grewal, 2016: 11), the news media reinforces problematic ideas about Muslim masculinities (Britton, 2019: 691), and traditional Orientalist discourses that construct 'Arab and Muslim culture' as Other as a means to justify Western intervention in the region (Dagistanli & Grewal, 2016: 131). This is particularly sharp because there is an Orientalist migrant dimension to UK news representations in this case because part of what underpins them is the fact that we are talking about Western women radicalised by Eastern men, a fact that is used to reinforce and legitimise the difference between the West and the Other.

A final issue with the 'difficult upbringing' narrative as it has been presented is that like the characteristics of the profile set out earlier in this section (age and educational history), it is not consistently borne out in the stories of known radicalised women. In fact, amongst the women named in the analysed news articles, only three women appear to fit this aspect of the profile with any degree of certainty. These include: Tareena Shakil, who reportedly experienced domestic violence at the hands of her ex-husband (BBC05/2016), Tania Georgelas, who alleges that she 'faced a lot of racism' in her youth that impacted both her upbringing and her mindset (Grafton-Green, 2017), and Sally Jones, who suffered sustained alcohol and drug abuse throughout her life, and experienced multiple tragedies which began early in her childhood with the death of her father, and continued into adulthood with the death of her partner (DM07/2015).

In the cases of other named women (see figure 5.1), there is either too little information to make a definitive determination about their personal background and its impact on their radicalisation, or the evidence that is available contradicts the established profile. Safiya Hussien, for example, describes her daughter, Yusra Hussien, as a "typical

teenager" who was bright, bubbly, engaged and loved by all those who knew her.[15] Lena Mamoun Abdelgadir, who was discussed earlier in this section, reportedly grew up in a financially stable home with a loving and caring family (Zambrana, Townsend & Graham-Harrison, 2015). Similarly, Aqsa Mahmood's parents claim that she grew up in a "happy home" filled with "love and affection" (BBC71/2015), and an affluency that provided her with plentiful opportunities (Blaker, 2015: 6). Based on these examples, I argue that the assertion that radicalised women typically come from unhappy, broken and/or poverty-stricken families is inaccurate (Peck, Speckhard & Jacuch, 2009: 78).

When considering the profile set out by Longman in its totality, it would be unsurprising if the general public were to assume a causal link between age, personal background and/or educational attainment and extremist radicalisation. It might even seem like common sense to readers to argue that those who appear to have 'nothing to lose' (in terms of familial connections and/or opportunities), and those who appear to not know any better (due to their age or lack of education), would be more susceptible to radicalisation (see, Berrebi, 2007: 1). If this were the case, one could plausibly argue that a 'reduction in poverty or an increase in educational attainment would meaningfully reduce [the lure] of international terrorism' (Krueger & Malečková, 2003: 119). The information presented in this section, however, largely contradicts any such link. Instead, it highlights that radicalised women come from diverse backgrounds and cannot be reduced to a single profile (Bakker & de Leede, 2015: 4).

It is my contention that the profile of radicalised women constructed in news discourse in which women's perceived youth, lack of education and difficult personal upbringings are listed as contributing factors, is designed not to explain the phenomenon, but to construct a feminised image of migrant women as young, naïve and helpless victims who didn't know any better and were taken advantage of and radicalised by malevolent and deviant Eastern men. This type of narrative enables UK news agencies to uphold deeply entrenched patriarchal assumptions that reinforce traditional representations of women as agentless, and to legitimise harmful Orientalist images of the Middle East

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[15] Quote from an article by Channel 4: 'Please come back- parents of missing Bristol girl', October 2014, https://www.channel4.com/news/bristol-missing-radicalised-girl-islamic-state-syria-turkey. 08/11/2019.

as a ruthless and despotic place, images that have historically been used to justify military intervention in the region (see, Owens, 2010; Skjelsboek & Smith, 2011).

The implications of this type of representation, some of which have been discussed already, can be understood through a consideration of the perception of radicalisation that it shapes for news consumers. This perception, which is based on incomplete and gender-stereotypical "knowledge", is damaging not only because it fails to develop a full picture of the conflict and all of its participants, but because it contributes to the construction of an inherently simplistic understanding of how and why radicalisation occurs through which meaningful strategies aimed at countering it cannot effectively be established. The pervasiveness and harmfulness of the patriarchal and Orientalist ideologies upon which this perception is built, is further compounded by the fact that it is not confined to discussions of radicalisation, it is also evident in news articles that shift focus to migrant women's perceived motivations for traveling to Daesh-held cities.

5.2.    Reasons for Migration.

Connected to discussions of radicalisation is the UK news media's reporting on the key motivators that purportedly contributed to the decision made by 145 women from the United Kingdom to migrate. The motivators highlighted in the news articles that I analysed (see figure 5.3), can be separated into two categories: 1) pull factors, also known as positive incentives: promises of marriage, adventure, belonging and status (Elshimi, Pantucci, Lain & Salman, 2018: 7), or 2) push factors which are reported to be rooted in supposed grievances against Western society: feelings of persecution and/or oppression based mainly on religious identity. From the figure below, it is clear that although several motivators are recognised in UK news discourse, some of which will be discussed in section 5.3.2, the idea that women migrated because they wanted to become wives of jihadi fighters and mothers to the next generation of fighters, is the dominant frame and as such forms the basis of this section.

**Figure 5.3: Motivating factors attributed to female migrants in the UK news media.**

| Motivators | BBC % | Daily Mail % | Sky News % | The Guardian % | Total % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Use of the 'jihadi bride' label or romance/marriage as goal. | 65 | 52 | 73 | 58 | 60 |
| Community, sisterhood or a sense of belonging as a goal. | 18 | 5 | 9 | 38 | 20 |
| To build an Islamic caliphate based on Sharia law. | 41 | 24 | 18 | 42 | 33 |
| Oppression / discrimination of Muslim population. | 18 | 19 | 9 | 35 | 23 |
| Sense of duty to the Caliphate / to wage jihad incl. violence. | 18 | 28 | 9 | 31 | 24 |
| Freedom from the west or empowerment / feminism. | 12 | 19 | 9 | 23 | 17 |

Reinforcing the view that women migrated to Daesh-held cities in Syria and/or Iraq to marry, the news media coined the now-famous and sensationalist 'Jihadi bride' label (BBC67/2015; DM23/2015; SN06/2017), which has become so pervasive that it is frequently used in the headlines of UK news articles to introduce migrant women to readers: 'Jihadi bride Aqsa Mahmood' (BBC68/2015), 'Jihadi brides Zahra and Salma Halane' (DM07/2015), 'British-born ISIS bride Tania Georgelas' (DM55/2017), 'Brides-to-be: the three Bethnal Green schoolgirls' (DM50/2015).[16] In using the 'Jihadi bride' label in this way, the UK news media ensures that women's supposed 'fervent desire to be married' is the first thing that readers learn about them (Martini, 2018: 467). This means that regardless of whether other potential motivators are alluded to, the idea that they migrated because they wanted to marry 'a perfect Muslim' (DM07/2015), or a 'heroic fighter' (TG04/2014), with whom they could live a domesticated lifestyle and raise a family (DM07/2015), is cemented in the 'public consciousness in the UK' (Zarabadi & Ringrose, 2018: 86).

Coupled with the continual use of the term 'Jihadi bride', the UK news media reinforces the message that marriage was a primary motivator in several ways. When discussing their actions prior to migrating, for example, the news articles that I analysed argue, without specific evidence, that radicalised women flooded the social media accounts

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[16] While the 'jihadi bride' label is dominant in the analysed articles; 'jihadist brides' (BBC01/2015), 'European Brides' (DM50/2015), and 'ISIS brides' (DM55/2017; TG10/2015), are also sporadically used.

of jihadis with declaration of love and proposals of marriage: 'the online accounts of male fighters [were] bombarded by requests from women wanting to be their wives' (BBC02/2014). Several of the news articles claim that even in online conversations in which women discussed what they should pack for their journey, they were consumed by thoughts of marriage. While the articles mention practical items such as: 'a mobile phone' (TG74/2016), and 'a pair of boots…for the freezing winters' (BBC67/2015), they largely draw the reader's attention to items like make-up, jewellery, underwear and even epilators (BBC67/2015; TG74/2016), and suggest that such items are necessary for women who are soon to be married (BBC67/2015).

To further legitimise this narrative, the UK news media also selectively focuses its reporting on migrant women known to have married shortly after their arrival in Daesh-held territories: 'Manchester twins Zahra and Salma Halane… both married IS fighters' (BBC01/2015), '[Tania Georgelas] who married America's most senior member of ISIS' (DM55/2017), '[Aqsa Mahmood] married a jihadist' (TG04/2014), 'all four of the girls (Kadiza Sultana, Shamima Begum, Amira Abase and another unnamed girl from Bethnal Green) became "jihadi brides"' (TG48/2015). In focusing on marital status in this way, the UK news media implies that the simple fact that many women did indeed marry Daesh militants is ample justification for their claim that 'romance and marriage' was their specific goal from the outset (SN08/2015).

Similar to the explanations of radicalisation discussed in the previous section, this is a simplistic portrayal of women's motives that communicates problematic patriarchal and Orientalist knowledge to the general public. This is because the central tenet to the 'Jihadi bride' narrative is the claim that women are biologically predisposed to becoming wives and mothers (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007: 180), but that the idea that they should do so in caliphate territories is shaped in them by malevolent and deviant Muslim men (Loken & Zelenz, 2017: 17). Specifically, it is reported that male jihadis preyed on the women's perceived naivety, loneliness and insecurities, and perceived 'innate' domestic and maternal nature (BBC05/2015), to manipulate and lure them to the region using the 'promise of meaningful romance [and family] as a prize for making the journey' (Saltman & Smith, 2015: 16).

To emphasise this, the UK news media systematically deploys what Alice Martini terms 'passive language' (2018: 466). This is language that categorises the women's

decision-making as submissive and non-violent such as: 'grooming' (SN04/2017), 'lured' (DM90/2015), 'brainwashed' (DM26/2017), 'manipulated' (TG36/2015), 'misled' (BBC41/2015), and 'exploited' (BBC51/2015). In using this language, the news articles discount immediately any possibility that the decision radicalised women made to migrate was based on 'political and rational calculations' (Carter Center, 2017: 2). Rather, they insinuate that had it not been for the influence of male jihadis, women likely would not have migrated (see, Pearson & Winterbotham, 2017: 65). In using such language, migrant women are constructed as the agentless victims of Daesh militants who are portrayed as 'masterful manipulators' (TG36/2015).

This view is cemented in news articles that depict women's alleged shock at the living conditions in areas of Syria and/or Iraq under Daesh control. In such articles, it is argued that it was only after their arrival in the region that migrant women began to understand the 'grim' and 'harsh' realities of life in the Caliphate, leading some to express a desire to return home: 'Tareena Shakil… escaped back to the UK after realising that she had made a terrible mistake by travelling to its stronghold in Raqqa' (DM54/2016). In the cases of those who remained in the region, the news articles tell their readers that despite 'yearning to leave' (TG35/2016), women were either unable or unwilling to do so due to fear: 'Kadiza Sultana, who went to join Isis in Syria in 2015… was fearful of the risks involved in trying to rescue her from Islamic State and could not "make the leap of faith" needed to try to escape; (TG74/2016).

In this scenario, narratives previously constructed in relation to radicalisation in which women are described as having 'fled', 'disappeared' and/or 'ran away' to Daesh held-cities (BBC34/2015; DM45/2015; SN23/2017; TG51/2015), transform suddenly into an abduction narrative in which women are constructed similarly to the Yazidi women discussed in chapter four, as helpless victims of Daesh militants who are being held against their will (see, Sjoberg, 2018). Despite offering specific evidence of this in the cases of three migrant women, only two of whom are from the UK (DM45/2015; TG54/2016; TG74/2016), the news articles that I analysed make troubling generalisations to communicate this representation to the general public: 'the majority of women who have fled to Syria… end up disillusioned with life under Isis' (TG74/2016), but found that they had 'no way back' (TG35/2016).

To readers this would seem to confirm the theory that migrant women (and girls) were so effectively brainwashed and/or misled by idealised and romanticised 'pictures of an Islamic utopia' that were fed to them by men (TG10/2015), that they did not (or through ignorance could not) comprehend the 'serious ramifications' inherent in living in a 'war-zone' (BBC41/2015). This means that rather than being constructed as full, active and willing participants of jihadist group, migrant women are portrayed in a stereotypically gendered way as naïve and irrational beings for travelling to Syria and/or Iraq without fully understanding the harsh realities that awaited them in conflict affected areas, and as 'non-credible terrorists' because they did not wish to stay (Martini, 2018: 467).

It is my contention that this representation constructs a confusing narrative for readers in which migrant women are portrayed as less accountable for their actions than their male counterparts because their decision to migrate is described as being made from an agentless position (see previous section on radicalisation), and less dangerous because they quickly became disillusioned with life in the Caliphate and as such were less likely to contribute to Daesh's violent agenda (TG35/2016; TG54/2016). Rather than seeking to explore any political and/or religious commitment that migrant women might have, the narrative constructed by the UK news media implies that migrant women should be pitied rather than feared because they were victims not only of their 'biological destinies' (Gentry & Sjoberg, 2015: 72), but also of their own naivety which enabled them to be deceived by militants.

Part of the difficulty with this representation is that it is often contradicted by migrant women themselves through their social media postings prior to and after migration. For example, before leaving the United Kingdom, evidence shows that several of those known to have migrated shared Daesh propaganda that contained 'brutal images of Sunni women and children killed in Syria and Gaza' (Van Leauvan, Mazurana & Gordan, 2016: 109), and depictions of the 'constant bombardment of airstrikes' in the region by coalition forces (TG74/2016). This suggests that rather than believing that they were 'going to the land of milk and honey', women who interacted with Daesh materials understood that 'they [were] going to a conflict zone in which they [would] have to make great sacrifices' (Milton-Edwards & Attia, 2017). This is further exemplified in the women's social media postings after their migration in which they dispute UK news media representations that they wish to return home, and express joy at living in the Caliphate (see images 5.4-5.5).
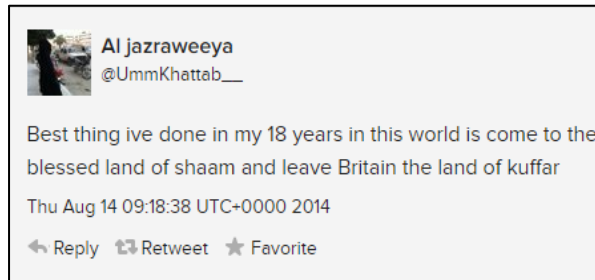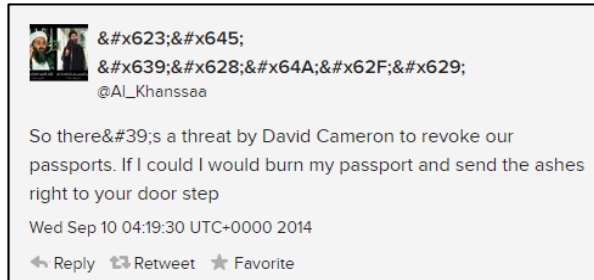
**Image 5.4: Al Jazraweeya (Hall, 2015).**

Al jazraweeya
@UmmKhattab__

Best thing ive done in my 18 years in this world is come to the blessed land of shaam and leave Britain the land of kuffar

Thu Aug 14 09:18:38 UTC+0000 2014

↩ Reply  ⟲ Retweet  ★ Favorite

**Image 5.5: Al_Khansaa (Hall, 2015)**

&#x623;&#x645;
&#x639;&#x628;&#x64A;&#x62F;&#x629;
@Al_Khanssaa

So there&#39;s a threat by David Cameron to revoke our passports. If I could I would burn my passport and send the ashes right to your door step

Wed Sep 10 04:19:30 UTC+0000 2014

↩ Reply  ⟲ Retweet  ★ Favorite

A further issue with the 'Jihadi bride' narrative is that it constructs a sexualised image of women's migration in which patriarchal and Orientalist ideologies remain visible. By reducing women's motivation to the pursuit of marriage, the UK news media tells its readers that those who journeyed to Syria and/or Iraq were driven to do so by their own 'innate' sexual and romantic urges (see, Martini, 2018: 467; Carter Center, 2017: 2). In a news article by the Guardian, for example, it is reported that to entice women (and girls) to the region, jihadi men presented themselves online and in propaganda like a sexually appealing 'boy-band accessorised with beards and semi-automatic weapons' (TG20/2015). Constructing a sensationalist and patriarchal representation, this implies to readers that migrant women can be understood similarly to 'hormone-driven adolescents' who fall in lust with the popular boy-band of the day (see, Martini, 2018: 470), and suggests that Daesh understood that the best method of recruitment for women was to appeal to their supposed 'sexual appetite' (2018: 470).

Coupled with the continual use of the word 'bride', this aids in constructing a sexualised narrative of radicalisation and migration reminiscent of traditional Orientalist discourse in which an 'association between the Orient and sex' is emphasised (Said, 1978: 188). In this context, migrant women are depicted as victims of their own biological desires (see, Zarabadi & Ringrose, 2018: 86), while male militants are cast in an Orientalist light as the sexual deviants who exploit those desires (see, Owens, 2010; Jacoby, 2015; Dagistanli & Grewal, 2016; see also my discussion in chapter two). Similar to representations of Yazidi women who were sexually victimised by Daesh (see chapter four), migrant women are thus depicted as the 'creatures of male power fantasy' (Said, 1978: 207), and/or as the 'sexual pawn[s]' of male jihadists' (Zarabadi & Ringrose, 2018: 86). Unlike Yazidi women were who raped and brutalised against their will, however, the 'jihadi bride' label constructs migrant women as 'more or less stupid, and

above all… willing' (Said, 1978: 207), though their willingness is explained away as stemming from immaturity and impressionability (see, Jacoby, 2015: 534).

UK news agencies perpetuate migrant women's perceived victimhood through the use of language, such as: 'groomed' and 'lured' (BBC70/2016; DM90/2015; SN04/2017; TG78/2015), arguing that militants used the women's supposed naivety and 'innate' sexual desires to entice and seduce them to the region. Through this type of language, Daesh's recruitment strategies are constructed as similar to those one might expect from 'paedophiles and sexual predators' (Bjørgum, 2016: 97). This image is cemented in news articles in which Daesh recruiters as described as 'befriend[ing] vulnerable targets online' (BBC70/2016), where they could shower them with romantic messages (TG10/2015), convince them to 'isolate themselves from family and friends', and 'feed them [extremist] ideologies' (BBC70/2016). This representation is explicitly evidenced in news articles that claim that despite believing that they were joining Daesh, migrant women were actually being recruited as 'sex slaves' (DM90/2015; TG56/2015). This provides another avenue through which the UK news media can lessen the blame placed on Western women by suggesting that like Yazidi women, they were merely the victims of male sexual deviancy (see my discussion on Orientalism in chapter two).

