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Women at War: A Feminist Study of Militarism in Gayle Tzemach Lemmon's *Daughters of Kobani*

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Abstract

The study of women in war spans ancient to modern times, highlighting their significant contributions as combatants, nurses, spies, resistance fighters, and home front workers. Their experiences challenge traditional gender norms and have led to lasting social and political changes. This study aims to examine the profound effects of war on women, using documentary novel to enhance our understanding of the role of women in war. By exploring the real stories of Kurdish women fighters in Syria, the study illuminates the multifaceted impact of war on women and their transformative roles in conflict and peace-building. Adopting a feminist perspective, the study explores *Daughters of Kobani* by Gayle Tzemach Lemmon (2021), focusing on the unique suffering experienced by women in war.

Key Words: Feminism and militarism, documentary novel, female fighters, Resilience, *Daughters of Kobani*.

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النساء في الحرب: دراسة نسوية للنزعة العسكرية في رواية بنات كوباني لغايل تزيماخ ليمون

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المستخلص

تمتد دراسة النساء في الحرب من العصور القديمة حتى العصر الحديث، اذ تسلط الضوء على مساهماتهن الكبيرة كمقاتلات وممرضات وجواسيس ومقاتلات مقاومة وعمال في الجبهة الداخلية. حيث تتحدى تجاربهن المعايير الجنسانية التقليدية والتي تؤدي إلى تغييرات اجتماعية وسياسية دائمة. تهدف الدراسة إلى دراسة الآثار العميقة للحرب على المرأة، وذلك باستخدام رواية وثائقية لتعزيز فهمنا لدور المرأة في الحرب. من خلال استكشاف القصص الحقيقية للمقاتلات الكرديات في سوريا، وتسلط الضوء ايضا على التأثير المتعدد الأوجه للحرب على النساء وأدوارهن التحويلية في الصراع وبناء السلام. من خلال المنظور نسوي، تستكشف الدراسة بنات كوباني بقلم غايل تزيماخ ليمون (2021)، مع التركيز على المعاناة الفريدة التي تعاني منها النساء في الحرب.

الكلمات الدالة: النسوية والعسكرية، الرواية الوثائقية، المقاتلات، المرونة، بنات

1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, women have played important roles in the military, since ancient times to the present day. While men have traditionally made up the majority of soldiers in many cultures, women have made significant contributions, particularly in European armies from the 14th to the 19th century. Their involvement went beyond combat, with some serving as nurses and aides. Despite their essential contributions, women's roles were often overlooked and taken for granted by society. Historians have tended to focus on famous women warriors, neglecting the many unnamed women who also played

crucial roles in warfare. Famous examples of these female warriors include Florine of Burgundy, Eleanor of Aquitaine, Margaret of Provence, and Shajar al-Durr. However, it's worth highlighting that Western chronicler of the time, who primarily focused on male-dominated narratives, rarely documented the presence of women in such roles (Hacker, 1981).

While some women in history stayed at home to manage domestic responsibilities, others joined their husbands in military campaigns, including the Crusades. It is important to note that it was not just noble women who participated in these campaigns; common women, such as washerwomen, servants, nuns, and even prostitutes, were also present. However, it is important to highlight those Western chroniclers of the time who primarily focused on male-dominated narratives, rarely documented the presence of women in such roles.

In his essay, Hacker B.C. (1981) underscores the blurred boundaries between military and civilian life during historical periods. Men and women played various roles with little distinction between their functions. Women, serving as camp followers, engaged in activities such as cutlery, trading goods like meat and beverages. Female settlers, often wives or widows of soldiers, undertook tasks like sewing, washing, and supplying items without compensation. During the World Wars, nursing emerged as a vital area of female contribution, with organizations like the Queen Alexandra Royal Army Nursing Corps playing crucial roles in caring for the wounded and filling positions at the front lines left by men, reshaping societal roles (Sjoberg, 2006).