This predatory narrative is problematic not only because it is rooted in patriarchal and Orientalist ideologies, but because it is not consistently accurate. In other words, it is based on the false assumption already discussed in the radicalisation section of this chapter, that devalues migrant women as impressionable and agentless youngsters whose youth, naivety and desire to wed were central factors in their radicalisation (BBC02/2015; DM85/2015; SN08/2015; TG36/2015). As I have already established, however, women in their thirties, forties and fifties also migrated (see figure 5.1), some of whom were already married. The women of the Mannan family, for example, travelled to the region alongside their husbands (DM17/2015), while Zohra, Khadija and Sugra, three sisters from Bradford, left their husbands behind (BBC19/2015; TG46/2015). Give that plentiful stories of this nature exist, stories that contradict the generalised view that migrant women from the UK were all hormonal teenagers 'attracted to, or groomed by, bad boy Muslim extremists' (Khalil, 2019), one must question why news articles continue to rely upon and to perpetuate the 'Jihadi bride' narrative?

In it my contention that through selective reporting, the UK news media highlight cases that can be portrayed as fitting the 'Jihadi bride' narrative in more detail and with more frequency than those that seem to contradict it. I argue that this is part of an effort to construct a sensationalist and homogenising image for readers that encourages them to think of all migrant women as 'Jihadi brides', and to associate them, therefore, with all of the connotations that the label has come to encompass: that migrant women from the UK regardless of age and/or marital status, were all 'naïve victims' whose actions were ruled by gender, and by the dangerous and deviant men who used their gender to manipulate them. Reflective of traditional patriarchal and/or Orientalist ideologies, this narrative is problematic because it represents women aligned with Daesh as wholly non-political and agentless, and contributes to the Othering of the Middle East by reinforcing traditional Western ideas about men in the Middle East, and about the region more broadly (see my discussion on Orientalism in chapter two).

Furthermore, it contributes to the construction of incomplete and harmful knowledge about migrant women that represents them as 'neither dangerous nor violent' (Martini, 2018: 466), and situates them instead in a stereotypically 'powerless position' (Paechter, 2016: 256), as 'victims/objects [who are] in need of protection' from predatory Daesh recruiters (Jacoby, 2015: 529). It tells readers that migrant women were innocent bystanders in their own radicalisation, and that they held no political and/or religious beliefs that motivated their decisions. Based on this, I argue that the general public engaging with such discourse is likely to assume that migrant women lacked the 'necessary agency and political engagement to want to support or join the Islamic state' (Cottee, 2017), thereby painting a partial picture of the conflict and its participants, a picture that prevents readers from recognising the roots of the conflict and the political, ideological and social factors that led to it, and the significance of migrant women's roles in the Caliphate.

## 5.3.    The Role of the Female Jihadist.

Given the pervasiveness of the 'jihadi bride' narrative in UK news coverage of Daesh and the migrant women aligned with them, it is perhaps unsurprising that the primary role attributed to them in Daesh-held territory is depicted as being 'a good wife to [their]

jihadi husbands… and to become a mother to the next generation of jihadism' (BBC03/2015). This role, which is portrayed as non-political and passive, is emphasised in the news articles that I analysed through reference to a document that was purportedly written by members of the Al-Khansaa Brigade, a 'women-only vigilante force' associated with Daesh (Khelghat-Doost, 2016: 24). This 'manifesto' titled *Women in the Islamic State*, was originally published on jihadist forums in Arabic in early 2015 (BBC65/2015; DM07/2015; SN65/2015; TG08/2015), but was later translated into English and picked up by the global media.

Portrayed as a 'guide to life under Islamic State' for women (TG08/2015), and a 'recruitment tool' (SN65/2015), the UK news media describes it is a 'chilling document' (DM07/2015), that provides an insight into what 'life [is like] for a female jihadist living amongst the extremists of Islamic State' (BBC65/2015). Despite the document's lengthy nature and its coverage of a wide range of topics pertaining to women's roles and duties in the region, the UK news media focuses almost exclusively on three specific topics: women's domestic roles as wives and mothers, gender segregation in the region, and the strict laws governing women's appearance. In their discussion of these topics, the news articles suggest that women associated with Daesh are expected to live as 'solely domestic creatures (Winter, 2015: 11), and to fulfil a passive and supportive role that is portrayed in the news articles as peripheral and politically insignificant (TG18/2016; TG52/2015).

Beginning with the view that migrant women's primary role in Daesh-held areas of Syria and Iraq was 'to marry a jihadi' (DM07/2015), the news articles quote the manifesto as declaring that "woman was created to populate the Earth just as man was… But, as God wanted it to be, she was made from Adam and for Adam" (SN65/2015). According to the UK news media, the publication claims that there is "no responsibility greater for [women and girls] than that of being a wife to her husband" (SN65/2015), which is why it is said to be 'considered legitimate for a girl to be married at the age of nine… [and suggested that] most pure girls will be married by 16 or 17, while they are still young and active' (TG08/2015). In this role, news articles argue that women are directed by the manifesto to 'live a completely "sedentary" lifestyle… at the service of men, who are described as their masters' (DM07/2015), and to 'bear… their children' (BBC65/2015). This means that any contribution that women make to the Caliphate is depicted as being 'from behind closed doors' (BBC65/2015).

Compounding this narrative, the news articles report that the manifesto sets out only three situations in which it is permissible for a woman to leave her home. Included in these 'exceptional circumstances' are: 1) 'to wage jihad when there are no men available' (TG08/2015), 2) if they are 'doctors or teachers' (TG08/2015), and 3) if they are pursuing education (SN65/2015; TG08/2015). Even in these situations, however, women are depicted as being heavily regulated. As doctors or teachers, for example, it is reported that while certain women are permitted to leave their homes to fulfil such duties, they "must keep strictly to sharia guidelines" which include gender segregation (TG08/2015). Likewise in relation to education women and girls are said to be restricted in terms of what they can study and at what age. Despite arguing that Daesh do not "support illiteracy, backwardness or ignorance" (TG08/2015), the manifesto limits education to those aged between nine and fifteen (BBC65/2015), and reduces the desired curriculum to 'religious studies… and Sharia law' (SN65/2015), as well as 'skills like textiles and knitting, basic cooking… and more manual skills, especially those related to raising children' (TG08/2015).

Finally, the news articles that report on the manifesto consistently reference women's expected appearance as they fulfil their 'fundamental functions' as supportive wives and mothers in a domestic setting (BBC65/2015). Specifically, they quote the manifesto as saying that 'beauty parlours and shops selling fashionable clothes… are both instruments of the devil designed to encourage women to spend vast amounts of money to change God's design' and as such should be avoided (SM07/2015). Expanding on this, news stories argue that the manifesto explicitly forbids women in the region from wearing fashionable clothes, from having 'things hanging from [their] ears [and other places]' and from having 'hair shaved in some places and not in others' (SN65/2015). Instead, women are purportedly directed to remain 'hidden and veiled' (DM07/2015; SN65/2015), particularly in public settings where the manifesto demands that they remain 'fully covered' to prevent 'their humiliation' (DM07/2015).

While the reporting on these facts is technically accurate in the context of the manifesto, the way in which they are reported is problematic. First, it is selective. For example, in discussions of the situations in which women are supposedly permitted to inhabit public spaces, each of the articles focus only on the three so-called exceptional circumstances detailed above. What they fail to explain, however, is that as the manifesto sets out these circumstances it makes clear that necessary excursions like

hospitalisation, day-to-day activities, and recreational pursuits like travelling and/or visiting with friends and family are not included because these are "customary" activities for women (Winter, 2015: 22). Given that these details are laid out in the same paragraph as the 'exceptional circumstances' in the manifesto (2015: 22), it seems likely that they were purposefully excluded in news discourse because they devalue the message that the reporting is attempting to convey: that women who travel to the region are forced into domestic isolation (TG35/2016).

Next, the reporting on the manifesto is sensationalist. This is evident when considering the topics that were singled out as newsworthy, specifically those that seemingly direct women to 'cover their bodies and faces and live in seclusion' (TG20/2015). As well as being potentially shocking to UK audiences, thus compelling interest and increasing viewership, it seems likely that these topics were intentionally addressed because they help to construct a traditionally Orientalist image of 'Muslim women' as the victims of a patriarchal 'Islamist tradition' (Mahmood, 2005: xii), thereby justifying the question often asked by the UK news media: why would 'western women [who] are liberated and free from gender constraints' (Scharff, 2011: 130), choose to travel to a region where their subordination and oppression seems certain? For instance, the Guardian states:

> It is difficult to comprehend why young women who have been raised in the west and enjoyed the benefits of women's rights would want to leave all the equality behind and migrate to a society in which they face the possibility of sexual servitude and oppression (TG56/2015).

Contributing to the stereotypical 'Othering' of 'Islamic cultures and countries' (Scharff, 2011: 130), portraying them as 'bad' and/or 'backward' in relation to 'West-orientated countries' (Haldrup, Koefoed & Simonsen, 2006: 179), this type of questioning is problematic because it constructs knowledge about women's experiences of Islam 'exclusively from a western point of view' (Scharff, 2011: 130). In other words, the news articles use language and ideas associated with Western feminist thought to portray 'Islam [as] innately and immutably oppressive to women' (Ahmed, 1992: 152), and to construct the thought that Western women would choose a life of oppression as unthinkable. The articles reconcile this by describing migrant women (and girls) as being 'forced' and/or 'brainwashed' into accepting domestic roles and justify their

questioning by reporting that they ultimately end up being miserable in the region due to their subservient socio-political position (BBC01/2015; DM07/2015; TG52/2015).

Women and girls who migrated to Daesh-held territory are thus depicted as lacking agency and being unwillingly subjugated by 'patriarchal customs and practices' antithetical to those they experienced in the UK (Mahmood, 2005: 189). However, this ignores the claim made in the same articles that the manifesto was produced and published by members of the Al-Khansaa brigade (BBC65/2015; DM07/2015; TG08/2015). Described in news discourse as a 'female-only militia' (DM36/2014), this brigade is said to have been 'set up by a British woman' (BBC02/2014), and to have up to '60 British nationals' amongst its membership (DM07/2015). Based on these details I argue that if it is indeed true that the manifesto was written by members of this brigade and it is also true that this group includes 'British female jihadis' within its ranks and senior positions (DM36/2014; DM54/2014), then it seems reasonable to assume that rather than being 'frustrated' by their supposed marginal role (BBC01/2015; TG52/2015), or forced to endure 'disturbing' gender-restrictions (DM07/2015), at least some migrant women from the UK actively advocated for and championed such positions.

This links to the third difficulty that I perceive to be evident in news media reporting on the manifesto and the role of migrant women more broadly: the devaluation of the importance of wifehood and motherhood to Daesh's overall agenda. Despite acknowledging that Daesh undertook an 'explicit recruitment drive' aimed at women (TG04/2014), the UK news media suggests that this was simply for their 'reproductive powers' (Yuval-Davis, 1996: 18). In this capacity, women are depicted as the oppressed victims of male militants who force them into domestic isolation and used them only as a means through which they could reproduce. This view is perhaps best exemplified in an article by the BBC in which Mia Bloom from the University of Massachusetts is quoted as saying that 'women are seen as little more than "baby factories" in [Daesh's] desire to populate the new "purist" Islamic State' (BBC02/2014). While the same article depicts this statement as provocative, it does not condemn or dispute it. In fact, the same message is implicitly conveyed in news discourse using passive language that paints women as being 'groomed' (SN04/2017; TG24/2016) and 'lured' (SN13/2017; TG26/2015) to the region to give birth to the next generation (BBC03/2015; TG04/2014; TG18/2016).

I do not argue in this study against the assertion that women's ability to reproduce members of the Islamic Caliphate was likely part of the reason that they were recruited and/or decided to migrate. Rather I argue that it is problematic to assume, first, that only women were recruited to grow the Caliphate, thereby ignoring that 'immigration' in general (of both men and women) would contribute to the achievement of this goal to some extent (Yuval-Davis, 1996: 18), and, second, that wifehood and motherhood are passive, sexually oppressive and subordinating roles (DM90/2015; TG56/2015). Focusing on the latter point, there is plentiful evidence in the social media postings of migrant women that contradicts such messaging (see images 5.6–5.8). In social media posts, wifehood and motherhood are depicted as 'divine duty' in the Caliphate (Winter, 2015: 18), and glorified as high-status and honoured positions for women (TG20/2015) through which women reportedly received to new homes with no rent or bills to pay, and free groceries and medical help (DM85/2015; SN04/2017).
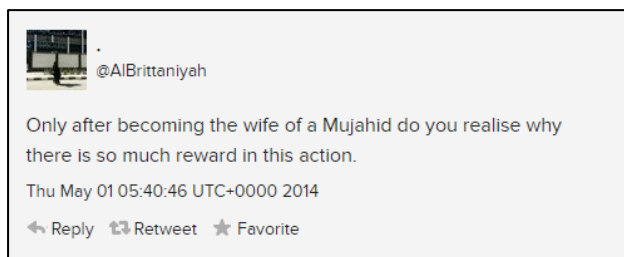
**Image 5.6: Al Brittaniyah (Hall, 2015).**



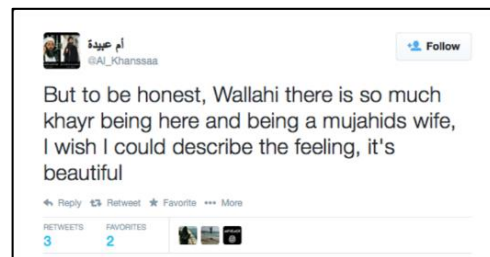**Image 5.7: Al Khanssaa (Hall, 2015).**



**Image 5.8: Aqsa Mahmood (Saltman & Smith, 2015).**



> [I]n these lands we are rewarded for our sacrifices involved in our Hijrah for example one is by receiving Ghanimah [war booty]. And know that honestly there is something so pleasurable to know that what you have has been taken off from the Kuffar [non-believers] and handed to you personally by Allah swt as a gift. Some of the many things include kitchen appliances from fridges, cookers, ovens, microwaves, milkshake machines etc, hoovers and cleaning products, fans and most importantly a house with free electricity and water provided to you due to the Khilafah and no rent included.[57]

In Daesh publications, the centrality of motherhood to Daesh's overall agenda and the significant responsibilities that are attached to this role are further emphasised. In the 11th issue of *Dabiq* (a Daesh produced magazine) in a section titled *To Our Sisters*, a woman named Umm Sumayyah Al-Muhajirah discusses motherhood as a 'fierce battle between truth and falsehood' in which women rely on their 'patience, faithfulness, and steadfastness' and their 'knowledge' to 'give [their] children a righteous upbringing'

(Dabiq, 2015: 43-45). Speaking to her 'Muslim sister[s]', the author of this article implores women to understand 'the enormity of the responsibility that [they] carry' because they are the mothers of 'lions and lionesses… the teacher[s] of generations and the producers of men' (2015: 43-44). This means that beyond simply birthing children, mothers are the primary source of children's understanding of Islam and as such play a vital role in developing and advancing religious customs, values and practices and preparing their 'lion cubs' for jihad (2015: 45).

This depiction of a mother's role in Daesh territory is reflected and expanded upon in the ninth issue of *Rumiyah* (another publication association with Daesh). In this article it is argued that mothers teach Islamic religious principles to children, they ensure that children learn to 'speak the Arabic language' accurately, and they reinforce the 'love for fighting for the cause of Allah' (2017: 19-21). This means that rather than being used to reproduce the members of the Caliphate by physically birthing children, migrant women who became mothers in Daesh-held territory also reproduced the boundaries of the Caliphate by acting as active transmitters and producers of its culture, religion and language (see also, Yuval Davis & Anthias, 1989: 7).

It also alludes to mothers playing an important role in its military aspirations by reproducing potential militants and providing them with the knowledge required to participate in jihad (Dabiq 11, 2015: 45). All of this suggests that far from being an oppressive and politically insignificant role in the region, motherhood in particular was integral to the construction and survival of the Caliphate that Daesh intended to build, thus placing women in a powerful and central position. This means that even if women's roles are limited to motherhood/wifehood, which I argue is incorrect, that subject position is more complex than what is allowed for within the news articles' understanding. This must be recognised if we are to understand the extent and significance of women's agency and their contributions to Daesh's political goals.

The final issue with the news articles that quote the manifesto relates to their portrayal of seemingly fixed gender roles. Despite reporting that the manifesto was not officially sanctioned by Daesh (TG08/2015), and that it was likely designed as a recruitment tool (BBC65/2015), the UK news media represents its contents as a factual account of life in the region for all migrant women despite plentiful evidence to the contrary. From the social media accounts of migrant women, it is clear that they often played

roles beyond the private sphere of the home, including roles that directly aided Daesh. Two such roles are discussed in the remainder of this section: women as enforcers of Daesh 'law' (section 5.3.1), and women as recruiters and propagandists (section 5.3.2). While many of the news articles that I analysed allude to such roles in their reporting, as we will see in the next sections, they are largely downplayed, thereby dismissing the agency of migrant women and constructing incomplete knowledge.

### 5.3.1. Women as Enforcers of Daesh 'Law'.

Despite relying on the manifesto discussed above to paint a picture of life in the region, the news articles that I analysed largely dismiss the agency of those who authored it: the Al-Khansaa Brigade. Described as an 'all-female police force' (DM54/2014), the Al-Khansaa Brigade is said to have patrolled Daesh-held cities and covertly monitored the behaviour of citizens to ensure their adherence to the strict 'sharia law' set out by Daesh (BBC02/2014; DM70/2015; SN52/2015), thereby contributing to the jihadist group's efforts to build and sustain their caliphate. According to the UK news media, a position in the Al-Khansaa Brigade required approximately 'four weeks of weapons training' (SN52/2015), and came with a salary amounting to between £70 and £100 per month (DM54/2014; DM70/2015; DM85/2015).

In terms of their duties, the UK news media reports that women associated with the Brigade took advantage of the 'head-to-toe niqabs' worn in Syria and Iraq to 'operate quite literally under cover' as they spied on local populations (DM54/2014). In particular, they are depicted as 'posing as housewives and mingling in the crowds to listen for any dissent' (DM85/2015), where they could also assess whether local women were adhering to Daesh strict codes (BBC01/2015). Contrary to the dominant portrayals of migrant women as passive mothers and wives, it is reported in some of the news articles that I analysed that those participating in the Al-Khansaa Brigade often carried out 'harsh punishments' against perceived wrongdoers (BBC01/2015), including: 'savage beatings' (DM70/2015), 'whipping people for not wearing the right clothing' (Katherine Brown, in BBC01/2015), and using various tools such as a 'spiked clamp device called a biter' (DM09/2014; DM64/2017).

While each of the four news agencies analysed in my thesis report similar details about the Al-Khansaa Brigade, news articles for the Daily Mail express an explicit interest in their activities and as such outline further details. Specifically, the Daily Mail reports that as well as inflicting violent beatings and lashings (DM54/2014), women associated with the group 'order[ed] executions' and 'manag[ed] brothels where thousands of [abducted women and girls were] believed to be imprisoned and raped daily' (DM70/2015). Based on these details, the Daily Mail paints a picture of notoriously brutal oppressors (DM70/2015; DM54/2014; DM74/2017), who both facilitated and participated in physical and sexual violence and as such were a 'key part of ISIS's terrifying image' (DM58/2015). This view is emphasised through the inclusion of images of women who appear to be aiming assault weapons and giving the one-fingered salute that has become synonymous with Daesh (see images 5.9-5.10).

**Image 5.9: Al-Khansaa Brigade with weapons (TG08/2015)**

**Image 5.10: Al-Khansaa Brigade, Daesh salute (DM54/2014)**

Despite all of the women associated with the Al-Khansaa Brigade being 'fully veiled' making it difficult to 'identify individuals' (DM95/2015), reporting by the UK news media alleges that 'as many as 60 British nationals' were members (DM54/2014). Eight of

the twenty migrant women named in the news articles that I analysed are linked to the group (see figure 5.1). These include: Zahra and Salma Halane – 'Zahra and Salma… are believed to have joined al-khansa' (DM54/2014), Khadijah Dare – 'another Briton believed to be involved with the al-khansa brigade is Lewisham-born Khadijah Dare' (DM54/2014), Aqsa Mahmood – 'a key figure [of the al-khansaa brigade is believed] to be Aqsa Mahmood, 20, of Glasgow' (DM36/2014), Sally Jones – 'the al-khansaa brigades… which are thought to include several British women including ex rocker Sally Jones' (DM58/2015), and Shamima Begum, Amira Abase and Kadiza Sultana – 'were reported to have been indoctrinated by al-khansaa' (SN06/2017).

Based on this reporting, it would be reasonable for readers to infer that at least some of the women who migrated from the UK actively contributed to Daesh's violent political agenda. In an effort to avoid this interpretation of their activities, however, the UK news media dispels representations that allude to agency by tempering stories of migrant women's violence with dismissive and stereotypically patriarchal language. For instance, in their initial depictions of the Al-Khansaa Brigade UK news articles add prefixes such as 'women only' (BBC01/2015, 'female-only' (DM36/2014), and 'all-female' (BBC02/2014; DM85/2015; SN06/2017) as a means to emphasise the gender of those purported to be members and to differentiate them from Daesh.

This tactic is also evident in UK news articles that classify the Al-Khansaa Brigade as a local-based secret, moral and/or religious 'police force' (BBC02/2014; DM36/2014; DM70/2015). In this context, the news articles emphasise that the brigade is a local force, and in doing so, distance it from Daesh, which is described as a political terrorist group with a global membership made up presumably of men. Rather than depicting the brigade as a wing of Daesh (see, Spencer, 2016: 74), the news articles therefore construct the groups as differentiated, thus enabling them to dismiss and/or downplay any violent actions perpetrated by members of the Al-Khansaa brigade as unrelated to Daesh's agenda or as insignificant in comparison to the actions of Daesh.

When women's violence and their participation in Daesh related activities is clear, however, and so is difficult to overlook, the news agencies deploy different strategies to diminish the women's agency. One of these strategies involves constructing the women of the Al-Khansaa brigade as desexualised. Much like with migrant women described as 'Jihadi brides', this means that rather than using labels that allude to

gender and imply femininity such as 'young women' (see section 5.1), news agencies use monikers like 'the Slaughterer' (DM09/2014; DM54/2014), and 'crocodile jaws' (DM64/2015), to refer to known members of the brigade. The news articles also use language that focuses on appearance and isolate characteristics that are designed to paint violent women as unfeminine and thus different from other 'normal' women.

This is evident in the Daily Mail article *'How 'up to 60' women rule ISIS's capital by fear'* (DM54/2014), in which the so-called 'Slaughterer' is discussed. In the article, it is alleged three times that she is believed to be 'six foot tall' (DM54/2014). While this might appear to readers to simply be a fact about the woman, the reason that it is emphasised becomes clear later in the article when a woman named 'khadija' is quoted as saying that 'the Slaughterer' is 'not a normal female' because 'she's huge' (DM54/2014). This desexualisation enables news agencies to describe the savagery and brutality of women (DM09/2014; DM54/2014; DM64/2017), without disrupting gender normative identities in the eyes of the general public who are led to believe that their actions are not indicative of those of women in the region more broadly.

A further strategy employed by the Daily Mail involves mocking women known to be members of the Al-Khansaa brigade and their ability to use the heavy weaponry with which they are often pictured in propaganda materials. This is evident in an article for the Daily Mail that discusses a video released on social media allegedly showing a 'militia of female jihadis firing machine guns and practising drills in Syria' (DM95/2015). In this article, it is argued that the women make several 'basic rifle mistakes' including holding their assault rifles incorrectly, carelessly or lazily, and firing them 'shakily' (DM95/2015). Using still images from the video, the article stresses these apparent mistakes by including demeaning captions under each of them: 'women appear to struggle with the cumbersome weapons' (see image 5.11), '[they] sloppily hold their rifles by their sides' (see image 5.12), 'many of the women seem surprised by the powerful recoil' (see image 5.13), and '[they] appear to be disinterested and can be seen chatting in the background' (see image 5.14).

**Image 5.11: Al-Khansaa Brigade (1).**



**Image 5.12: Al-Khansaa Brigade (2).**



**Image 5.13: Al-Khansaa Brigade (3).**



**Image 5.14: Al-Khansaa Brigade (4).**



As well as mocking their seemingly 'amateur shooting skills' the news article argues that those participating are seen 'chatting in the background' as their leader gives a 'hate filled interview' thus concluding that they are 'disinterested' in their training and that the video was likely produced for propaganda purposes (DM95/2015). The statements made in this article seem to be designed to imply to readers that women, including those who migrated from the United Kingdom, are unlikely and/or ineffective terrorists because they do not possess the requisite skills or the political commitment or interest to participate in violent conflict. In comparison to their male counterparts therefore, migrant women's violence (or threat of violence) is portrayed as somewhat comical thus ensuring that audiences view them as differentiated from Daesh and as significantly less threatening.

Despite seeming to contradict the dominant representation of migrant women aligned with Daesh that is perpetuated by the news media, that they fulfil domestic roles in the Caliphate as wives and mothers, the UK news articles that I analysed go to great lengths to dismiss the agency of migrant women purported to be members of the Al-Khansaa Brigade. Whether this is achieved through an emphasis on their identities as women or by constructing them as desexualised when their violence is clear, by differentiating them from Daesh proper, or by mocking their actions and capabilities,

the UK news media sets out to uphold gender normative identities by dismissing women's violence and by insinuating that it is uncharacteristic of 'real women' to meaningfully participate in such action. In other words, the UK news media legitimises patriarchal claims that women do not possess the necessary traits and/or capabilities to participate in violent conflict, and that if evidence to the contrary exists, as is the case with some members of the Al-Khansaa Brigade, then those perpetrating it are somehow 'unnatural'.

This has led to the reinforcement of harmful patriarchal ideologies that have historically been used to exclude women from discussions of political violence. Part of the difficulty with this is that if the motives and roles of some politically violent actors are overlooked or omitted from the narrative of events, then the root causes of conflict cannot be properly investigated. This means that if the UK news media fails to properly report on the violent actions of Daesh aligned women, then the general public, whose perception of the conflict is primarily shaped by the news media, are disadvantaged because their understanding is based on partial knowledge, thus negatively impacting their ability to recognise the dangers that members of the Al-Khansaa Brigade pose, to appreciate the violent acts in which they are complicit, and to understand the conflict and how it occurred. Similar tactics aimed at devaluing the agency of women are evident in news media reports of their participation in recruitment and the propagation of propaganda.

### 5.3.2. Women as Recruiters and Propagandists.

Contrary to the dominant representation in UK news discourse that casts migrant women in a solely domestic roles as wives and mothers, several of the articles analysed for this chapter allude to their participation in recruitment and in the dissemination of propaganda online. In particular, the UK news media reports that migrant women from the United Kingdom played a 'prominent role on social media' (BBC01/2015), and 'contributed persistently to propaganda narratives' (Saltman & Smith, in BBC57/2015). The extent of this role and the strength on women's online presence is clear when considering that 'women who joined Isis from Western societies' allegedly posted 'about 100,000 pro-Isis tweets every day' in 2015 alone (BBC01/2015). These posts, as well as those on other social media platforms, are reported by the UK news media to be focused mainly on spreading and glorifying

Daesh's extremist ideology (BBC51/2015), in an effort to convince others to migrate to the Caliphate to join Daesh and/or to perpetrate acts of violence in the West.

As part of this effort, the UK news media claims that migrant women used a range of social media platforms to condone and to celebrate violent acts committed by Daesh as they attempted to build an Islamic Caliphate (see images 5.15-5.17), as well as acts perpetrated by Daesh and others in the West such as: the 2015 shootings at the Charlie Hebdo offices in Paris (TG52/2015), and the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks in the United States of America (see image 5.18). Migrant women are also accused of encouraged and inciting those unable to travel to the Caliphate to 'mount attacks' in their home countries (TG48/2015). In news articles this is evidenced through quotes attributed to Aqsa Mahmood: "if you cannot make it to the battlefield then bring the battlefield to yourself" (TG48/2015), and through reporting on other migrant women who allegedly advised Daesh sympathisers to use 'homemade bombs' (BBC24/2017; TG37/2014), or knives and poison to perpetrate indiscriminate attacks: "kill Kuffar in alleyways, stab them and poison them, poison your teachers, go to haram restaurants and poison the food in large quantities' (Zehra Duman, in Saltman & Smith, 2015: 33).

**Image 5.15: Praising Daesh 1 (Hall, 2014).**


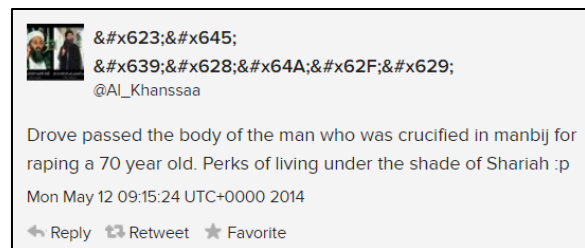
**Image 5.16: Praising Daesh 2 (Hall, 2014).**



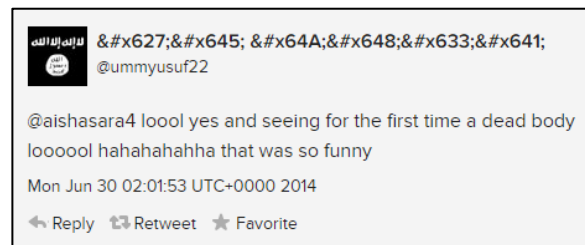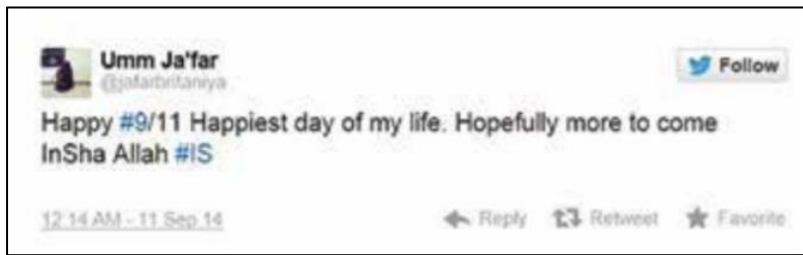**Image 5.17: Praising Daesh 3 (Hall, 2014).**

**Image 5.18: Praising 9/11 (Zahra Halane, in Saltman & Smith, 2015: 21).**



Social media posts made by Daesh aligned women are also reported by the UK news media to have been designed to encourage and to aid potential recruits who hoped to migrate to the region. In this context, the news articles claim that a 'cluster of British women' were involved in a sustained social media campaign aimed at 'glamourising the life of the jihadi bride' by painting a picture of the Caliphate as an 'Islamic utopia' (BBC57/2015) where all of their needs and desires would be met. Moreover, female recruiters are depicted as offering 'practical advice' on how best to travel to the region without arousing suspicion from friends, family and various officials (TG37/2015). In particular, they are said to have used social media to share step-by-step guides that explain not only how potential migrants should plan their journey and the best travel routes to take (see image 5.19), but 'what to bring, how to dress, how much money will be required… and what to expect once there' (Blaker, 2015: 5).

**Image 5.19: Online guide frequently disseminated by Daesh aligned women online offering advice on how to migrate and what women should bring with them (Hall, 2014).**



1. Make sure your plane ticket is a return (two-way) ticket.
2. Make sure you obtain a tourist visa and keep it well (it's going to be in your passport, so keep your passport securely).
3. Make sure you have a good knowledge of the tourist attractions in Turkey. Go to a travel agent and get yourself some brochures on Turkey or buy a traveller's handbook. This is important since if they question you, you can just brandish this in front of their noses and show them how serious of a tourist you are.
4. Make sure you don't have any incriminating evidence against you. (I know this is contrary to what I advised in #DustyFeet part 5, but the advice in this post is from the Turkish brother I spoke to (not directly from me). Bringing, e.g. a knife is RISKY. Don't neglect this if you're extremely afraid of getting caught.)
5. Make sure your phone and other electronic devices are "clean" from incriminating evidence.
6. Plan out an itinerary before you land in Turkey. I advise brothers to take the bus/coach down south. Lay low during the day and travel at night. I advise sisters not to take the bus/coach. Sisters, read the second half of this post, *insha Allah*, for advice about what you should do.

Included amongst the migrant women from the UK reported to have become famous for disseminating propaganda and for dispensing such advice are: Aqsa Mahmood, who 'recruited for ISIS online, condoning and encouraging terror attacks in Europe' (TG37/2015), Khadijah Dare, who appeared 'in an ISIS recruitment video calling on British Muslims to "stop being selfish" and to give up their families and studies to join the front line in the Middle East' (DM54/2014), Sally Jones, who 'maintained a stream of hostile online propaganda aimed at the West… [including] luring western female recruits to the self-declared IS caliphate, encouraging attacks in the West, and threatening to kill non-Muslims' (BBC24/2017), and Salma and Zahra Halane, who are 'among a "cluster of British women" luring young westerners to Syria' (BBC57/2015).

Despite illustrating that migrant women from the UK played a prominent role in the Caliphate beyond what is depicted in the domestic and maternal narrative outlined at the outset of this section, the UK news media employs several techniques in their reporting designed to diminish the public nature of the 'recruitment and propaganda' role and its importance as a central element of Daesh's strategy. These techniques include constructing the role as inherently gendered, and portraying the women who undertake it as coerced, thus denying their agency. In relation to the former, the news articles describe 'recruitment and propaganda' as a gender-specific activity. In other words, the articles insinuate through the language they employ, that migrant women only recruited other women, and similarly, that when migrant women incited others to perpetrate violence, their social media posts were designed to target women: 'three British women… [encouraged] young girls to join the jihadists in Syria' (BBC51/2015), '[women] working to recruit other young women' (TG09/2015), and 'British women who have travelled to Syria to join Islamic State (ISIS) are encouraging other women in the UK to carry out terrorist attacks back home' (TG52/2015).

Despite these assertions, it is clear when analysing the social media posts of Daesh aligned women and articles purportedly written by women in Daesh literature, that the gendered representation constructed in UK news discourse of female recruiters and propagandists is inaccurate. In reality, much of what has been written by women is gender-neutral. In other words, the language employed by women makes no reference to a targeted gender, or in some cases references both men and women (see images 5.20-5.21). Moreover, there are cases in which migrant women have explicitly directed their social media posts at men (see image 5.22). This means that while it might be

true that some women specifically targeted or engaged with other women (see image 5.23), the representation of the role itself as inherently gender-specific is a misleading generalisation that contributes to the construction of incomplete knowledge.

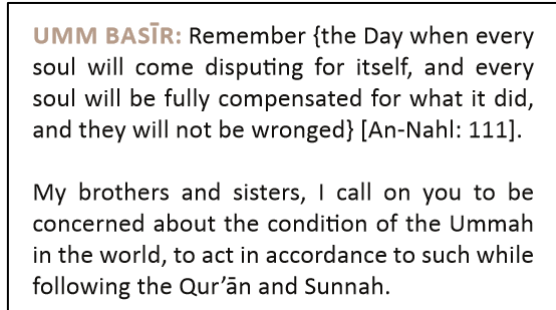**Image 5.20: Aqsa Mahmood (BBC51/2015).  Image 5.21: Interview extract (Dabiq, 2015).**



**Image 5.22: @Al-Khanssaa (Hall, 2015).  Image 5.23: @UmmDujji_ (Hall, 2015).**



Connected to this depiction of a gender-specific 'recruitment and propaganda' role is the claim that while it might appear to be an 'active role', in reality, the women who undertook it in the Caliphate were 'heavily controlled' (TG36/2015). Compounding this argument, UK news articles suggest to readers that female recruiters were simply the pawns of male jihadis who 'used' them as a strategic 'tool' through which they could share extremist content online and 'lure' potential recruits to the region (BBC24/2017). Through this type of language, the UK news media insinuates to readers without specific evidence, that migrant women were perhaps manipulated and/or forced to recruit for Daesh and to spread its propaganda, and that their writings might have been monitored. Given that there is little avenue through which the validity and reality of this representation can be investigated or proven, I argue that it is likely constructed as a convenient way through which UK news agencies can call into question the willingness of women to participate in conflict, thus enabling them to deny women's agency.

Similar to the representations of radicalisation already discussed (see section 5.1), as well as my analysis of the reporting on the Al-Khansaa Brigade (see section 5.3.1), it

is my contention that the techniques used to construct female recruiters as gendered and agentless actors are designed to delegitimise and depoliticise their activities, and to reinforce the patriarchal and Orientalist ideologies upon which much of the UK news coverage of Daesh is built. In doing so, however, the news articles obscure and oversimplify the extent and significance of the role migrant women played in the construction of the Caliphate. In other words, most academics agree that recruitment and propaganda were central elements of Daesh's strategy, and that the effectiveness of their online campaigns contributed greatly to their ability to seize the territory that it would eventually claim as its caliphate. This means that as the news media overlooks and/or downplays the role women played in recruitment and propaganda campaigns, it contributes to the development of incomplete knowledge that will likely prevent the public from being able to recognise such material online and to respond appropriately, and hinder the efforts of academics and policy-makers to research the ways in which such strategies are deployed in conflict and to devise effective countermeasures.