The term gendering refers to categorizing and treating individuals based on perceived gender affiliations. In global politics, gendering relies on presumed traits attributed to a group rather than individual characteristics. While traditionally aligning gender with biological sex, feminists challenge this assumption, questioning whether gender disparities and women's subordination are truly based on biological distinctions (Skapoulli, 2004 and Sjoberg, 2006).

A documentary novel is a factual fiction and a textualization and fictionalization of facts of fiction and nonfiction that combines elements of both. Although it is based on actual events, it tells the story using fictional methods. This might mean coming up with characters, dialogue, and plots that aren't strictly based on facts. The objective of narrative books is to give a more vivid and connecting with experience for the per-user than customary genuine can do (Smith, 2013).

Patrick Smith (2013) presents that the documentary novel is a 20th-century genre that combines imaginative fiction-writing techniques with real-world information and events. In addition to engaging readers with the emotional and psychological depth of fictional characters, it aims to present a comprehensive picture of a specific time period,

historical event, or social issue. The documentary novel is a one-of-a-kind approach to exploring and comprehending complex subjects because it combines literary storytelling with documentary research.

Benedict's research contributes to feminist scholarship on militarism by exposing the systemic issues that perpetuate gender-based violence and inequality within military institutions. It calls for reform and challenges the patriarchal power structures and gender norms that enable such harmful behaviors. In her groundbreaking book *The Lonely Soldier: The Private War of Women Serving in Iraq* (2009), Hellen Benedict explores the experiences of women in the U.S. military during the Iraq War. Through extensive research and interviews, she provides valuable insights into the challenges these women face, including sexual harassment, assault, and the ongoing struggle for recognition and support. The book critically examines the intersection of militarism and gender, shedding light on complex issues within the military.

Benedict's book (2009) contributes to feminist scholarship on militarism by exposing the systemic issues that perpetuate gender-based violence and inequality within military institutions. It calls for reform and challenges the patriarchal power structures and gender norms that enable such harmful behaviors. The book critically examines the intersection of militarism and gender, shedding light on complex issues within the military. Also, in her book *The Plight of Women Soldiers* (2007), Benedict addresses the systemic issues of gender-based violence and inequality within military institutions. She highlights how the culture of the military often upholds traditional gender roles, marginalizing and silencing women. This creates difficulties for women to report instances of harassment or assault and hinders their advancement opportunities.

Examining the relationship between gender and war is essential because the two are interconnected. War has historically been regarded as a male-dominated activity, leading to distinct gender roles. Gender analysis not only highlights these roles but also the differing opportunities available to men and women in society. Dijkema's 2001 inquiry, "Why study Gender and Conflict together?" emphasizes that armed conflict and its practice are influenced by gender. Society's gendered structure extends to the structure of warfare, resulting in distinct roles for men and women. Men typically fight in battles to protect their country, while women often have private sphere responsibilities.

In her examination of the role of women in combat, Lucinda Peach (1994) presents three distinct ethical viewpoints. The first perspective, the "Ethic of Accountability," opposes the inclusion of women in combat roles, citing concerns about potential decreases in military effectiveness and the disruption of essential male bonding in military units. It also reflects a gender ideology that seeks to maintain the separation of traditionally "masculine" combat from anything considered "feminine". This perspective

often argues that women's physical and psychological differences, along with their potential roles as mothers, make them unsuitable for combat.

Militarization involves a transformation where individuals and societies become influenced and reliant on military ideals, leading to the widespread acceptance of military methods and concepts. Conversely, militarism refers to the belief that the military is the most suitable institution for addressing societal issues, highlighting its revered status in many societies, including the respect and significance of military veterans. Manoeuvres Enloe C. in *The International Politics of Militarizing Women's Lives* (2012) presents that the consequences of militarization and militarism are significant, with women being disproportionately affected. These processes, often linked to war and conflict, play a pivotal role in shaping cultural identities and nationalism, ultimately leading to a gendered form of nationalism. As war is predominantly associated with male involvement, it's typically men who get to define the nation, emphasizing the importance of considering gender dynamics in this context.