5.4.  Conclusion.

UK news media coverage of Daesh aligned women is dominated by representations of migrant women who travelled to Caliphate territories from the United Kingdom after 2013. Consequently, the primary questions that the reporting seeks to answer are: 1) Why did women (and girls) from the UK make the decision to leave behind families and homes to travel to Syria and/or Iraq to join Daesh? And, 2) How did migrant women contribute to Daesh and its agenda when they arrived in areas of the region under the jihadist group's control? This means that much of the focus of the reporting has been on radicalisation, who is susceptible to it and how it occurs, and on the types of roles women are said to have played in the Caliphate. In this chapter, I investigated the representations of migrant women constructed as a result of their "visibility" in news coverage of Daesh, and examined the likely impacts of such representations on the construction of knowledge about migrant women in the context of this conflict.

Similar to the Yazidi women depicted in chapter four who were the targets of Daesh violence, migrant women aligned with the jihadist group are represented as its victims in UK news media discourse. Unlike Yazidi women, however, my findings illustrate that migrant women are portrayed not as victims of violence, but as victims of Daesh

manipulation, and of their own gender. Particularly prevalent in discussions pertaining to radicalisation, and in the reporting on migrant women's motivations, the UK news media paints a gender-stereotypical image of passive, helpless and emotional women deceived by deviant men. In this image, jihadis are depicted as preying upon the women's youth, ignorance and difficult personal histories, to lure them to the Caliphate using promises of marriage and family as incentives. This representation is captured by the 'Jihadi bride' label through which migrant women are portrayed predominately as naïve victims motivated by maternalism and a gendered desire for a domestic life rather than any political or ideological reasoning.

While the perceived victimhood of migrant women continues to be emphasised in the news articles that report on their experiences in Caliphate territories, the dominant representation becomes 'passive participants'. In particular, migrant women are depicted in a simplistic manner as domestically isolated wives and mothers who contribute to Daesh and its agenda by passively supporting male fighters and raising the next generation of jihadis. Without analysing the complexities of this role and its significance to the establishment and maintenance of the Caliphate, the news articles largely dismiss it as subsidiary and politically irrelevant. Even in cases where women are known to have played public and active roles as members of the Al-Khansaa Brigade or as online recruiters and propagandists, the UK news media denies their agency by claiming that, in reality, much of what they do is gender-specific and controlled by men who simply use them as pawns to achieve specific goals.

In analysing of the stories of migrant women as told through their social media postings and other writings, I emphasise two interrelated and inherently harmful implications of the 'naïve victims' and 'passive participants' representations that are constructed in the UK news discourse: 1) the representations rely on and perpetuate patriarchal and Orientalist ideologies, and 2) they contribute to the construction of incomplete knowledge. In relation to the former, I argue that the ideologies that frame UK news coverage of migrant women are intended to legitimise gender normative identities by emphasising stereotypically feminine characteristics as a means to explain away the decision made by women to migrate and to subordinate their roles in violent conflict. Moreover, I posit that because the topic of the reporting is Western women who were radicalised by Eastern men, the news articles contribute to the Othering of the Middle East by reinforcing Orientalist knowledge that constructs an "us vs them" dichotomy

between the East and the West based on Western understandings of gender-relations in the social, political and religious norms and practices of Muslim societies.

Finally, in relation to the latter, my findings illustrate that in their efforts to perpetuate a gendered narrative that represents migrant women as agentless, the UK news media constructs only partial knowledge of the conflict that obscures and oversimplifies the reality of women's participation. From explanations of radicalisation to discussions of migrant women's roles in the Caliphate, the UK news media's reliance on the 'naïve victims' and 'passive participants' representations contribute to the construction of a confusing narrative for readers in which it appears that they are insinuating that migrant women are not culpable for their actions because they didn't know any better, and that despite their decision to join Daesh, they are not violent. This chapter has shown that given that news discourse often shapes the perceptions of the general public and can therefore impact policy-making, by denying migrant women's agency in this way and by downplaying their participation, the UK news media fails to provide a full and accurate picture of the complexities of the conflict and women's involvement in it that might aid the public in recognising the dangers such women might pose, and in calling for appropriate countermeasures to radicalisation and other conflict related issues.

**Chapter Six: 'Women Warriors'.[17]**

Laura Sjoberg in her recent work argues that while women's visibility in International Relations and in the discourse of global politics and war has historically been rare (2018: 296), representations of women that are both 'positive and agential' in nature have been rarer still (2018: 299). This seemingly changed after 2013 as the violent conflict in Syria and Iraq intensified and a 'media frenzy' began in relation to Daesh (Dirik, 2014), and more specifically for the purposes of my research, in relation to the women 'in and around' Daesh (Sjoberg, 2018: 298). So far, my thesis has shown this increased visibility through engagement with UK news coverage of women who depicted as victims of Daesh (see chapter four), and women aligned with Daesh portrayed largely as supporters rather than fighters (see chapter five). In this chapter, I discuss my findings pertaining to women known to have actively fought against the group by engaging in conflict on the frontline.

There are two notable differences in this reporting compared to the narratives already presented in my thesis. First, despite a 'plethora of reports' making visible the women who took up arms in Syria and Iraq (Dirik, 2014), the coverage has not been as frequent, nor has it been as in-depth as it has been in the cases of other women in the region. Using the same data collection procedures, forty-four news articles were sourced for this chapter, less than half the number sourced for chapter four (96 news articles), and chapter five (106 news articles). While this does not negate my assertion that women's visibility in UK news coverage of this conflict has been high overall, it does suggest that despite plentiful evidence of women's political agency, stories that portray their perceived victimhood remain most popular for UK news agencies and audiences.

Second, in the news articles that I analysed for this chapter, it is clear that women who fight Daesh are afforded praise and agency in a way not yet seen in my findings. Despite this shift, however, I argue that the representations constructed in this context are not gender-neutral, nor do they lack in the patriarchal and Orientalist assumptions evident in the already analysed reporting. The assumptions are 'simply… packaged differently' in this case, using more subtle techniques and less overt language

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[17] This title is based on a quote from an article by the Guardian (TG11/2017). See appendix one, section three for full reference details.

(Sjoberg, 2018: 299). Through an analysis of these techniques and by engaging with the stories of the discussed women, I argue that while the news articles portray women's militarism as remarkable on the surface, in reality, the representations that have been constructed devalue the women, and pay only lip-service to their agency.

To discuss my findings in relation to UK news media representations of women who fight Daesh, I separate this chapter into three sections. First, I examine how the women are portrayed, paying particular attention to representations of gender, and the ways in which these are used to sensationalise their participation in combat, and to construct it as exceptional (6.1). Next, I analyse the motivations that are attributed to the women, arguing that they are constructed through a feminised lens as non-political and gender-specific (6.2). Finally, I engage with depictions of women's actual roles in conflict, noting that in UK news coverage, some tension exists about whether the women are active participation in the same ways as men, or symbolic fighters (6.3).

6.1. Feminised Fighters.

In a news article for Al Jazeera, Tanya Goudsouzian argues that since the war began 'Western media has salivated over the Amazonian fighters on the front-lines of clashes with ISIL' (2015). This fascination with women fighters is reflected in the UK news coverage that I engaged with for this chapter. Fighting in 'war-torn' areas across Syria and Iraq (TG63/2015), these 'female fighters' (DM83/2015), are described as 'strong', 'fearless', and 'utterly determined' women (BBC14/2017; DM47/2015; SN49/2014), who willingly 'left behind lives and families' (DM83/2015), to go to the frontline to fight militants from the 'Jihadist Islamic State' (BBC33/2015).

Focusing primarily on women affiliated with the 'Kurdish Peshmerga' (TG39/2017), a subunit of the Peshmerga dubbed the 'Yazidi Peshmerga' (DM69/2016), and the 'Women's Protection Unit (YPJ)' (DM46/2015), UK news agencies argue that women have played a 'major role' in the fight against Daesh (DM92/2014). Appearing to emphasise their agency, the news articles also describe the women's preparedness 'to fight' (BBC33/2014), to 'stop at nothing' (SN21/2015), and to 'risk their lives' (SN12/2017), as they attempt to end Daesh's 'brutal reign of terror' in the region (TG11/2017). To stress their perceived heroism, the news articles frequently argue

that those fighting *chose* to do so despite very real threats of enslavement, torture, rape, and murder (BBC18/2016; DM47/2015).

Given the seemingly positive and agential nature of the language used in this news coverage, it would be surprising if it were painted as progressive, or lauded as somehow feminist by news consumers. This is particularly true when considering who the women are: Eastern women normally reduced in Western discourse to subservient beings, constrained and oppressed by patriarchal religious norms and practices (see also, Said, 1978; Ahmed, 1992; Tickner, 1992; Mahmood, 2005). However, one need only study the language and images in use to expose the patriarchal and Orientalist assumptions that seep into the narratives, assumptions that construct an image of women as 'beautiful, innocent and strong' beings (DM49/2014), who, as a result of the dire situation in Syria and Iraq, defied traditional male-dominated norms and practices to become militarised (Wong, 2011).

To varying degrees of frequency and depth, all of the news articles that I analysed for this chapter report on the women's experiences of and actions in this conflict, as I will demonstrate in later sections. Yet, much of the content focuses on spotlighting gender to emphasise the fighters' identities as women. The most explicit way in which this occurs is evident when considering the prefixes 'female' and 'woman', which are used consistently in the news articles before terms such as 'fighter', 'combatant' and 'soldier'. This is not uncommon in International Relations and the discourses of war and violent conflict, where the idea that men can be soldiers is constructed as normative, but women in the same role are portrayed as 'unconventional figures' (Alison, 2004: 447), thus necessitating the use of a gender-specific label to differentiate them.

Reinforcing this unconventionality, the analysed news articles also use language that depicts the women who fight Daesh as out of the ordinary (BBC33/2014), or as a 'striking anomaly' in the region (DM92/2014), thus justifying their fascination. While this is consistent with the traditional representations of women who are publicly visible, I contend that UK news agencies place particular emphasis on it in this case because the idea that 'brown women' can exercise agency in what is typically understood to be a uniquely patriarchal and conservative society, defies long-held Western-based

knowledge about gender relations in the region (Spivak, 1988; Shahvisi, 2018; see also, my discussion on Orientalism in chapter two).

Rather than directing their fascination with such women to the study of who they are, and to the political, ideological and social factors that influence them, UK news agencies instead fetishize them through a determined focus on physical appearance. Consider the following quotes from the BBC, the Daily Mail, and Sky News, that show the types of depictions found across all of the news media agencies that I studied:

> Standing straight in their fatigues with Kalashnikovs on their shoulders, this looks no different than any other training camp. But it is the long hair tied back in a bun under caps, and the hint of make-up on some faces, that spells out the difference (BBC33/2014).

> In the fight against the fanatics of Islamic State, lipstick might seem an unlikely weapon. But for the woman warriors of Iraqi Kurdistan make-up is essential. One of them, Ahd Mohemed, starts her morning by drawing on her eyebrows, putting on mascara, applying lipstick and painting her nails before grabbing her combat fatigues and AK-47 (DM96/2016).

> Two young girls who even in combat fatigue look petit[e] and pretty, both carrying key fobs of small fluffy animals. Butter would not melt? Think again, these girls have seen fierce frontline urban fighting and are ready for more (SN21/2015).

In each quote, evidence of the women's militarism is juxtaposed with depictions of their perceived femininity. This also occurs in the images used in UK news articles (see images 6.1 and 6.2), that often construct stereotypical visuals of 'smiling beaut[ies], wearing combat and toting a rifle' (Dirik, 2014).

This juxtaposition is symbolic of both patriarchal and Orientalist stereotypes. Like Arianne Shahvisi, I argue that this focus on physical description is designed to reinforce to news consumers that despite flouting stereotypes through which women are cast as peaceful private actors, in all other ways 'these women are reassuringly gender-stereotypical' (2018: 4). In other words, this reliance on physical description is meant to assure readers that while they might not be "acting" like it, these fighters are indeed "real women". This has the dual implication of limiting the existence of the

women's agency to this conflict alone, while also contributing to the formation of a powerful patriarchal construction of so-called knowledge that is often relied upon in traditional discourse to justify the marginalisation of women.

**Image 6.1: Suzan, Iraq (DM96/2016)**

**Image 6.2: Diren, Syria (BBC16/2014).**



Moreover, I contend that this emphasis on perceived womanhood enables UK news agencies to differentiate women fighting Daesh from women who are aligned with the group. As we saw in chapter four, rather than focusing on appearance, women who joined Daesh are defined by their age and character to facilitate their portrayal as naïve and easily-manipulated beings, or, in cases where their violence is undeniable, they are constructed as desexualised using labels such as: 'Merciless Jihadettes', 'the Slaughterer' and 'the White widow' (see section 4.3). I argue that this difference in characterisation stems from an Orientalist desire to paint "the good guys" (allies of the UK), as "normal" women, and the "the bad guys" (allies of Daesh) as the deviant Other. Disempowering stereotypes that reflect colonialist thinking are thus reinforced through a homogenising image of the East as inferior, backward, and despotic (Hasan, 2005; Macfie, 2002).

This differentiation does not extend, however, to the broad sexualisation of women in the region. Like women aligned with Daesh, those who fight them are objectified and sensationalised in UK news discourse through fetishized Orientalist imaginings. It simply occurs in different ways. Where those aligned with Daesh are portrayed as victims of their own sexual desires or deviancy (see chapter five, section 5.2), women who fight them are constructed as sexualised objects of Western fantasy. I argue that this type of representation benefits UK news agencies in two ways. First, it helps to

build an image of the fighters as exotic heroines behaving exotically (Shahvisi, 2018), thus capturing the attention of UK audiences.

Second, it enables UK news agencies to differentiate women who fight Daesh from their male opponents. In an article for the Daily Mail for example, Narin Afrin, is given the label 'the Peshmerga Princess'. There are two issues with this label. First, Narin is not a member of the Peshmerga. Rather, she is a Commander in the YPJ who are based in Syria. This means that without taking the word 'princess' into account, the label is incorrect. At best, this represents an example of poor fact-checking. However, I argue from the context of the news article that it is more likely that the politics of the unit simply didn't matter because the aim was to emphasise gender. This directly reflects the patriarchal discourse that characterises their representation, and facilitates the portrayal of their agency as limited.

The second issue relates to the label in its entirety and the image that it constructs. In the news article, it is used not only as a way to emphasise a feminized and somewhat mythical image of Narin that focuses on her perceived beauty, innocence and strength, it is also used to contrast Narin with her 'opposition number in command of the jihadist force' (DM49/2014). Unlike Narin, her opponent, who is given the name Abu Khattab al-Kurdi, is characterised as 'ugly' and 'wild', and is given his own label: 'a straggly-bearded fanatic' (DM49/2014). To reinforce this perceived difference between the Commanders the news articles also use visual representations in their reporting (DM49/2014 - see images 6.3 and 6.4):

**Image 6.3: Narin Afrin.**                          **Image 6.4: Abu Khattab al-Kurdi.**



Through this type of representation, a narrative of heroines and villains is established. Aimed at contrasting the perceived femininity of women fighters with the ruthlessness

of Daesh militants, this narrative is rooted in Orientalist assumption. In particular, it highlights the traditional Orientalist trope that 'Oriental' men are deviant, menacing, and wild (Owens, 2010; Dagistanli & Grewal, 2016). Due to the status of Kurdish women fighters as allies of the West, this feminized representation of Narin enables UK news agencies to uphold traditional "us" vs "them" dichotomies. In this case, Kurdish women fighters are temporarily appropriated into the "us" category, and Daesh militants are once again constructed as the Other who must be opposed. This narrative is inherently problematic not only because it provides a way through which UK military intervention can be justified in the region, but because it disregards the Kurdish identities of the women as the UK news media attempts to assimilate them into the "us" category, and thus decontextualises the broader struggle in which they are engaged.

Finally, it is important to note that this focus on gender enables UK news agencies to ignore the long history of women's participation in Kurdish fighting forces (see also, Mojab, 2000; Şimşek, 2018), and their broader political cause. This is reflected in the words of Narin Afrin: "We're not just a pretty picture. We are a way of thinking. We have beliefs. And we have a cause" (Solomon, 2014). I posit that this is perhaps the point. In other words, in focusing on superficial elements of the women's stories, UK news agencies can comfortably report on the agency of Kurdish women, and construct them as relatable and 'sympathetic enemies' of Daesh (Dirik, 2014), without having to engage in any meaningful dialogue about their complex, nuanced political objectives. I argue that this is beneficial to news agencies because it enables them to avoid areas of discussion that may be fraught with political difficulties stemming from Kurdish decades-long demands for self-determination. This point is revisited in the next section where I discuss my findings in relation to representations of women's motivations.


6.2. Reasons for Taking Up Arms.

Brigitte L. Nacos argues that 'the media tend to report the news along explanatory frames that cue the reader, listener, and viewer to put events, issues, and political actors into contextual frameworks of reference' (2005: 436). However, as I argued in my methods chapter (chapter three), in using such frames it is often the case that certain elements of social reality are emphasised, while others are obscured and

oversimplified (see also, Entman, 1996: 77). This is evident in UK news media coverage of women's perceived reasons for taking up arms in Syria and Iraq against Daesh. Following the pattern that has been evident so far in the coverage, the news articles rely on traditional gender stereotypes that trivialise their motives as being inherently gendered, and largely situational. While the overall reporting of motivations in the news articles that I studied is limited, I determine that the primary frames of reference constructed, and thus those discussed in this section, are revenge (6.2.1), a desire to humiliate their opponents (6.2.2), maternalism (6.2.3), and female empowerment (6.2.4).

*6.2.1. Revenge.*

The most prominent motivating factor attributed to women fighters in both Iraq and Syria is revenge. This can be seen most explicitly in reporting on the Yazidi women of the Iraqi Peshmerga. In news coverage of this unit, it is made clear to readers that they were established after (and in response to) the assault on Sinjar in the summer of 2014, when Daesh drove 'locals into the mountains… bulldozed villages, captured thousands of women as sex slaves and slaughtered everyone in their path' (TG27/2015). The argument made is that during this assault Yazidi women experienced immersible personal tragedy and horror, and were thus motivated to join the Peshmerga. The articles specifically point to experiences of 'physical, emotional and sexual abuse', as well as stories of 'disappeared, tortured and murdered family members' (TG27/2015), to explain why these women made the supposedly 'radical' decision to fight (TG40/2017).

In their reliance on this narrative, UK news agencies unreflexively link women's militarism to a 'desperate [need] for revenge' (SN07/2017). This is evident in the language used in several of the sourced news articles: 'Yazidi women vow to take revenge on Islamic State captors who used them as sex slaves' (SN02/2017), 'an all-female Yazidi battalion being trained to take revenge against ISIS' (DM69/2016), '[Daesh] rampaged through her homeland… torturing and enslaving her people, her friends and her family… within months she was in uniform, driven by a furious desire for revenge' (TG40/2017). Although their experiences of Daesh undoubtedly impacted the women, and may have informed the participation of some, this narrative as it has

been constructed, perpetuates a homogenising image of Yazidi women in which revenge is situated as their primary and/or singular motive.

In other words, I do not find it problematic to argue that some women who participate in armed conflict do so because they have experienced personal tragedy or some type of grievance. This occurs for both men and women. I argue, however, that it becomes problematic when "personal motivations" of this nature, are portrayed as gender-specific, and when they are used to delegitimise and depoliticise women's combat and to construct it as less credible than men's (see also, Nacos, 2005; Eager, 2008; Sjoberg, 2010). This has often been the case in traditional discourse in which women's agency is often explained and diminished through entrenched patriarchal assumptions that portray their motives as profoundly different from the political and issue-based motives that are often attributed to men.

UK news media representations of Yazidi women's motives for joining the Peshmerga reflect this traditional discourse. Specifically, they paint a picture of Yazidi women as peaceful, non-political beings, for whom violence is 'out of character' (Sjoberg, 2018: 303), but were so emotionally impacted by the brutality that they suffered that it fuelled a desire for revenge strong enough to transform them into soldiers. This means that as well as propagating the patriarchal trope that constructs women as unlikely soldiers, the news articles diminish the agency of Yazidi women by portraying it as situational: 'though it's a proactive decision to fight, it's out of calamitous necessity' (TG27/2015). Moreover, they tell readers that rather than fighting the same war for the same reasons as men, Yazidi women are fighting a war specific to them for personal reasons, and that those reasons are based in feminised emotionality.

I argue that this is an oversimplified and incomplete narrative that contributes to the continued marginalisation of Yazidi women. This is because it fails not only to convey the diversity of Yazidi women's experiences of Daesh, and their motivations for joining the Peshmerga, it also overlooks the reality that seemingly "personal motivations" are often intertwined with the political (see also, Enloe, 1989, 2014; Eager, 2008). This is evident when considering the personal stories of Yazidi women sourced through the documentary *Stacey on the frontline: Girls, Guns and ISIS* (2016), in which Stacey Dooley, a British presenter, interviews members of the Yazidi Peshmerga on the

ground in Iraq, about why they joined the unit, what their thoughts are on Daesh, and what they hope to achieve through their participation.

Like the analysed news articles, there is much discussion in the documentary about what Daesh did when they arrived in Sinjar. Included in this are stories of rape, murder and other horrific acts. Below are just two examples:

> I saw how they raped girls, I saw how they beheaded men and women (Nadia, in Dooley, 2016).

> I met a woman who had been captured by ISIS… with her one-year-old baby. The ISIS leader didn't allow her to feed the baby for three days. The baby kept crying and crying… [the ISIS leader] grabbed the baby from the chest, pulled up his head and with a sword beheaded him (Khatoon, in Dooley, 2016).

There is also some discussion about seeking vengeance: "If we kill one ISIS fighter, we will be avenging many victims. Actually, I don't want to kill just one, I would like to kill thousands… even if I killed thousands, it would not be enough for our revenge" (Inas, in Dooley, 2016).

What differentiates the documentary from the news articles that I analysed, however, is that these stories, when they appear in the documentary, are not told in isolation. Nor are they selectively narrated to centre on a revenge narrative. Rather, Dooley justifies their inclusion by explaining that she simply wants to provide the women space to tell the world what happened to them: "it is important that these stories are heard because they [the women] have been silenced for a couple of years." She also stresses that while a sense of duty to avenge those captured or killed by Daesh may have been one motive for joining the Peshmerga, it is only part of the story. The women also stated that they wanted to protect their religious norms and practices, and restore their ancestral land. Perhaps most importantly to the women, however, was a need to participate in efforts to free their people from Daesh hands.

In discussions about Sinjar, referred to by the women as *Shingal* (Kurdish for Sinjar), the interviewed women speak idealistically about what it once was, and the destruction that Daesh left in its wake. Driving through the ruined city, Khatoon, the founder and Commander of the Yazidi Peshmerga (see image 6.5), reflects on the multiple impacts of the damage perpetrated by Daesh:

I think in the whole world there isn't a place as beautiful as Sinjar was. Sinjar was famous for its mountains, famous for its people. Now everything have been destroyed… their people have suffered a genocide, have been captured, and their houses flattened… it's really difficult. These homes were full of families, with girls, women, children. Now when I look at it, it's ruins, emptiness… and life is so difficult.

**Image 6.5: Khatoon Khider (TG40/2017).**

The difficulty inherent in seeing her homeland destroyed, and its peoples attacked, undoubtedly impacted Khatoon, as it did all people from the region. In founding this unit, Khatoon wanted to take Sinjar back from Daesh, and restore the region socially, politically and religiously, to what it once was. This is emphasised not only in stories like Khatoon's, but also in the tattoos the women wear on their hands that read شنگال which translates to *Shingali* (see image 6.6), and in the words of the songs they sing as they travel between military bases and the frontlines; "I am eager to fight for my land".

**Image 6.6: Image of Shingal tattoo (Dooley, 2016).**

Connected to this is the women's desire to free those who remain captured in Daesh. Dooley explains: "it is not just revenge that [they are] after, [they] also want to fight to free the 3,000 women who are still captive". Based on her first-hand experience on the ground, she argues that "a day doesn't go by here without thinking about the women who are still held captive," and that the women of the Yazidi Peshmerga are "ready to risk their lives to rescue [them]." This suggests that far from being their only motive, the desire for revenge is intertwined with, and often secondary to, their goal to free their people. Dooley asserts that this is the "driving force [for the women] to overcome the unthinkable and fight until the end" (2016).

This reframing of Yazidi women's motives from those portrayed in news discourse, is backed by their own words in the documentary, particularly in the stories of Inas, Khatoon and Adiba. Inas, a 17-year-old fighter from Sinjar, was captured by Daesh militants but was later able to escape, and later joined the Peshmerga. During her interview she remembers her time being held by Daesh: "I remember all of the horrible things [Daesh] did in front of our eyes… how they killed and raped women in front of us". We also find later in the documentary, as the fighter visits her family in a refugee camp, that Inas's sister was killed by Daesh militants during their initial assault. It is for these reasons that she also speaks of revenge.

I do not question Inas's story. However, I argue that it is representative of the type of story that the UK news media selectively chooses to rely upon because it enables them to construct a highly emotional and sensationalist narrative of Yazidi women's militarism. Part of the issue with this selective reporting is that it contributes to the development of only partial knowledge, through which the reality and diversity of women's motives cannot be properly understood. In Inas's case for example, prior to making the statements above, she first explains that the driving thought in her mind at night, and arguably the thought that motivates her participation, is the "situation we are in… of my sisters still in the hands of IS." It is possible to infer from this that the women who remain captured, and the idea of getting them back, is a central element of Inas's participation.

This is also demonstrated in Khatoon's story. Prior to Daesh's assault, Khatoon was a well-known Yazidi singer. In her interviews, she explains why she stopped singing: "On August 3rd 2014, when they [Daesh] attacked Sinjar and young women and

children were captured, I join the army. I cannot sing anymore knowing that our women and girls are captured by ISIS". When asked by Dooley when she would finally sing again, Khatoon does not mention revenge at all. Instead, she says: "until the day when I see our women and children back to us… that day I will sing in this very uniform". This places the Yazidi people as central to Khatoon's participation in the Peshmerga.

A similar sentiment is expressed by Adiba in her discussions of Sinjar:

> It's still the same smell of Shingal. It will never change. Like the sky here is different and the sun here is different. Everything is different in Shingal. We don't have anything but we were making such a beautiful life. I wish, like, we give them all of Shingal, but just they give us our people.

Like Khatoon's love of music, one of the most important things to Adiba is the Sinjar region. As is evident from her words, however, she would sacrifice that part of herself for her people. Where Khatoon is willing to give up music until Yazidi women and children are freed, Adiba asserts that she would give all of Sinjar to Daesh, if it meant freedom for those who remain captured.

In listening to these stories, it is clear that the idea of taking vengeance for the brutality perpetrated by Daesh plays on the minds of Yazidi women, as it most likely does on the minds of Yazidi men. However, to suggest that it is their only motive is a harmful mischaracterisation that is rooted is patriarchal ideology. This is because it constructs an oversimplified image of Yazidi women that belittles their agency. In particular, by connecting their motives solely to personal grievance resulting from Daesh violence, they construct their agency as inherently gendered and situational. In other words, it delegitimises their agency outside of this conflict and ignores other motives by suggesting that had the emotional impact of Daesh violence not spurred a 'furious desire for revenge' (TG40/2017), Yazidi women would not have decided not act.

Part of what makes this type of news coverage damaging to Yazidi women is that while it gives the illusion that their stories are being told, in reality, much of what they actually say is ignored. As the members of the Yazidi Peshmerga spoke to Dooley, it was clear that the overarching message that they were attempting to convey to the world was that thousands of their people remain in Daesh hands, and that they are in need of rescue. In focusing on an emotionally-charged vengeance narrative, this message is somewhat lost in the new articles that I analysed. Based on my assertion that the

perceptions and responses of the general public to conflict are shaped by the news discourse with which they engage (see also, my discussion of methods and theory in chapter three), I argue that in obscuring their primary message in this way, UK news agencies hinder the ability of the general public to call for appropriate responses to the situation in Iraq, and aid for the Yazidi population more specifically.

*6.2.2. Humiliation.*

Connected to the revenge narrative laid out, is the claim made across all four of the studied news agencies, that Kurdish and Yazidi women were motivated to fight Daesh because it would be shameful and humiliating for militants to be killed by a woman given how they view women:

> The so-called holy warriors of IS – also known as ISIS – will be humiliated by the fact that a woman is leading the stubborn fight against them say their opponents. IS gunmen view women as little more than slaves so being killed by one will be doubly shameful (DM49/2014).

The news media employs citations from fighters to emphasise their assertion: "When they see a woman with a gun, they're so afraid they begin to shake" (Diren, in BBC16/2014), "When they know women are fighting, they run away" (Roza, in DM83/2015). Based on the assumption that militants will be barred from paradise if killed by a woman (SN19/2015), UK news agencies insinuate that the women fighters in Syria and Iraq, have 'the power to emasculate the jihadists and humiliate them' (Toivanen & Baser, 2016: 308), and that this is what drives them to participate in combat in the region.

While I acknowledge that women fighters have spoken on this issue, I argue that they typically frame it differently:

> When the day of liberation of Shingal came, the Peshmerga leaders called us and told us to get ready to go to the frontline. The top gendered from the Yazidi Peshmerga army in Shingal called me and asked if I was ready to join the Peshmerga frontlines. I said yes. All of us girls and women will be there because

Daesh declared that if they were killed by a Yazidi girl or woman, they wouldn't go to paradise.

We went to the Peshmerga frontlines and started fighting and shooting bullets because we wanted Daesh fighters to think they might get killed by a woman and not go to paradise. We made ourselves visible. I want ISIS fighters to get the message that even if they are killed by men, they won't go to paradise because of what they did. So, it doesn't matter if they get killed by men or women (Adiba, in Armstrong, 2017).

From Adiba's story, it is possible to ascertain that Yazidi women were already involved with the Peshmerga by the time this declaration was made. Indeed, all of the military units in which women are members pre-date this declaration, with some even pre-dating Daesh entirely. As such, the implication that it inspired women's decision to take up arms is negated. Moreover, it is clear that rather than attempting to shame Daesh militants, women on the frontlines recognised this declaration as a tool that they could use against Daesh. In other words, the women used Daesh's supposed fear and misogynistic prejudices against them by making themselves visible in battle, thus weaponizing preconceived notions of gender.

Like Dilar Dirik (2014), I argue that the humiliation narrative as it has been constructed in news discourse, devalues the 'legitimate struggle' in which women in Syria and Iraq are engage. Like the revenge narrative, it oversimplifies and sensationalises it. From my findings, I argue that UK news agencies do not evoke this narrative as a means to explain women in combat, nor is it aimed at demonstrating women's power. Rather, they repeat it again and again because it enables them to degrade Daesh in an exciting way for readers by arguing that these seemingly 'fanatically brutal' men are actually cowards because they are 'afraid' of women (BBC16/2016). This is evident in a Daily Mail headline that reads: 'What really scares ISIS? Girls" (DM46/2015).

While this type of representation is aimed at emasculating Daesh militants, I argue that the tone used also degrades the women who fight them. This is because it implies that women are not "naturally" fearsome, and that "real men" would not find them so. It almost encourages readers to find amusement in the idea that Daesh men would be afraid of their female opponents. This reflects a patriarchal discourse that relies on gendered stereotypes of masculinity and femininity to define what it is to be a man or

a woman. In particular, it reinforces that idea that men who are typically associated with masculinity are strong, and that women as a result of their femininity are weak.

Furthermore, as news articles continually refer to this fear of women and the humiliation and shame it would cause militants to be killed by one, they create a false impression that women on the frontlines are somewhat protected by virtue of their gender because rather than engage with them, Daesh 'run away' (DM83/2015). This idea is disputed in the comments of Azima, a YPJ Commander:

> The idea that if there are women, ISIS won't go to paradise, that if a woman killed them, they would go to hell… this is not true. That wasn't true because ISIS attacked us, sending a lot of their men. For example, they would send 250 terrorists for 30 of our comrades (YPJ Press Office, 2016).

Narratives like Azima's are not reflected in any of the analysed news article. I argue that this is because they diminish the emasculating image of Daesh that they seek to construct. In reality, female fighters have been targeted by Daesh, and hundreds have been killed or injured in battles across Syria and Iraq (YPG Press Office, 2016). Suggesting that Daesh 'run away' from these women is to ignore that fact. Moreover, I argue that by minimizing the risks these women face, and by repeating again and again that Daesh are 'afraid', the news articles risk heightening the danger that they face. In other words, by using these women as a tool to emasculate jihadist militants, they situate them as prime targets: "They [Daesh] really hate the Peshmerga women and they instruct their militants to kill us first. A Peshmerga woman is a particularly valuable trophy for ISIS terrorists" (Col Nahida Ahmed Rashid, in Shevardnadze, 2015).


*6.2.3. Maternalism.*

As I have already discussed in this chapter (6.1), much of the reporting on women who fight Daesh is focused on perceived gendered aspects of their existence; how they look, what clothes they are wearing, if they are wearing make-up etc. This is also true in reports of their alleged motives. In this case, the news articles often allude to their familial status, particularly whether they are mothers. This enables the UK news media

to construct their participation and agency through a maternalist lens. Consider the quotes below from Sky News and the Daily Mail:

> Her tone is steely and matter of fact as she recounts the most horrific details of her constant abuse, physical, emotional and sexual. But she only breaks down when she describes the cruelty meted out to her children (SN02/2017).

> Kurdish mother-of-two launches suicide attack to slow Islamic State advance in desperate battle for Kobane (DM92/2014).

In both articles, the women's participation in combat is linked to motherhood. In the example from Sky News, the report focuses on Shireen, a recent escapee from Daesh, who discusses her reasoning for wanting to join the Syrian Democratic forces. The reporter first outlines the abuse suffered by Shireen, but focuses primarily on her children, and the cruelty that they experienced. Emphasising that she was 'sobbing' and had 'tears running down her cheeks' as she spoke of her children, the news article tells readers that she made the decision to join Daesh because she was 'acting from a maternal imperative' (Gentry, 2009: 236). In other words, her motive was solely based on the violence Daesh perpetrated against her children.

The Daily Mail article on the other hand tells the story of Arin Mikan, a member of the YPJ, who is said to have '[blown] herself up at an IS position east of the border town [Kobane], killing ten jihadists' (DM92/2014). Unlike Shireen, the news article does not explicitly associate her actions with her status as a mother. However, it is the first thing that we learn about her. Despite the suicide bombing being the subject of the report, in the headline, we first learn that she was an alleged mother-of-two. It is necessary to stress 'alleged' in this case because in the body of the article, we learn that her status as a mother is unconfirmed. Yet, it was seemingly deemed necessary to include in the headline.

Tacit connections to motherhood are also constructed in an article for the BBC in which three women are interviewed, the unit commander, Col Nadia Ahmed Rashid; the unit trainer, Capt Mujdat al-Hameed; and, Awas Tawfiq, a member of the unit. Alongside seemingly pertinent information about the unit's training for an upcoming mission, readers also learn that Nadia has a 10-year-old daughter, Mujdat is a married mother-of-three, and Awas is a divorce with two teenaged boys who juggles her military

obligations and family commitments by spending 'two days a week at the military camp and the other four with her children' (BBC33/2014).

Motherhood and soldierhood have traditionally been constructed as antithetical in the dominant theorisations of war and violent conflict, with maternalism often used as a means through which the perceived femininity of women who participate in conflict is reinforced, and their agency denied (Åhäll, 2012a; Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007; Gentry, 2009; see also chapter two).. This is evident in news coverage of "jihadi brides" in which a passive understanding of maternalism is used to deny agency to women who joined Daesh (see chapter five). In this case, however, I argue that maternal thinking is used as a lens through which the agency of women fighting against Daesh can be explained and accepted, though in a limited capacity.

In other words, the frame of reference constructed is that women's motivations for participating in combat against Daesh can be understood through a consideration of their apparent femininity, that it is their 'maternal passions [and] biological urges [that] transform women into fearsome killers' (Åhäll, 2012b: 292). Women's agency in this context is therefore recognised, but it is explained as stemming from their perceived femininity and maternal disposition. It is my contention that this enables the UK news media to create a balance, a way in which they can construct their allies as agential in the fight against Daesh, while also upholding gender stereotypical ideas about women in war and violent conflict more generally, by limiting their agency as non-political and situational.

The way in which maternalism is invoked in this case highlights the conflicting nature of the theory itself. Those portrayed as "the good guys" in UK news narratives (women fighting Daesh), are portrayed as "real women". They are agential, but only insofar as they are acting in defence of their children. This means that their agency is recognised, but it is constructed as a performance that only occurs in exceptional circumstances. Those categorised as "the bad guys" (Daesh aligned women), however, are represented through passive maternalism which is used to deny their agency, and to marginalise their actions as politically irrelevant. In both cases, "political" agency is denied.

In the reporting of each of the four news agencies that I analysed, it is suggested that female fighters in Syria and Iraq fight against Daesh as part of an effort to achieve gender equality. Specifically, it is argued that female fighters chose to fight Daesh because it would enable them 'to carve out a better future with more freedom and rights' for women (DM73/2017). This is not an uncommon explanation of women's participation in political violence in the news media. Brigitte L. Nacos argues that it has often been the case that women's violence in war and conflict is reported on 'as the expression of gender equality or the struggle to achieve gender equality' (2005: 442).