Furthermore, both Benedict and Colleen emphasize the broader impacts of militarism on women, including violence and structural inequalities. The militaristic culture normalizes violence as a means of conflict resolution, affecting women within the military and civilian populations. Violence against women, such as domestic violence and the use of pornography, is prevalent in military contexts. This perpetuates a culture of violence with impunity (Burke, 1998).

While war is a fundamental aspect of militarism, representing its culmination and the ultimate point for all the investments, training, and preparations, militarism extends far beyond warfare. It encompasses a comprehensive system of institutions, practices, values, and cultures that go beyond the actual occurrence of war. According to Peterson and Runyan (1999), militarization refers to the processes in which typical military practices are expanded into civilian life. This can be observed when businesses rely on military contracts, fashion trends incorporate military styles, or toys and games that emulate military activities. Although Peterson and Runyan's definition provides valuable insight into militarism, a broader conceptual perspective allows us to better understand its extensive influence. Rather than simply viewing militarism as the extension of military practices into civilian life, it can be seen as the gradual erasure of boundaries between war and peace, and between the military and civilian spheres.

Benedict's book highlights how exposure to violence, combat, and the overall stresses of military life can give rise to a range of mental health issues, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, and thoughts of suicide. Benedict emphasizes the unique challenges faced by women, whose experiences may be further complicated by gender-specific issues like sexual assault and harassment. "Some are put on powerful antidepressants and anti-anxiety drugs to keep them there; others have

threatened suicide, been ignored, and then killed themselves or other soldiers.” (Benedict, 2009, p.102).

Feminist theory emphasizes the importance of challenging traditional gender roles and advocating for gender equality. In this case, women's desire to form their own military units challenges traditional notions of women's roles in the military and society. Benedict's work may provide insights into the challenge's women face when trying to break gender barriers and the resistance they encounter. Lemmon suggests that women's contributions and sacrifices were not initially recognized or valued, and they had to advocate for their own rights and recognition. This can be analyzed through the lens of gender discrimination and exploitation, where women's labor and efforts are undervalued or overlooked compared to men. This situation highlights how gender discrimination can persist even in contexts where women are actively participating in traditionally male-dominated roles (Labott, 2021).

The impact of war on civilian women is devastating. Women are often the primary victims of sexual violence, displacement, and poverty in conflict zones. They also face increased risks of physical and mental health problems. To investigate these devastating effects of war, the study also examines *The Daughters of Kobani: A Story of Rebellion, Courage, and Justice* (2021) by Gayle Tzemach Lemmon to convey the story of the Kurdish women who fought against ISIS in the Syrian city of Kobani in 2014. The novel explores how war affected these women, both during and after the conflict. One of the most important things about the novel is that it shows how war can both empower and disempower women. On one hand, war gave the Kurdish women of Kobani the chance to fight for their rights and challenge traditional gender roles. On the other hand, they became fierce warriors and played a key role in defeating ISIS.

2. Empowering the Unsung Heroes in Gayle Tzemach Lemmon's *Daughters of Kobani*

The Daughters of Kobani: A Story of Rebellion, Courage, and Justice, exhibits elements of both historical narrative and metafiction of documentary journalism and traditional storytelling takes readers on a riveting journey. It is a narrative that bridges the realms of fact and fiction, weaving together the power of real events and real people with the artistry of imaginative storytelling. This dynamic blend creates a reading experience that not only informs but also immerses the reader in the gripping tale of courage and resilience (Anderson, 2021). Lemmon delves into the historical context and the Kurdish nationalist movement's evolution. She goes into the historical context and evolution of the Kurdish nationalist movement, including the ideological background and philosophy underpinning gender equality in Kurdish democratic confederacies. By exploring the historical context, the novel enhances its documentary nature, providing readers with a deeper understanding of the Kurdish women's movement and its roots.