The UK news media reinforces this assertion using citations from female fighters in the region: "[women have] taken up arms and gone to battle to protect Kurdistan, but also to say that there's no difference between men and women" (Col. Rashid, Kurdish Peshmerga, in BBC33/2014); "we're going to free them [women in towns under Daesh control] and give them the volition they lost years ago, not just from Daesh, but from the male mentality and the government mentality" (Sarya, YPJ, in DM93/2017); "The goal… is to stand up against Daesh, to stand up to them and tell them that the woman is strong" (Layla, SDF, in DM93/2017).

It is my contention that the news media relies on such quotes to construct female fighter's agency as gendered and situational, and to reinforce Orientalist ideologies about the region more broadly. In other words, rather than fighting the same war for the same reasons as men, the UK news media suggests that women were motivated to fight Daesh solely because it provided them an opportunity to 'annihilate the patriarchal [social and political] structure[s] that exist in the Middle East' (TG11/2017). Through a consideration of the women's own narratives, however, it is clear that this representation oversimplifies their motives, and obscures the reality of their decades-long participation in Kurdish forces in Iraq and Syria.

Consider the following statement made by Col. Rashid of the Kurdish Peshmerga:

> Women have always been part of the Kurdish uprisings along with men. After the toppling of Saddam's regime and the liberation of Kurdistan, we went into politics, became part of the Kurdish government… We are always ready to

stand up for our country, the rights of women, and all of the communities of Kurdistan (Shevardnadze, 2015).

Col. Rashid's words highlight that while the rights and freedoms of women may be part of what motivates the female unit of the Kurdish Peshmerga, gender equality is not all that motivates them, nor are their objectives confined to the fight against Daesh. Rather, the political objectives of the unit, which was "formed 18 years ago" in response to Saddam Hussein, extend beyond women's liberation to maintaining and protecting the autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan in Northern Iraq, and building a society in which the rights of all citizens are protected (Shevardnadze, 2015).

Similar statements are evident in the narratives of YPJ fighters in Syria. For example, Nesrin Abdullah, a YPJ commander, explains that while gender equality is a central element of the objectives of the YPJ, it is only part of their overall political agenda which is to "build a free, democratic, ecological society, which increases the equality among people" (YPG Press Office, 2016). It should also be noted that this is not solely the objective of female fighters, it is the objective of both men and women, both in fighting forces and in politics, who founded Rojava, the Kurdish region in Northern Syria, 'on a constitution which guarantees freedom of conscience and religion, pluralism, and equal rights for all people of the region' (Ünal, 2020).

Based on these statements, it is clear that female fighters, along with men, are fighting a war on two fronts. On one hand they are fighting to protect Kurdistan from what Col. Rashid calls "the most barbaric enemy of all time" (Shevardnadze, 2015), and on the other, they are fighting to establish and maintain autonomous Kurdish regions in Iraq and Syria, regions based on a democratic system of governance that address all forms of oppression, including gender oppression (Isik, 2016). As such, I argue that to depict women's participation in Kurdish forces as a 'manifestation of women's liberation' that is confined to this conflict (Nacos, 2005: 442), is to ignore the complexities of their political agency.

6.3. On the Frontline.

At the outset of this chapter, I asserted that the women who fight Daesh have been made "visible" in a way rarely seen in the discourse of war and violent conflict. Plentiful

news articles have been written about these women and their experiences in the region. It is clear, however, when engaging with UK news discourse specifically, that some women are made more visible than others. In the news reports that I analysed, the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) based in Syria are covered significantly more than their counterparts in the Iraqi Peshmerga forces. Moreover, in Iraq alone, coverage of the women in the Peshmerga forces has focused on the so-called Yazidi Peshmerga more so than other female units. This difference in visibility is particularly evident in news coverage of their activities on the frontlines, and their roles in the Kurdish forces more broadly.

In all of these cases, reporting is limited, with details of missions and battles often relegated to a sentence of two in the body of news articles that are more focused on physical appearance and gender. Yet, from the information available it is clear that the agency of the women fighting across Syria and Iraq is constructed differently as news articles flit between portrayals of active fighters fighting alongside men, and fighters who seemingly inhabit a peripheral space in the conflict, as defensive units less likely to participate in actual combat. In this section, I study the different representations that have been constructed, and rely on third-party interviews to shed light on the actual roles that women have played in both territories, and to underscore the existence and significance of their agency in the region.

*6.3.1. On the Frontline in Iraq.*

In news articles where the focus is on Iraq, two units of Kurdish female fighters are discussed. These units are named in news articles as the 'Kurdish Peshmerga' (BBC33/2014), and the 'Yazidi Peshmerga' (TG40/2017). Both are categorised as 'female unit[s] of the Peshmerga- the Kurdish Regions security forces' (BBC33/0214), but in the news articles, they are reported on separately, with differences evident not only in the depictions of their military activities, but also in the depth of the coverage. In news stories about the Kurdish Peshmerga, despite there being clear evidence of their presence on the frontlines, the news articles offer only vague representations of their activities. In contrast, the coverage of the Yazidi Peshmerga, who are constructed as symbolic rather than active fighters, is much more detailed. I argue that this difference has much to do with the histories of the units, and how they came to be.

Purportedly made up of 'several hundred fighters, all volunteers' (BBC33/2014), the Kurdish Peshmerga is depicted as a 'well-armed, disciplined' unit (SN67/2014), who have undertaken extensive military training at a facility near Sulaymaniyah (see image 6.7). Focusing on this training, the news articles report that they have worked 'with SWAT teams and with special forces' (BBC33/2014), to enhance their "war fighting skills" and "operational capability on the battlefield" (Lieutenant Colonel Oz Lane, in DM96/202016), before being transported to frontline areas along the Kurdistan border.

**Image 6.7: Google Map of Syria and Iraq (Sulaymaniyah). [18]**



Coverage of the women's military roles is evident in the news articles, albeit in a limited form. In the news articles, Kurdish Peshmerga women are said to have moved 'into disputed areas abandoned by Iraqi security forces during the ISIS advance' (BBC33/2014), and are credited with playing a part in the recapture of Mosul Dam (DM49/2014), and in 'seiz[ing] control of oil production facilities at Bai Hassan and Kirkuk', where they denied Daesh vital territory and financial resources (BBC33/2014). Overall, it is argued that their role is to contribute to broad efforts to 'secur[e] the Kurdistan region' (BBC33/2014), and to help to 'protect town centres and villages' (SN67/2014).

Beyond this, there is little else reported about Kurdish Peshmerga women in the news articles that I analysed. Due to its superficial nature, I argue that, from this coverage,

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[18] Image sourced from Google Maps: https://www.google.com/maps/@33.1493647,39.2212011,6z.
Last Accessed: 11/04/2019.

readers are left with partial knowledge of their participation: it is clear that they took part in missions, but how? What were their actual roles? What part did they play in missions like those outlined about? Did they engage directly with Daesh? Were these the only missions that women played a part in? In an interview with Sophie Shevardnadze in 2015, Col Nahida Ahmed Rashid, the highest-ranking woman in the Peshmerga forces, answers these questions:

> From the very beginning, we have been on the frontline in this war with ISIS. We are the first to fight. We fought in Kirkuk and at the Khanaqin front[line]. Our women get killed in this war. The deputy commander of the regiment, that is to say my immediate deputy was killed last November. She was a captain, a skilled shooter and a sniper.

She goes on to say:

> We have been fighting along the Kirkuk/Khanaqin line since June. When our unit was preparing for an assault near al Bashar, the women's unit, armed with heavy machine guns, grenade launchers and sniper rifles, reach[ed] the front at midnight. It was an intense and difficult battle. The enemy was fighting back fiercely trying to repel our attack, but the Peshmerga won the battle. Terrorists had to retreat, leaving many dead behind.

> Last October, we were in another difficult fight. We were attacked from all four sides. Suicide bombers were trying to get to our lines to blow themselves up amid the Peshmerga so that they could puncture our defence, but our regiment demonstrated outstanding bravery on the entire front and the enemy was unable to break through.

> Today, our members are fighting right on the frontline in actual combat with terrorists. In the last battle we lost several people including a general. It was a tough affair, but we hit them hard with our mortars, machine guns and grenade launchers.

Moreover, Col Rashid explains that this is not the first time that her unit has played such active roles in violent conflict:

> This is not our first war; we have been through many fights already. Let me tell you about our role in the fight against Saddam Hussein. We were on the

frontline near Kirkuk and Khanaqin. Several of our fighters were wounded. We were the first women's unit to enter Kirkuk in 2003 together with the Peshmerga brothers. We were fighting side by side… and back in 1995, we were fighting against Islamist terrorists. So this is clearly not our first fight.

Unlike the vague representations of Kurdish women's roles in combat constructed in the news articles, Col Rashid's story sheds light on the full reality of their agency and participation in the fight against Daesh and in the Peshmerga more broadly. From her account, it is clear that Kurdish women in Iraq play the same roles in combat as men, facing the same enemy, and using the same weapons:

> Right now I can say with confidence that males and females are equal. We work with men during military exercises… we are taught how to use all types of weapons. Just like men, we have a female sniper team, female mortar gunner units that are equipped with heavy machinery and other heavy weaponry. We even have female tank crews. Our regiment is part of a well-trained, well-equipped modern fighting force.

Why then do the analysed new articles provide only superficial accounts of their actions, particularly given their apparent fascination with female fighters in this conflict? I argue that it stems from an unwillingness to move away from entrenched patriarchal and Orientalist ideas about what it is to be a woman, and more specifically a woman in the 'East'. As we have seen, there has been a consistent effort made by UK news agencies to represent the agency of women who fight in this conflict as extraordinary. Coupled with language that stresses the perceived usual subservient position of women in a 'traditional, conservative society' (TG40/2017 – see my discussion in chapter two), the view put forth in news articles is that these fighters retain their "natural" femininity because their participation is a result of the direness of the situation.

This is evident in UK news articles that depict Col Rashid's unit: 'these are not your ordinary Peshmerga' (SN67/2014). Despite this representation, from Col. Rashid's story, it is clear that this unit is decades-old and as such, is the ordinary Peshmerga. I argue that stories like Col Rashid's are omitted because they disrupt the narrative of exceptionality that UK news agencies have relied upon thus far, and because they would challenge traditional characterisations of women as unlikely soldiers. This

explains why UK news coverage has focused predominately on gender, and on the women's activities away from the frontlines, in training facilitates. My argument in this context is strengthened when considering the detailed reports of the participation of Yazidi women in the Peshmerga, who, based on how they came to be, can be more easily cast as exceptional agents in conflict because they were formed in response to Daesh and Daesh's assault on Sinjar.

As discussed in the previous section on motivations, the Yazidi unit of the Peshmerga, was established after Daesh attacked the Sinjar region. According to the news articles, Khatoon Khider, the founder and commander of the unit, was in Sinjar when Daesh arrived (TG40/2017). Like hundreds of thousands of other Yazidis, Khatoon is reported to have witnessed the total destruction of her home village and the death or capture of several of her loved ones by jihadists: 'an aunt was taken captive, a disabled uncle was murdered in his bed and another uncle died on the frontlines… [and] she knew hundreds of others who were killed or enslaved' (TG40/2017).

In an effort to escape a similar fate, Khatoon is described as 'run[ning] for her life into the mountains' where she survived for ten days in the 'blazing heat of summer without access to food or water' (TG27/2014). After successful rescue efforts, it is reported that while many Yazidis were taken to refugee camps, Khatoon was 'determined to return and fight' (TG40/2017). To form the unit, the news articles stress that Khatoon had to get permission from both the Kurdish regional government, and the blessing of the top Yazidi religious leader (TG40/2017), thus highlighting the perceived conservative nature of Yazidi and Iraqi society.

According to the news articles that I analysed, Khatoon then recruited other women from amongst displaced populations. While it is suggested that she recruited only Yazidi women, statements made by Khatoon elsewhere show that not to be the case: "We spread through media that we are going to defend our honor and my call is not only for Yazidi girls, not for Sinjar alone, but to all women" (Khatoon, in Hall, 2017). Those who joined Khatoon travelled to training camps in Northern Iraq, where the Daily Mail suggests they were 'transformed… into brave fighters' (DM69/2016). This type of representation reinforces the image already constructed through Kurdish Peshmerga fighters, that women are unlikely soldiers. If the Yazidi women had to be 'transformed'

in order to become 'brave fighters', this implies that they did not have that capacity prior to Daesh, thus emphasising the situational nature of their depicted agency.

Given the focus of UK news agencies on the SGBV perpetrated against Yazidi women (see my discussion in chapter four), it is perhaps unsurprising that in representations of their roles as members of the Peshmerga, a romanticised image has emerged of those same women bravely taking up arms to fight back against their oppressors. This has facilitated the characterisation of Yazidi women as largely symbolic fighters, less likely than their male (and female) counterparts to actually participate in violence, or to engage with Daesh. This view is reinforced in news articles by the Guardian in which it is reported that their 'base is more than an hour's drive from the frontline, on the other side of [Sinjar] mountain' (TG40/2017), and that Yazidi women primarily spend their time 'on standby', taking part in 'guard shifts' and conducting surveillance on Daesh 'from the height of Sinjar mountain' (TG27/2017).

As well as representing Yazidi women's role in the Peshmerga as subsidiary, the same news article argues that the unit's 'very existence… is a blow to their enemy' (TG40/2017). This implies that the Yazidi Peshmerga do not have to fight to contribute to combat efforts against Daesh to be successful, they simply need to exist. This lends credence to the idea put forth in the article that so-called 'critics' of this unit describe it 'as more propaganda than a real fighting force' (TG40/2017). While this description is attributed to 'critics' and not the news agency itself, when considered alongside the romanticised images perpetuated in relation to these women, and depictions of their supposed positions far away from the frontline, public perception is likely to be that Yazidi women did not fight Daesh directly.

Through such narratives, Yazidis women's agency is devalued as their participation is trivialised, and their roles portrayed as subordinate. I return to the BBC documentary by Stacey Dooley, to argue that such portrayals of Yazidi women's participation on the frontlines fail to reflect the reality of their experiences. During her two weeks with the unit, Dooley followed Yazidi fighters to the *Faysh Khabur* and *Snuny* military bases where the women trained, to refugee camps where they visited their families, and to the Sinjar frontline where they protected the region and engaged militarily with jihadists (see image 6.8).
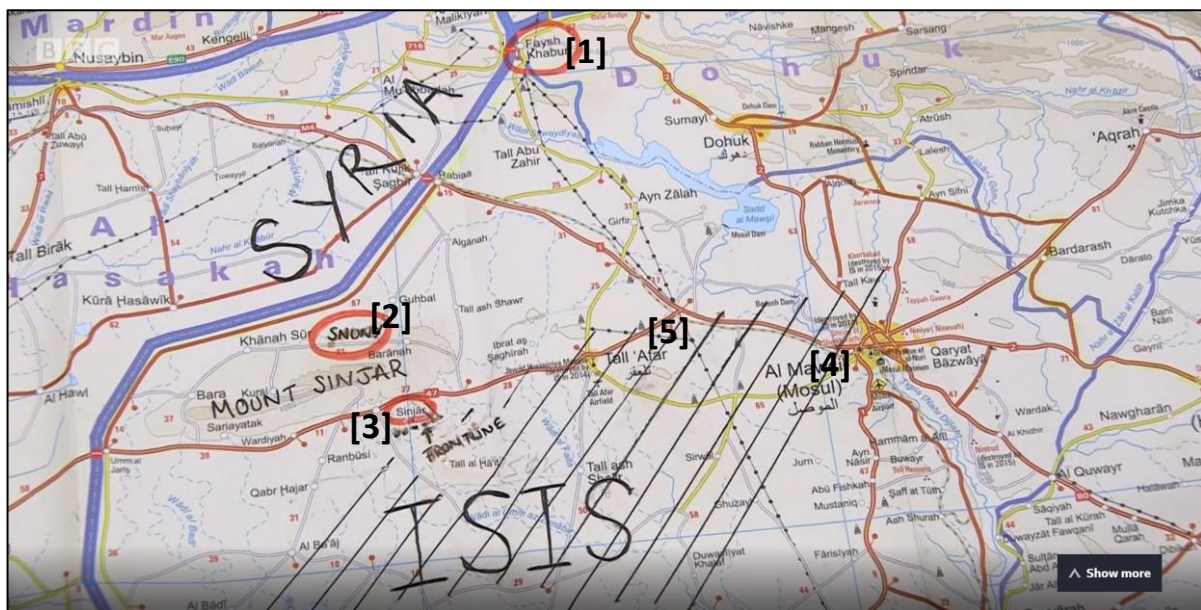
**Image 6.8: Map of Iraq with various points marked.**



Image 6.8: This is a map used by Dooley to tracked her journey in Iraq: [1] *Kaysh Khabur* training camp where she first met the unit, [2] *Snuny* base where they waited to be called to the frontline, [3] the Sinjar frontline, and [4] and [5] known Daesh positions in Mosul and Tal Afar (Dooley, 2016).

As stated, the news articles largely describe the women of the Yazidi Peshmerga as being separated from the frontline by a mountain, and an hour-long drive. This gives readers the impression that Yazidi women were relatively safe. From the documentary, however, we see that this was not the case. While there is little discussion about their roles from the women themselves, video footage follows them from *Snuny* base, over the mountain to Sinjar, where they travel through the ruined city to the frontline. It is explained that the unit will be stationed on the Sinjar frontline alongside male members of the Iraqi Peshmerga, and that they are only "500-600" metres" away from Daesh militants (Dooley, 2016).

The danger faced by the women is made clear as Dooley speaks to the frontline commander at their position, who explains that: "during this week more than 50 mortars have fallen at this front[line]… and there is a possibility for that at any moment. At any moment you should expect a mortar failing… two mortars today have fallen". Not long after their arrival, we see the unit come under attack with an exchange of gunfire occurring between jihadists and the Yazidi Peshmerga who are operating the weapons on the frontline. This illustrates that contrary to what the UK news media portrays, Yazidi women were active participants in frontline combat. This point is reiterated by one of their male colleagues stationed with them:

They fight on the frontlines like us. Before we did not have this power. If these girls had been able to shoot weapons before ISIS attacked us then maybe ISIS would not have been able to take over Sinjar. Now, women and men… we all fight equally as one. The girls can be stronger and more powerful than us. They are great fighters (unnamed male fighter, in Dooley, 2016).

Based on the video footage and narratives sourced from this documentary, it is evident that the Yazidi unit of the Peshmerga were not merely a propaganda tool in the fight against Daesh. Rather, they were positioned on the frontline, playing the same roles as men. In particular, they fought to protect Sinjar, thus ensuring that it would not fall back into Daesh hands, and in the process, they blocked Daesh's main route into Syria. Dooley ends her documentary by explaining that the unit's position became vitally important after the "battle to retake Mosul" because they were able to stop jihadists from reaching the border, where they would be able to flee into Syria, taking their captives, primarily Yazidi women, with them (Dooley, 2016).

In taking all of this into consideration, two questions arise: why does the UK news media report more on the Yazidi unit rather than Col. Rashid's unit? And, why does the UK news media portray Yazidi women as subsidiary actors when clear evidence of their participation in combat exists? I argue that the answer to both questions is clear: it is easier for the UK news media to diminish the agency of Yazidi women, and to reinforce patriarchal ideologies. Unlike, Col. Rashid's unit, the Yazidi Peshmerga can be portrayed as a reactionary force. They were established in response to Daesh's attack on Sinjar, and their militarism can be represented as stemming from the impacts of the SGBV perpetrated against Yazidi women by Daesh.

This means that, in overlooking other units, the UK news media can more feasibly construct a homogenising image of female fighters, an image that recognises their agency on the surface, but simultaneously diminishes it as exceptional and gendered. I argue that it would be difficult to paint the same image of Col. Rashid's unit if the full details of their history were to be reported. In maintaining this image, however, the UK news media largely ignores the voices of the women in both units by side-lining the stories of the Kurdish Peshmerga, and obscuring and oversimplifying the stories of the Yazidi unit. Based on this, I argue that despite making them "visible" in the narrative

of the conflict, the UK news media simultaneously marginalises female fighters, and constructs a distorted image of their agency as fighters.

## 6.3.2. On the Frontline in Syria.

When reporting on the Syrian frontlines, the news articles that I analysed focus primarily on the Syrian Kurdish forces, and in particular, on the women of the *Yekîneyên Parastina Jin* or the Women's Protection Unit (YPJ) (Darden, Henshaw & Szekely, 2019). This unit is portrayed in news discourse as an 'all-female branch of the Kurdish Protection Units' of the YPG (DM46/2015), which is reported to have 'some 50,000 fighters, 20 per cent of whom are women' (DM46/2015). Depicted as a 'potent force' (SN19/2015), the women of the YPJ are made "visible" by the UK news media more so than their Iraqi counterparts. Yet, like their Iraqi counterparts, much of what is reported on their activities fails to portray the reality of their activities.

Despite stressing that 'on the frontlines they [the YPJ] fight alongside the men, taking the same risk and the same dangers' (BBC16/2014), the UK news media provides little detail about their roles, and the importance of their actions, beyond simplistic statements, such as: 'They have been a constant and equal part of the victory here [in Raqqa] and in many other battles' (SN12/2017); '[They were] locked in a life-and-death battle for Kobane that has lasted a month' (DM49/2014).

It was the battle in Kobane that arguably brought global media attention to the YPJ. Yet, the UK news media fails to paint a picture of the significance of their fight against Daesh in the city which saw Daesh experience their first major defeat. Shedding light on what this fighting looked like and how women participated in it, is Jiyan Tolhildan, a YPJ commander:

> They attacked with all their forces in every direction. The only thing they didn't have was airplanes. They had everything else: tanks, panzer, rockets, missiles. In the first few weeks there were very violent conflicts. They burn down houses. They raped girls. They cut their heads and this was distributed over the internet and the media.

Suddenly, we saw them coming in their cars screaming "Allah is the greatest". There seemed to be about 400 ISIS men. We counter 15 trucks full of them. I only had 50 comrades with me… They shouted and screamed: "What are women doing in the army? You are neither Muslim nor faithful… having women in your army proves it".

A comrade told me: "We are running out of ammunition… We only have what we carry on us". This stressed me a lot because I had 50 comrades in my group. So, when it got dark we sent them back in groups. Eight of us would stay behind, six men and two women. In any case, we had a bomb on us. If they came close, that would be the last thing they would see. We were going to blow ourselves together with them.

Later our reinforcements came and they [Daesh] were forced to withdraw. They retreated and we took from them a lot of ammunition. They suffered many losses. We lost one, and found 50 dead bodies left behind (Ünal, 2020).

Jiyan's story highlights not only the intensity of the battle in Kobane, but the vital role that women played in ensuring that Daesh failed in its efforts to capture it. Considering the fixation that the UK news media has shown in relation the YPJ fighters, one must question why the full reality of their participation is obscured and oversimplified in one sentence in the body of a news article focused more on physical appearance. I contend that this is because stories like Jiyan's illustrate the experience the YPJ fighters have in frontline battles, and as such, disrupt the news media's assertion when discussing all of these female units, that their agency as fighters was gendered and exceptional.

This is evident when considering that in the same news articles where YPJ fighters are depicted as fighting equally in battles, language diminishing their roles in the Kurdish forces is used: 'These women stand-out as a striking anomaly in the regions often male-dominated conflicts' (DM92/2014); '[They are] the Kurds' secret weapon' (SN19/2015). In reality, the YPJ are not a secret nor are they an anomaly in the region. Despite being formed in 2012, Kurdish women 'have been organising themselves politically and militarily since the '80s' (Dean, 2019: 5), and the Women's Protection Unit (YPJ), is simply the latest development of such fighters.

The news articles also fail to recognise the full scope of women's activities in the YPJ in their reporting. Female fighters fought on the frontlines, but they also established

education centres and military training facilities to train news fighters (Janda Kocher, in YPG Press Office, 2016), and aided in setting up medical facilitates for fighters. Female fighters who took part in the battle of Kobane explain that because of the intensity of the battle, the YPJ determined that appropriate medical services for were required. Bishengê, a member of the YPJ, explains:

> Because our fighters were relentless in the battle of Kobane, we were pushed to react quickly and provide medical services, which was a huge challenge because of the embargo. We knew that to win this war in the long-term, we would have to develop other areas that affect our fight. Since the victory of Kobane, many new doctors are formed to face the specificities of war and its emergencies (YPG Press Office).

All these details highlight the extent of the involvement of YPJ fighters, not only in frontline battles against Daesh where they participated in active combat, but in every facet of the military structures of the Kurdish forces. They were fighters on the ground as the news articles suggest, but they were also commanders leading the battles, they were in charge of military training for new recruits, and recognising that "war and health are interlinked, and that if there [was] sudden fighting and [not] enough medical services [that] there would be a lot martyred", they expanded their force to include medical units (Dr Viyan, in YPG Press Office, 2016).

In overlooking such details in favour of descriptions of what female fighters are wearing as they go into battle, I argue that the news articles pay only lip-service to the agency of female fighters in Syria. Despite fixating on female fighters and making them "visible" in news media representations of the conflict, I argue that the news articles that I analysed largely ignore their voices, and thus, contribute to their marginalisation. Moreover, they fail to explain the existence and significance of their participation to UK news audiences whose perception of the conflict is shaped by such coverage.


6.4. Conclusion.

Similar to women depicted as 'victims' of Daesh (see chapter four), and those who are represented as being aligned with the jihadist group (see chapter five), the women of the Iraqi and Syrian Kurdish fighting forces have been made "visible" by the UK news

media in a way seldom seen in the discourse of war and violent conflict. As I argued at the outset of this chapter, however, in the case of female soldiers, the types of representation that have been constructed as a result of this "visibility" are significantly different than those analysed in previous chapters. Rather than being stereotyped as the helpless victims of Daesh violence (Yazidi women), and/or manipulation ("Jihadi brides"), female soldiers appear, at first glance, to be portrayed in the UK news media as agential warriors whose determination and willingness to stop at nothing to defeat barbaric insurgents is worthy of praise: 'strong female comrades' (BBC14/2017), 'fearless warriors' (TG11/2017), 'brave female fighters' (DM83/2015), 'she is willing to give her life to end extremism' (TG39/2017).

Through an analysis of this news coverage and the women's own stories, however, this chapter has illustrated that the UK news media's seemingly positive portrayals of female soldiers and their agency are largely superficial. In other words, despite making them "visible" and depicting their actions as remarkable and heroic on the surface, one need only study the language in use to uncover the harmful patriarchal and Orientalist ideologies that permeate narratives of their agency. Relying on these ideologies the news articles that I analysed perpetuate a distorted and subordinating image of female soldiers as beautiful, innocent and inspirational women who took up arms in response to Daesh's perceived ruthlessness towards women and as a means to seek revenge for and/or to liberate women. My findings show that this is a stereotypically feminised narrative that enables UK news agencies to recognise the agency of female soldiers, but to simultaneously diminish it as gendered, exceptional and inherently non-political.

From depictions of identity to explanations of the women's motives and actual roles in combat, the UK news media reports on female soldiers through a patriarchal lens and relies on Orientalist ideas about what it is to be a woman in the Middle East to stress the perceived unconventional nature of their participation in combat. Differentiating them from their male counterparts through the continual use of gendered labels and a determined focus on physical appearance to emphasise their womanhood, I contend that the news media sensationalises and fetishises female soldiers to reinforce the perceived abnormality of their militarism. This is also achieved through discussions of their motivations which are portrayed as gender-specific, personal and based in feminised emotionality, and in news coverage of their roles which are recognised as active, but discussed in vague terms giving the impression that they are peripheral

and situational actors, thus enabling the UK news media to portray them as largely symbolic. This means that not only are female soldiers constructed as depoliticised in news discourse, their agency outside of this conflict is delegitimised and the broader political, ideological and social struggles in which they engage in are ignored.

My findings illustrate that these types of representation are problematic not only for female soldiers, but for the general public whose knowledge and understanding of the conflict is shaped by news discourse. In particular, I argued that while the UK news media's fascination with female fighters gives the impression that their stories are being told, in reality, much of what they actually say and purport to stand for is obscured and oversimplified in the reporting. Rather than amplifying the voices of such women, the UK news media contributes to their marginalisation and subordination as public actors. This means that only partial knowledge is constructed by the UK news media, knowledge that upholds harmful patriarchal and Orientalist assumptions and that hinders the ability of the general public to understand the experiences of Kurdish female fighters and to call for appropriate support that might aid them in their fight against Daesh.

**Chapter Seven: Concluding Remarks.**

From 2013 onward in the United Kingdom, it was impossible to avoid news coverage detailing the mass atrocities that Daesh fighters perpetrated in Syria and Iraq as they attempted to capture huge swathes of territory to establish an Islamic caliphate (Cottee, 2017: 440). What differentiated this reporting from the news coverage of other wars and/or instances of violent conflict was its explicit fixation on women. In this news discourse, women were made "visible" in a way seldom seen as daily news articles were written about their experiences as victims of, participants in, and fighters against Daesh. Focusing on these representations my thesis set out to analyse not only how women are portrayed in UK news discourse (2013-2017), but how and why specific ideologies are used to underpin the constructed representations and how public perception of the conflict and its participants, is shaped through such ideologies. Centring the voices of women, I also investigated how the representations constructed in the news media impact and/or inform the women to whom they relate, and how women's stories of their experiences challenge and/or disrupt them.

Recognising that critical discourse analysis and narrative analysis are interconnected methodologies, and can be used together to facilitate a more complete analysis of discourse and its implications for the development of knowledge about specific events (see my discussion in chapter three), I deployed a combined approach to facilitate my analysis of UK news discourse and personal narratives. In particular, I deploy critical discourse analysis to examine 245 online news articles about Daesh by four UK news agencies: the BBC, the Daily Mail, Sky News, and the Guardian, before using narrative analysis to examine the personal stories of women sourced through: semi-structured interviews, survivor (auto)biographies, social media posts and third-party interviews. Operating within a feminist theoretical framework (see my discussion in chapter two), my chosen methodologies enabled an investigation of the representations of agency (or lack of agency) that have been constructed in UK news discourse in relation to women 'in and around' Daesh (Sjoberg, 2018a: 298).

As I illustrate in chapter four, women in this conflict were first propelled into the news media spotlight in August 2014, after Daesh launched a brutal offensive on Sinjar, a district in the Nineveh governate of Northern Iraq. By the time this offensive took place, the jihadist group had already established strongholds in Syria, and had seized control

of major towns and cities across Iraq. However, it was their actions in the towns and villages that surround Mount Sinjar in Iraq, that captured global attention. Home to the majority of Iraq's Yazidis, a Kurdish religious minority, Sinjar was attacked on August 3rd 2014, causing a mass exodus of its residents who fled into the mountain, where they became trapped without food or water, in extreme heat and with Daesh fighters surrounding their position. As the world watched the humanitarian crisis on Mount Sinjar unfold, and scrambled to provide aid and to make rescue attempts, however, those who remained on the ground were met with extreme brutality.

In what the UN would later declare a genocide (2016), an untold number of Yazidis were executed by Daesh, while thousands of others, primarily women and girls, were abducted and taken to makeshift detention centres, later dubbed 'slave markets', where evidence suggests they suffered horrific sexual and gender-based violence. Stories relating to this type of violence became a fundamental part of the UK's news coverage of Daesh, and explains how Yazidi women came to be situated as the archetypal targets and victims of Daesh violence in the region. In analysing 96 news articles that report on women (mainly Yazidi women) as 'victims' of Daesh, my thesis demonstrates that the representations constructed in the UK news media contribute to the construction of problematic knowledge that subordinates women in the region, and shapes a selective and sensationalist perception of the conflict and its participants for the public. This is particularly evident when considering the harmful patriarchal and Orientalist ideologies that the constructed representations rely upon and perpetuate.

As each of the four news agencies studied use graphic sexual language to construct sensationalist stories of the perceived pain and suffering of Yazidi women, they paint a homogenising and subordinating image of women in the region as agentless victims of Daesh violence. Coupled with the use of gender-stereotypical language that depicts women as innately peaceful, innocent and helpless beings (see chapter two), the news media represents Yazidi women as defenceless against Daesh's perceived brutality and ruthlessness, and tells its readers that women in the region require rescue and protection from the West. Reflective of Spivak's classic example of 'white men saving brown women from brown men' (1993), my thesis contends that this type of narrative is used to provoke a sense of moral outrage that would enable the US and its coalition partners to justify military intervention in Syria and Iraq. Consequently, women (mainly

Yazidi women) are situated in UK news discourse as both the catalyst of war, and its victim (see, Elshtain, 1989; Sjoberg, 2010; Ahram, 2015).

Relying on the personal stories of women from Syria and Iraq sourced through face-to-face interviews and from (auto)biographies, chapter four illustrated and investigated two primary issues with this type of representation. First, it contributes to the construction of partial knowledge about the reality and complexity of Yazidi women's experiences of Daesh. Recounting personal stories from Nadia Murad, Farida Khalaf and other Yazidi women who were in abducted by Daesh from their homes in Sinjar, my thesis outlines examples of women's resistance. In particular, I note that women devised practical and strategic methods to protect themselves and others from Daesh violence. Not only did they physically fight their captors, they took creative steps to ensure that they could be identified if killed or found, and took deliberate action to secure their freedom, including instigating their own escapes and/or rescues. My thesis contends that by omitting such stories from the narrative of events, UK news agencies obscure the existence and significance of women's agency and risk harming them further by contributing to their marginalisation and disempowerment.

Second, it overlooks, almost entirely, the suffering of other populations who were targeted by Daesh and others in the region. Engaging with the personal stories of the women I interviewed who travelled to Belfast as refugees, my findings demonstrate that contrary to the majority of the UK news coverage of Daesh, Yazidi women were not the only targets of Daesh violence, nor were Daesh the only group perpetrating violence. Lina's story, for example, shows that Shia women from Mosul were also targeted by Daesh, and experienced similar occurrences of sexual and gender-based violence.[19] Moreover, from Abeer and Haya, we learn that state forces in Syria were also engaged in such violence, and that populations displaced as a result of Daesh's rampage were victimised in other countries. Discussing the UK news media's failure to reflect on stories of this nature, I argue that the full reality and impacts of the conflict in Syria and Iraq are not conveyed, and that because news discourse plays an explicit role in shaping public perception of the conflict, partial narratives reduce the potential for meaningful responses to it, and ensure that some victims remain unrecognised.

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[19] The names given to interviewees are pseudonyms used to protect their identities.

Chapter five then turns to the UK news media's fascination with women aligned with Daesh, who, like Yazidi women, are made "visible" in news articles that I analysed. This news coverage is dominated by representations of migrant women who travelled to Daesh-held cities from the UK to join the jihadist group, with news articles from each of the four selected news agencies fixating on how women from the West could involve themselves with an extremist group who brutalised and oppressed other women. While women had been migrating to Syria and Iraq since 2013, it was only after news coverage intensified in 2014, that migrant women became a central element of the reporting, and the primary way through which the public perception of women as participants in Daesh was framed. Consequently, the news media focused intently on discussions of radicalisation and motivations, and on reports of the roles attributed to women in the Caliphate. In particular, the UK news media studied the personal histories of migrant women in an effort to construct a profile of radicalisation that sets out how it occurs and who is susceptible to it.

My analysis of the constructed profile demonstrates that it relies on depictions of migrant women's perceived youth, lack of education and difficult personal histories, to portray them as 'naïve victims' of deviant jihadis. In particular, the profile suggests to news consumers that migrant women were merely naïve, helpless and impressionable youngsters, ruled by the "natural" maternalism and desire for domesticity. Relying on this representation, the news articles explain away migrant women's radicalisation and motivations for migration by suggesting that predatory male jihadis lured them to the Caliphate using promises of marriage, love and family as incentives for making the journey. This representation is captured by the now-famous "Jihadi Bride" label which is used to depoliticise migrant women, and to reinforce a traditional Orientalist image that casts males jihadis as malevolent Eastern men attempting to taken advantage of and to corrupt innocent and naïve Western women.

Similarly, in representations of their eventual roles in Daesh-held cities, the UK news media reinforces the idea that migrant women were victims of Daesh by portraying them as 'passive participants'. In particular, women in the Caliphate are represented in a patriarchal way as domestically isolated wives and mothers whose role in conflict is to support their menfolk from the side-lines, and to raise the next generation of fighters. Ignoring the complexities of this role and its significance as a means to build and sustain a lasting caliphate, the news media denies migrant women's agency by

portraying them as subordinate and politically irrelevant actors. Even when evidence of their participation in Daesh exists, as recruiters and enforcers, the UK news media delegitimises migrant women and casts them as non-credible jihadis by arguing that much of their actions are gender-specific and non-violent, and that if evidence of their violence exists, then they are portrayed as "unnatural" women, or simply doing as they were instructed by men.

My thesis raises two interrelated issues with the representation of migrant women constructed in UK news discourse. First, it relies on and perpetuates deeply harmful patriarchal and Orientalist ideologies. Specifically, it attributes stereotypically feminine traits to migrant women as a way to explain away their radicalisation and migration, and to marginalise their roles in the Caliphate. Moreover, by limiting their reporting to migrant women, the news media constructs a homogenising image of Daesh's female participants as helpless, innocent and Western women who, through the ignorance of their youth and gender, fell victim to the manipulation of unsavoury men from despotic Eastern societies. Second, it ignores the voices of migrant women who have used social media to outline their religious and political reasoning for migration, and instead obscures and oversimplifies their involvement in Daesh, thereby contributing to the construction of incomplete knowledge about the conflict and its participants.