On one side, there are Syrian Arab forces, representing the central government and backed by Arab states in the region. These forces emphasize the unity and territorial integrity of Syria, seeking to maintain the centralized control of power and authority. On the other side, there are Kurdish-backed forces, such as the People's Protection Units (YPG) and Women's Protection Units (YPJ). These Kurdish forces have been at the forefront of the fight against ISIS, demonstrating their effectiveness in combating the terrorist group. They argue for greater autonomy and recognition of the Kurdish region within Syria, leveraging their contributions to the fight against ISIS (Flinchum, 2021).

As the Syrian civil war erupted in 2011, the Kurdish population was prepared to confront Bashar al-Assad's regime. However, instead of recognizing Kurdish independence, the Assad regime-imposed restrictions on the role of women in society. "The world has a way of telling young girls and women what they should want from their lives and of telling them not to ask too much. In northeastern Syria, these young women tell you exactly what they want for themselves" (Lemmon, 2022, p.172). In 2012, despite the emergence of ISIS, the Kurds successfully gained control of Rojava, an autonomous region situated in northeastern Syria. The Women's Protection Unit (YPJ) was established on April 4, 2013, as the female component of the People's Protection Units (YPG). Both the YPJ and YPG are integral parts of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which serve as the armed forces of Rojava.

In the previous century, Kurdish women did not possess individual names; they were commonly referred to as "the daughter of" or "the wife of," lacking their own distinct identity. However, with the establishment of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the status of women in society began to transform. In 2019, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) introduced a set of laws aimed at safeguarding women's rights, including the prohibition of child marriages and acts categorized as "honour" killings (Grey, 2021).

Lemmon effectively uses personal stories, interviews, and real events to help readers truly grasp the experiences of YPJ fighters in the frontline. Additionally, through fighters like Arin Mirkan, she shows how the YPJ actively fights against oppressive norms and stands up for women's rights. This makes the book a strong testament to their unwavering resolve (Barker, 2021).

The Daughters of Kobani not only educates readers about real events but also appeals to their emotions. By immersing readers in the lives of the characters, Lemmon enhances their understanding of the themes of rebellion, courage, and justice. The main characters are Azeema, Rojda, Nowruz, and Znarin. They are all members of the YPJ, the all-female Kurdish militia that fought against ISIS in the Battle of Kobani. Lemmon portrays these characters in a complex and nuanced way. She shows their motivations for fighting, their strengths and weaknesses, and their personal growth throughout the novel.

The novel follows Nowruz and the YPJ women as they bravely battle ISIS in Kobani, overcoming obstacles like sexual violence, limited weaponry, and overwhelming odds. They ultimately succeed in driving ISIS out of Kobani despite being outnumbered and outgunned. The story skillfully blends real and fictional elements, using real names and events while creating engaging dialogues and emotions for the women fighters. Based on extensive research, interviews, and on-the-ground reporting, it sheds light on the Kurdish women's commitment to gender equality. This powerful narrative emphasizes women's capabilities in warfare and their role as active participants and survivors in conflict (Simkins, 2022).

Moreover, Lemmon highlights how prepared women are to make concessions in order to improve the standard of living for their children. Many women in war zones go through severe personal problems, such as losing loved ones, being uprooted, and dealing with the difficulties of living in a hostile environment. Despite these challenges, they are resilient and committed to building a better future for the following generation (Ibrahim, 2021). Nowruz says, "Like any other person, I love life-I am not tired of life," (Lemmon, 2021, p. 176).

Within the narratives of women fighters who endure the harsh realities of war and its aftermath, another remarkable character comes to the forefront: Nowruz Ahmed. An esteemed figure within the Women's Protection Units, hailing from the resilient city of Al-Hasakah, she possesses a seniority of ten years over Azeema and Rojda. Nowruz was aware of her unique perspective on the world. She was constantly debating the status of women in her family and questioning them about the undervalued place that girls held in their lives. Her queries led her family to believe she would practice law. Her mother is Nowruz's first inspiration although was uneducated, unable to read or write, and she didn't have the chance to choose her husband (Nowruz' father). She had eight children, whom she nurtured. Her mother assured that she had faith in her, "Don't be like me. Your life should be different. Don't depend on others for your future" (Lemmon, 2021, p.33). Nowruz's mother hoped that her daughter would not simply mirror her life but rather become a person of significance who could make important decisions (Ibrahim, 2021).

Nowruz was against forced marriage. Where it sought to improve both the circumstances of Kurds and women. Where it sought to improve both the status of Kurds and women's lives. She used to hear from her relatives and the people of Nowruz that girls should become wives rather than soldiers. In times of conflict, both men and women can experience the devastating loss of their loved ones. However, women may face specific challenges due to traditional gender roles and societal expectations. Women often bear the primary responsibility for caregiving within families, so when family members are lost, women may take on additional burdens and responsibilities (Labott, 2021). Whether she thought all the fighting was worth it, given ten thousand SDF lives lost to ISIS and another war under way. Nowruz states:

I say it is worth it because when I see a child, I wonder how will they live. I fight so people can live freely," she said. "Many of my relatives were martyred in the fight against ISIS. It is much more difficult to start a family and have children without a future, when you know you can't obtain education in your language, can't live in freedom on your own soil, and constantly live in fear of death" (Lemmon, 2021, p.176).

Also, Nowruz says: "I love my people and children; I don't want them to live in the painful life that I lived in. I don't regret the sacrifices I have made." (Lemmon, 2021, p.176). The fact that her meeting for applying at school had to be postponed because of Turkish attacks demonstrates how conflict stifles not just the social and cultural activities that support women's rights but also the physical infrastructure of societies. During wars, women frequently carry an unfair burden and face greater dangers to their safety and wellbeing (Ibrahim, 2021).

In the heart of *The Daughters of Kobani*, Gayle Tzemach Lemmon masterfully guides the reader through the harrowing and heroic journey of Kurdish women who stood unwaveringly against the brutal forces of ISIS during the Battle of Kobani. What sets this narrative apart is its genre-defying nature, a captivating blend of documentary journalism and traditional storytelling. Lemmon skillfully intertwines real events and real people with elements of fiction, weaving a tapestry of truth and imagination that defines the emerging genre of the documentary novel.

Moreover, this genre, still relatively new but rapidly gaining popularity, offers authors a powerful means to inform and engage their readers simultaneously. In the case of *The Daughters of Kobani*, it is a genre that transcends the traditional boundaries of non-fiction and fiction, delivering a story that is not only informative but deeply moving. It is a tale of resilience, sacrifice, and triumph that revolves around the pivotal Battle of Kobani in 2014—a turning point in the battle against ISIS and a resounding victory authored by the Kurdish women fighters (Labott, 2021).

Writing a novel like *the Daughters of Kobani* requires a lot of research and fact-checking. Authors typically spend a significant amount of time gathering information from multiple sources, cross-referencing their findings, and verifying the accuracy of their data. This ensures that they can present a comprehensive and accurate narrative. Lemmon uses a combination of documentary journalism and traditional storytelling to bring the reader into the lives of those women. One of the elements in the story is personal stories and interviews that help readers understand the historical context, social dynamics, and challenges faced by the YPJ fighters. By giving voice to these women and sharing their motivations and journeys, Lemmon makes the narrative relatable and engaging. Furthermore, Lemmon employs traditional storytelling techniques to make the

book accessible. She weaves together the personal narratives of the YPJ fighters, creating a coherent and captivating storyline. By focusing on individual characters and their struggles, Lemmon humanizes the larger story and provides an intimate understanding of the fighters' experiences (Anderson, 2022). Gayle Tzemach Lemmon weaves together the personal narratives of the YPJ fighters. These personal narratives serve to humanize the larger story of the conflict in Kobani, offering readers an intimate understanding of the fighters' experiences. By focusing on individual characters and their struggles, Lemmon brings to life the challenges, triumphs, and personal journeys of the YPJ fighters through Azeem, Zinarin, Nowruz and Nouri. This narrative approach allows readers to connect with the individuals involved and enhances the overall impact of the story.

Lemmon's narrative skillfully traces Azeem's journey, from the moment she made the courageous choice to join the YPJ to the rigors of her training and her unwavering commitment displayed in the fierce clashes against the forces of ISIS. Through Azeema's narrative, readers bear witness to an extraordinary story of courage, unwavering determination, and an unyielding dedication to the pursuit of justice and the defense of her community. Lemmon describes her:

She was part of YPJ, the all-women's force that faced off against ISIS on the ground each day, fighting the men of the Islamic State room-by-room and house-by-house, and she had started fighting ISIS in 2013 before the group was officially born(Lemmon, 2021, 41).

Historically, women who engage in violence have not been portrayed as regular combatants because violence is not seen as a stereotypical female trait. Johann Jakob Bachofen introduced a groundbreaking perspective on the societal roles of women in various ancient cultures, challenging established norms and providing a fundamentally new comprehension of women's positions and contributions throughout diverse historical settings. In ancient Greek mythology, the Amazons portray as a society of female warriors, emphasizing a world where women held dominance. This female-centric realm depict as existing beyond the borders of conventional civilization, situated in a mythical location either to the south or north but consistently outside the confines of human societal structures(Fishbane,1981)

Even in the military, women are expected to conform to gender norms and be feminine, despite femininity being perceived as a weakness. Strength is considered essential for success in the military, which implies that a "good" woman who adheres to gender norms cannot be a successful soldier. If a female soldier proves to be equally competent as her male counterparts, it challenges the gender stereotype of women, leading to the perception that something is wrong with her (Byerly & Ross, 2006).

Azeema, a leader within the People's Protection Units, enrolled in the Kurdistan Students Union Academy in Qamishli (Al-Hasakah) when she was just 13 years old. She says:

when I first asked the American special operations soldiers who among the fighters, they worked with I should meet in Syria, one of the first names that always arose was Azeema. She came from Qamishli, a town in northeastern Syria, and was known for her relentless willingness to lead from the front, her swashbuckling manner, her chain-smoking ways and her wry sense of humor (Lemmon, 2021,102).

She has chosen not to marry for two distinct reasons. Firstly, she considered the Syrian uprising in 2011 to be a more pressing concern than marriage. Secondly, a pivotal moment from her past influenced her decision.

The Daughters of Kobani is a compelling documentary that tells the remarkable story of women who defied traditional gender roles to fight against extremism in Syria. These women, known as the Kurdish Lionesses, challenged societal norms by embracing both their femininity and strength, showing that women can excel in combat while maintaining their identity and skills in everyday life. The documentary showcases their bravery and determination to defend their communities and oppose oppressive laws.

3.CONCLUSION

Throughout history, women have played significant roles in the military, yet their contributions have often been overlooked and undervalued. This study emphasizes the need to recognize and address the specific challenges faced by women in combat and noncombat life affected by war and militarism. It advocates for the incorporation of women's perspectives in decision-making processes and the dismantling of gender inequalities and power dynamics that marginalize them. The study aligns with feminist perspectives and aims to challenge gender biases in military contexts, promoting inclusivity and equality in addressing these issues. It also highlights the importance of developing a comprehensive theoretical framework that connects the suffering experienced by women to feminist perspectives, particularly within the genre of documentary novels, which explore the profound impact of war on women and their broader socio-cultural implications. *The Daughters of Kobani* (2021) is a compelling documentary that showcases the remarkable journey of women who defied traditional gender roles to join the fight against extremism in Syria. These women, known as the Kurdish Lionesses, challenged societal norms by embracing their femininity alongside their strength. The documentary highlights their bravery and determination to protect their communities and challenge oppressive laws. It sheds light on the Women's Protection Units, an organization formed in 2013, whose female fighters played a crucial role in liberating Kobani and combating ISIS. *The Daughters of Kobani* offers profound

insights into heroism, sacrifice, and the power of sisterhood, providing a crucial perspective on the triumph of women over the Islamic State and the evolution of Kurdish identity and nationalism in different regions.

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