The ramifications of this knowledge can be understood through a consideration of the impact that it has on the general public. If the public's awareness of social and political events is dependent upon what they learn from discourse, then the representation of migrant women constructed in UK news discourse, is likely to paint a confusing and limited picture for readers. In other words, by casting migrant women as agentless and naïve victims, and as subsidiary and largely irrelevant actors in the Caliphate, the UK news media indicates to its readers that migrant women were not complicit in their radicalisation, or in Daesh's violent agenda. It is my contention that this hinders the general public's ability not only to perceive the dangers that such women might pose in Syria and Iraq, and at home should they return, but to recognise radicalisation in their own families or communities, and to call for appropriate policies to counter it.

In chapter six, I argued that similar to women depicted as 'victims' of Daesh (Yazidi women) and represented as aligned with the jihadist group (migrant women), women fighters against Daesh are made "visible" in UK news discourse in a way seldom seen.

Unlike other women in the region, however, my thesis illustrates that female fighters appear, at first glance, to be represented in an agential light as heroic warriors fighting bravely on the frontline against ruthless insurgents. Despite the praise often heaped on these female fighters, one need only study the language in use in UK news articles to determine that any recognition of their agency is superficial. In other words, it is recognised only insofar as it can be subordinated as gendered and exceptional. This is evident when considering what is included and/or excluded from the discourse, and through a consideration of the patriarchal and Orientalist ideologies that permeate it.

To stress the perceived unconventional nature of women's militarism in the region, for example, UK news articles focus their reporting overwhelming on appearance and on the women's religious identities. In particular, the UK news media constructs an image of beautiful, innocent, exotic and inspirational women, who defied deeply conservative social norms and practices to take up arms in defence of other women. Emphasising this representation, the news articles that I analysed often juxtapose the militarism of Kurdish female fighters with depictions of their perceived femininity. In chapter six, I contend that this occurs as a means to assure readers that while they might appear to be flouting gender-stereotypes that cast women as private and peaceful actors, female fighters are indeed "real women". Connected to this, it also aids in separating women fighting against Daesh from women aligned with the jihadist group who are constructed as desexualised in news discourse when their participation in violence is clear.

Rather than being portrayed as fighting the same war, for the same reasons as men, my thesis demonstrates that female fighters are further differentiated from their male counterparts by news articles that insinuate to readers that, in reality, they are fighting a gender-specific war for stereotypically feminine reasons. In particular, the new media describes the motivations of female fighters to be non-political, situational and based in emotionality, that is, rather than being motivated by political, ideological and/or religious factors, female fighters are depicted as being motivated by maternalism, and a desire to emasculate Daesh fighters and/or to take revenge against them. This type of gendered and exceptional representation of the agency of female fighters is also evident in news coverage of the roles which are recognised as active in the discourse, but are often discussed in vague terms that give the impression that it is a novel phenomenon and that the women are peripheral, subsidiary or symbolic actors.

In chapter six, I contend that these types of representations are problematic because they depoliticise Kurdish female fighters, and contribute to the delegitimization of their agency outside of the context of this specific conflict, thereby disregarding the broader political, ideological and social struggles in which they are engaged. Moreover, despite their apparent fascination with such women, the "knowledge" that the UK news media constructs about them is dangerously incomplete because it largely ignores their voices and their calls for military and political support in their fight against Daesh, in favour of sensationalist and fetishized narratives of their experiences. Consequently, in their efforts to uphold gender normative identities, the UK news media contributes to the marginalisation of female fighters and to the subordination of their agency, and shapes a perception of them for the general public that is rooted in Orientalist assumptions.

It is clear that women in Syria and Iraq who are depicted as victims of, participants in, and fighters against Daesh, have been made "visible" by the UK news media in a way rarely seen in the discourse on war and violent conflict. My findings show, however, that across each of the four news agencies selected for analysis, they are only made "visible" in particular ways, not in the fulsomeness of their agency and experience. In particular, they are made "visible" only insofar as the experiences and actions at the centre of the news coverage reinforce gender-stereotypical ideas about what it is to be a woman, and more specifically, what it is to be a woman in the Middle East. Replete with gender-specific language that reflects an Orientalist lens, I argue that the constructed representations are not designed to make clear the reality of women's lives in Daesh-held territories. Rather they are intended to construct a homogenising and sensationalist image of the conflict and its participants, that will attract readers and provoke a sense of moral outrage at the perceived brutality of Daesh, particularly against women, thus justifying military intervention in the region.

This means that rather than making visible the existence and significance of women's agency or emphasising issues of concern to women as it purports to do, the BBC, the Daily Mail, the Guardian and Sky News (the news agencies selected my analysis in my thesis) each contribute to the continued marginalisation of women by subordinating their voices in the narrative of events, and obscuring and oversimplifying the reality of their experiences and actions in the region. Moreover, through such representations, the UK news media perpetuates a distorted image of the conflict and its participants.

Given that discourse is the primary way through which social actors construct meaning about the social world, and build and/or change their beliefs, ideas and preconceptions, my thesis contends that for the general public, the knowledge that is constructed through UK news discourse has harmful implications. Specifically, it reinforces patriarchal and Orientalist ideologies that contribute to the subjugation of women and the Othering of Muslim societies, thus aiding in cementing harmful stereotypes in the UK public consciousness. Coupled with the incomplete nature of the knowledge constructed, this is likely to prevent the public from being able to: 1) respond to conflict related issues in an unbiased and informed manner, 2) call for appropriate state and non-governmental support and aid for women impacted by conflict, 3) demand strategic changes to policy aimed at combatting radicalisation in the UK and terrorism globally.

For the general public to properly understand specific global events, news discourse is essential. However, to be effective, such discourse must be transparent and provide a nuanced analysis of the event, an analysis that recognises the reality and complexity of the experiences and actions of all those involved. In the case of this conflict, and its female participants, it is clear that this type of analysis did not take place in the UK news media, regardless of the perceived political and/or ideological editorial stance of the news agency (see Chapter three). While it might be appropriate to continue to call for changes in how the news media operates and for increased regulations aimed at promoting impartial and objective reporting, my position is that bias is as unavoidable as it is harmful. Rather than denying the discursive power that the news media holds, therefore, my thesis illustrates that, in the context of the women in and around Daesh, the most effective way to limit the influence of traditional ideologies in news coverage is to amplify the voices of the women involved and to provide space for them to tell their own stories in their own words.

In future projects, efforts to amplify women's voices in this way might include more extensive personal interviews. Given the chaos of the conflict when I began my research, personal fieldwork in Syria and Iraq was not possible, nor was it probable that women from the region would respond to digital communications. This means that I was not able to personally interview women who participated in, or women who fought against Daesh. If travel were possible, I would propose undertaking such interviews and broadening the scope of those considered 'fighters' against Daesh to include

women who fought against the jihadist group through political and social activism in the region. Despite these obstacles to personal fieldwork, however, the methods that I employed in my thesis enabled me to gather the stories of a wide-range of women who were impacted by the conflict. These stories were sourced through personal interviews with refugees living in Belfast, survivor (auto)biographies, social media posts written by migrant women known to have travelled to the region, and third-party interviews with Kurdish female fighters. By relying on such stories, I was able to reach my primary goal of centring the voices of women as a means to highlight the existence and significance of their agency.

The news discourse that we engage with matters, as do the representations that the news media presents to us. Engagement with the news is the primary way that we, as consumers, learn about events from around the world, and construct our perceptions, beliefs and attitudes about specific topics. It is important, therefore, that when we read about women and how they have been impacted by Daesh and the conflict in Syria and Iraq, that we receive information that accurately reflects the reality of their agency and experience. When this does not occur, and when the news media allows harmful patriarchal and Orientalist ideologies to permeate its coverage of the conflict and its participants, the resulting narratives must be challenged and deconstructed. Ensuring that women's voices are heard in the narrative of events is a crucial element of this process. It is only through the stories of women, as told by them, that we can demystify their experiences and shed light on their agency. My thesis, in which the voices of women are centred, starts us on that road in a positive way.

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**Appendix One: News Media Bibliography.**

1.1.     News Articles Analysed for Chapter Four.

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**Appendix Two: Initial Letter to Gatekeepers.**

To whom it may concern,

My name is Méabh McAuley.  I am a post graduate research student in the School of History, Anthropology, Philosophy, and Politics at Queen's University Belfast.  I am currently working on my PhD thesis on women from Daesh controlled territories in Syria and Iraq, titled *Women, Daesh & Discourse: A Critical Analysis*.  As part of my research, I would like to interview 10-15 Iraqi and Syrian refugee women who now reside in Northern Ireland and would be very grateful if you could assist me in reaching out to potential participants.  I hope that this email will provide you with information on my research, but please feel free to ask me questions regarding anything you are unclear about.

My research aims are: (1) to explore how the UK government and media *(e.g. news stories and articles produced by the BBC, the independent, and the Guardian)* on the one hand, and Daesh on the other, portray women and, (2) to study the impact that these representations have on women from Daesh controlled territories.  The key purpose and benefit of my research is to shed light on an under-researched area, and to challenge stereotypes that are often associated with women from Daesh controlled territories.

I intend to commence the interviews in February 2018.  All interviews will be conducted in a place chosen by the participating women and will last approximately 45-60 minutes.  Interviews will also be conducted with a female interpreter present to ensure ease of communication.

Confidentiality is paramount; please be assured that I will not report data in any way that could identify any of the women involved, or be associated with a particular person.  The women's names will not be revealed in any of the recordings, transcriptions or in the study itself.  An alias will instead be provided to ensure anonymity.  All research data will remain confidential and private.  Participation will also be voluntary.  Women can withdraw themselves, or any information that they have provided at any time during the research.

If you have any questions regarding my research project or you are in a position to help me reach out to women, please contact me at any time.  I can assure you that this research project has been reviewed by my supervisors, Professor Beverley Milton-Edwards (QUB) and Dr Birgit Schippers (St Mary's University College Belfast); further, prior to commencing the interviews I will seek ethical permission from my School's Research Ethics Committee.

Many thanks,
Méabh McAuley

mmcauley12@qub.ac.uk
07808218700

**Appendix Three: Letter of Informed Consent (English).**

**INFORMED CONSENT LETTER FOR PARTICIPATION IN A RESEARCH PROJECT ENTITLED "Women, Daesh & Discourse: A Critical Analysis".**

Dear (INSERT NAME)

My name is Méabh McAuley.  I am a post graduate research student at Queen's University Belfast currently working on my PhD thesis on women from Daesh controlled territories in Syria and Iraq, and invite you to participate in my research.  I hope that this letter will provide you with information on my research, but please feel free to ask me questions regarding anything you are unclear about before deciding whether you wish to participate in my research.

The aim of my research is to explore how the UK Government, UK media and Daesh portray women and the impact that this has on women from Daesh controlled territories and wider societies. The key benefit of my research is that it will shed light on an under-researched area, and it will challenge stereotypes that are often associated with women living in Daesh controlled territories.

I will begin my research on _____, and I intend to use individual interviews as a method of collecting information.  If you agree to participate in my research, I will invite you to take part in two interviews lasting approximately 45-60 minutes.  The interview will take place in a local facility or in a place of your choosing.

Participation in my study is voluntary.  You can also withdraw yourself, or any information you have provided at any time during the research.  I do not know of, or do not anticipate any risks to participants who take part in this research project.  My findings will be presented in my PhD thesis and future disseminations, by making reference to the information collected from those who agreed to participate.  By volunteering to take part in the research project you are agreeing that I can use your data, alongside that of other participants, for this purpose.

Confidentiality is paramount; please be assured that I will not report data in a way that could identify you, or be associated with a particular person.  Research data will only be made known if required by law, or after I have received permission from you.  I will store all research data in a secure location, where it will only be accessible by myself. The research data will be retained for a period of five years before it is fully destroyed.

If you have any questions regarding my research project or would like additional information please ask me before, during, or after the interview. I can assure you that this research project has been reviewed by my supervisors who have granted approval for the research to proceed.

Yours

Méabh McAuley BA, PGCE, MA

Email; mmcauley12@qub.ac.uk

Tel No; 07808218700

# CONSENT FORM

I have read the information presented in the accompanying letter about the research project entitled "Women, Daesh & Discourse: A Critical Analysis" conducted by Méabh McAuley at Queen's University Belfast.

I have been offered the opportunity to ask any questions related to this research project, and I am satisfied with the responses I received.

I am aware that extracts from the interview may be included in the findings of this research project.

I was informed that I may withdraw my consent to participate in this research at any time, without prejudice.

## EITHER

With full knowledge of all the above, I **agree** to participate in this research project.

Participant Name:

Participant signature:

Date:

Interviewer Name:

Interviewer Signature:

Date:

## OR

With full knowledge of all the above, I **do not agree** to participate in this research project.

Participant Name:

Participant signature:

Date:

Interviewer Name:

Interviewer Signature:

Date:

**Appendix Four: Letter of Informed Consent (Arabic).**

رسالة للحصول على موافقةٍ مشروطةٍ بالمعرفةِ المسبقةِ للمشاركة بمشروعٍ بحثي بعنوان "المرأة وداعش والخطاب: تحليلٌ نقدي"

عزيزتي

اسمي ميف أولي، طالبة دراسات عليا في جامعة كوينز في بلفاست. أدعوكِ من خلال هذة الرسالة أن تتعاوني معي من خلال المشاركة في بحث الدكتوراه خاصتي والذي يتمحور حول النساء النازحات من مناطق تسيطر عليها داعش سواء كان ذلك في سوريا أو في العراق. آمل أن رسالتي هذه ستقدم معلومات حول البحث الذي أقوم به. وأتمنى أيضاً ألا تترددن بالاستفسار عن أية أمور لم تكن واضحة لكُنّ بعد أن أنهي رسالتي هذه وقبل أن تتخذن قراركن بخصوص المشاركة في بحثي هذا.

يهدف هذا البحث إلى معاينة وكشف طريقة تصوير كل من الحكومة البريطانية والإعلام البريطاني وداعش للمرأة وأثر ذلك على النساء النازحات من مناطق تسيطر عليها داعش، بالإضافة إلى أثره على المجتمعات بشكل عام. تنبع أهمية هذه الدراسة من نقطتين: أولاً أن هذا البحث يتناول موضوعا لم يتم البحث فيه بشكلٍ وافٍ، وثانياً أن دراستي هذه تسعى لتغيير الصور النمطية التي ترافق النساء اللاتي نزحن من مناطق مسيطر عليها من قبل داعش، وستعمل على الحد منها.

سيبدأ بحثي في _____ ، وأما منهجية البحث وجمع المعلومات فستتضمن إجراء مقابلات فردية مع المشاركات في مشروع البحث هذا. موافقتكِ على المشاركة في هذا البحث تتضمن مشاركتكِ في مقابلتين مدتهما معاً تتراوح بين 45 إلى 60 دقيقة. وستجرى المقابلات في إحدى المنشآت أو المباني المحلية أو في مكان تختاره المشاركة.

المشاركة في هذا البحث هي عملٌ تطوعي. وبالتالي يمكنك أن تنسحبي منها، أو أن تتراجعي عن إعطاء أية معلومات في أي وقت خلال المقابلة. وكوني باحثة في هذا المجال، فإني أؤكد أنه لا توجد أية مسؤولية على المشاركات في هذا المشروع البحثي. وأما بالنسبة لنتائج هذا الدراسة فسيتم تقديمها لغايات بحثية فقط متعلقة بالدراسة البحثية وأية منشورات متعلقة بها في المستقبل، مع الأخذ بعين الاعتبار توثيق كل المعلومات التي جُمعت خلال المقابلات مع اللاتي وافقن على المشاركة في هذا المشروع. وسأستخدم كباحثة المعلومات التي ستقدمها كُلّ مشاركة متطوعة لأغراض البحث في حال موافقتها على ذلك.

خصوصية المعلومات وسريتها هي أمر بالغ الأهمية، وعليه أرجو منكِ الاطمئنان التام بأنني لن أقدم أية معلومات من شأنها أن تُعرف بك أو بهويتك، أو أن تكون متعلقة بأي شخص محدد. فلذلك لن يتم الافصاح عن هذه البيانات إلا في حال أمر قانوني، أو في حال إعطائكِ الإذن لي بالإفصاح عنها. سيتم حفظ جميع البيانات في مكان آمن لا يستطيع أي شخص الوصول إليها سواي وذلك لمدة خمسة أعوام قبل أن يتم التخلص منها نهائياً.

إذا كان لديك أي سؤال أو استفسار حول مشروعي البحثي، أو كنت ترغبين بمعرفة المزيد حوله، أرجو منك سؤالي قبل أو أثناء أو بعد المقابلة. وأرغب كذلك أن أؤكد لكِ بأنه قد تمت مراجعة هذا المشروع البحثي من قبل أساتذتي المشرفين على دراستي في الجامعة والذين بدورهم أعطوني الموافقة على المضي قدماً بهذا المشروع.

مع خالص احترامي وتقديري

ميف ماك أولي: حاصلة على بكالوريوس وماجستير وشهادة دبلوم عالي في التربية والتعليم

عنوان البريد الإلكتروني: mmcauley12@qub.ac.uk

رقم الهاتف النقال: 07808218700

**نموذج موافقة على المشاركة**

لقد اطلعتُ على المعلومات الواردة في الرسالة المرفقة والمتعلقة بمشروع بحث بعنوان "المرأة وداعش والخطاب: تحليل نقدي". والذي تقوم به ميف ماك أولي من جامعة كوينز في بلفاست.

لقد تم إعطائي الفرصة لتوجيه أية أسئلة متعلقة بالدراسة، وقد كانت الإجابات التي حصلت عليها مُرضية وكافية.

وأنا على دراية وعلم تامّين بأنه من الممكن أن تستخدم أجزاءً من المقابلة لتُعرض في نتائج هذه الدراسة.

بالإضافة إلى أنه قد تم إعلامي بأنه يمكنني أن أسحب موافقتي على المشاركة في هذه الدراسة في أي وقت وبدون أحكام مسبقة أو ضرر.

<u>الموافقة</u>

بناءً على ما تقدم من معلومات، فإنني **أوافق** على المشاركة في هذه الدراسة البحثية.

اسم المشاركة:

توقيع المشاركة:

التاريخ:

اسم الشخص الذي أجرى المقابلة:

توقيع من أجرى المقابلة:

التاريخ:

<u>عدم الموافقة</u>

بناءً على ما تقدم من معلومات، فإنني **لا أوافق** على المشاركة في هذه الدراسة البحثية.

اسم المشاركة:

توقيع المشاركة:

التاريخ:

اسم الشخص الذي أجرى المقابلة:

توقيع من أجرى المقابلة:

التاريخ: