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MISOGYNY AND MALE CHAUVINISM IN SISTERS IN ARMS

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Abstract

History showcases each woman as submissive, inferior and weak intellectually, mentally and physically from generation to generation. The picture hasn't changed from the scriptures to the post-modern books and still the halo around woman lingers as the 'other'. When it comes to religion, each of them demands a particular subsidiary place to women and settles them as subordinate. The study attempts to analyze the treads of male chauvinism and misogyny as portrayed in Caroline Fourest's 2019 film *Soeurs D Armes*. Women are mere playthings of men and in Muslim community, there are visible solid strokes of domination and patriarchy. Zara, a Yazidi girl who is abducted by ISIS army is the chief victim and object of this particular study. The preconceptions make men sturdy and well-built to battle at the front. It is impossible to think women as fighters and they are not considered fit to be called as warriors and comrade-in-arms because of their status as a 'woman'. 'Physically inferior' and 'mentally fragile', they are forced to remain in the four walls of their houses. Each traumatic experience the women have dealt with is constructed under microscopic precision and further how men contribute to their tragedy is also of critical importance to the paper. Men use sexual violence upon women and it is not only an outward contemplative action but also it can be considered as a weapon of war and armed conflict. Wartime sexual violence faced by Zara and other major female characters forms the detailed part of the paper.

Keywords: Patriarchy; Chauvinism; Misogyny; 'other'; Traumatic

Caroline Fourest, a forthright columnist and documentarian, interested in topics such as women's and gay rights, extremism and religious fundamentalism. Her debut film feature, *Sisters In Arms* (aka *Red Snake*), inspired by the real-life portraits of international women volunteers who joined Kurdish female fighters in the war in Syria and Iraq against ISIS. She wages a war against the dominating masculine forces and directed the film which is described as:

Her (Fourest) move into fiction filmmaking brings together many of those themes and Fourest describes *Sisters In Arms* as "a feminist war film". It tells the story of members of a female fighting unit involved in heavy combat against Jihadists, weaving in the life stories that led them to the frontline.

Feminism is the underlying force of the film, but from the start itself chief male chauvinism directed against the whole female fraction is outwardly visible. The film is having powerfully centripetal magnetism where feminism lies in the centre while patriarchal norms and regulations are present on the frontier. Set against the war between ISIS and Kurdish forces, Fourest has used real life incidents including an interview of a Yazidi girl, Nadia Murad to develop the plot. She also came to know about Kurdish women fighting at the front as well as accounts about women who died on the battlefield. One can call Fourest a feminist director and she chooses the title "Sisters in Arms" enforcing and embodying the totality of feminine power at the warfront. Like *Girls of the Sun*, this movie presents the problems, physical abuse, identity crisis and harassments faced by women during wartime.

In 2014, thousands of Yazidi men were captured and about 3500 women, including girls were abducted for trafficking. Many of the girls were sold off into sex slavery. The sisters in arms as described in title of the film include the cast Dilan Gwyn, Maya Sansa, Noush Skaugen Esther Garrel, Amira Casar, Nanna Blondell and Camélia Jordana. In the film, Fourest explains:

there is Jordana a young French-Algerian woman who joins the unit in response to terror attacks back home; Casar is a Kurdish commander; Sansa plays a former model with an anarchical streak; Blondell is a skilled sniper; and Gwyn plays a former Yazidi slave determined to free her brother from the clutches of ISIS.

Lioness of Kobane admits the fact that women fighters are always erased from the pages of history. Long ago, before arrival of capitalism, Goddess and women were respected. Later on, male domination settled in. Their Kurdish grandmothers were fighting for their country but they were send back to home very soon. Just like Alice Walker in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* remarked that, our talent comes from our ancestors who are enslaved, curbed or driven insane by dominating power, Lioness establishes the truth of history of subservience of women who had been denied a 'voice':

A long time ago, when Mesopotamia was not divided between Persians, Kurds and Arabs, men respected the Mother goddess. It was the arrival of monotheism that system of male domination has imposed its laws... Viking women were fighting, our Kurdish grandmothers fought against the Turks. But when women rebel, they are erased from history, erased from the society and send back home. We send back home to be slaves.

Fourest became intrigued in the women who were travelling to join Kurdistan's female fighters battling ISIS on the battlefield. They, like Zara, volunteered as well as international volunteers like Yeal and Kenza from France. She recounts her experience as the director:

I lost a lot of friends and colleagues. It became difficult for me to express all the emotions I was feeling with journalistic language. The ISIS fighters on the front were scared of being killed by a female fighter. They believed it would deprive them of paradise and the virgins that went it. I came to the conclusion that in the same war, you had peak feminist power and peak misogyny.

The film is a perfect example for portraying the condition of woman during war. Women are abused, sold off, assaulted, raped and killed. Zara, who is the prime victim of male abuse throughout in the film, is sexually abused by Britani for a "long time". Girls who should be enjoying their adolescent period are casted away as sex objects, slaves and mistresses in name of "holy war". Before ISIS invasion, Zara, Keiro and their elder brother have been peacefully enjoying in their garden as she says that her life is going to change soon:

At that time I did not know what they could do to us or what they were capable of. I had my brother and family but I had not yet met my sisters in arms. I still cannot believe how fragile our happiness was and how much this war was about to change me.

Women have been marginalized and abused by ISIS and at the beginning of the film; one observes the ISIS separating the young and the old women in two different buses. They address the young as “fresh” to be sold. Zara, a girl of twenty is abducted from her whole family. Not only Zara, all the girls suffer from the same tragedy. Zara’s friend says to Zara that: “They attacked all of our villagers, I saw lot of girls from school”. Zara’s life was tranquil at the start of the film but ISIS captures the women and as a result, Zara along with other young girls are tied by hand like animals and presented at an isolated camp. At the Arab camp, Zara is openly asked if she’s a virgin and if Keiro is her son. After the inquiry is over, she is send to a room where the female purda officers examine her private parts by lifting her parts. The most basic necessity of any female is to guard her nether regions but this basic right is straight away denied. At a certain instant, three girls are presented before Al Britani. One of them mutilates her face so as not to get sold. When Zara is evaluated, the camp man discloses to Al Britani that her teeth is beautiful and inserts his fingers into her mouth. The all powerful Britani says that he “will take her” as a slave. Zara tries hard to be with Keiro and pleads to Al Britani in utmost humble tone that “she will do anything if he buys Keiro”. He thinks for a second about the total submissiveness of Zara because it is very evident that all men want women as submissive, compliant and tame. But he clearly knows that Zara is his slave whether he buys Keiro or not and she is slapped unconscious by him. Zara is forced to endure a life as a slave of Al Britani.

Al Britani is the commander of the ISIS and holds a very respectable topmost position in the ISIS army. He is a strict patriarchy adherent and dominates women around him, visibly, his wife, Zara and even the Kurdish chief. He slaps Zara and his wife mercilessly without any regret, labeling them as his ‘property’. Having already married to Nadia, making Zara his inferior mistress is a straightforward pointer to the implicit jingoism. He lives with his wife and brother-in-law, El Tounsi. The brother-in-law is out rightly hesitant to let Zara stay in the house, but Britani convinces him. Proceeding to indulge in sexual activity with Zara, though Nadia resists the idea of letting Zara live in the house but the patriarch is determined and stern. This shows that Al Britani is a clever paterfamilias

in the film who controls not only women, but also subordinate men. Nadia witnesses the painful incident of Britani's forceful sex as she hears poor Zara screaming and wailing, but being the 'other' puts Nadia into the submissive position who can't raise her voice against the injustice. Nadia's typical passive position as a woman and wife is articulated through her daily duties; make food, serve it to men, wash plates etc...As a woman, Nadia can't complain but simply succumb to fate. That's why she resigns to wash plates when Britani approaches Zara's room. Unable to contain herself, she cuts her hand and blood spreads through the water. Clearly, in Muslim religion, men can have as many as wives as they please and they consider it as their right, completely keeping women in the dark corner without any visible communication. Beyond the walls of their house, the opinions and grievances of Muslim/Arab women are curbed. Their views are not audibly heard even if they screech. They are suppressed, harassed, punished by the male counterpart. At one time, when Zara tries to escape from Nadia's custody, Nadia asks Britani to "punish" Zara. It is the dictator in Britani who responds to Nadia as all men retorts bitter contempt when women advise men. The male chauvinist warns Nadia, "Stop telling me what I have to do all the time" and later, for Nadia's insisting repartee, Nadia gets slapped. Britani's mere stare shocks Zara and makes his brother in law quiver and mute. The crucial and basic necessity of humans, the right to live is even denied to Zara as she is locked up in a room and one doesn't see her eating or sleeping peacefully. At one point, it is shown that Zara is not allowed to use the bathroom. Even Britani's wife is repellent towards Zara in the fear of Britani.

Zara recounts the trauma of her life period 'being a slave' for so prolonged duration, "It feels like he is in me all the time. His smell and his disgusting face..." Laura comforts her assuring that she "will get through this". Laura also comments that the tragic occurrence happening to women and "the invasion" they "suffer" are "deeper and more cruel than bullets". She also recounts her tragedy of being a slave at the age of sixteen:

I was sixteen when it happened to me. And it took me years to understand it was not my fault. And it wasn't my fault. It's a war...Thousands of years, wars have been waged on the bodies of women.

Al Britani emotionally manipulates Zara when he is captured by Kurdish female forces and don't show respect to them only because they are 'women'. He wants to exhibit control over Zara as once she was his slave before and cruelly harasses her contemptuously when she is a Kurdish fighter:

You are weak just like your father. He was screaming when Abu Mariam shot him in his head. He was screaming like you, when I was inside you. You enjoyed it, didn't you? Come on, be honest. Women enjoy when you force on them. And I felt you enjoy a hundred times.

Women are mere playthings of men during war time. They are sold, bought, raped, kidnapped, abducted, gang raped, harassed, mistreated, beaten or even killed by male authority. Al Britani insults Kurdish army when he is in their detention. When the chief enquires him, Britani offends whole Kurdish female comrades by saying that if a female is captured, the men would definitely take advantage of her. Even the supreme ISIS leader Abu Mariam is offered a group of girls as his 'slaves' from various parts of the country. Towards the end, there is a last ritual showing that he also employs women trafficking. Typical practices such as scratching the face of women's face in the shampoo bottle, the announcements made in the Arab community makes women as something dreadful and disgustingly evil; "By the law of God, it is forbidden to be alone in a room with someone of the opposite sex". The announcement to women not to eat cucumber in public as they are shaped like male organ was also made, conveying it as against God. But when they are needed to mate, they go on even to rape the same women.

In Zone occupee, when the group of girls and women are taken to the camp, man in the last truck talks with another soldier about how he would buy a Yazidi girl with brown or blue eyes. His eyes brightened as he said so and was very enthusiastic for such an action. Suddenly, sisters in arms appear and he begs to them "Let a man kill me, not a woman". The degradation of women's status is articulated in the frightened voice of that man. The prejudice against reputation and position of women in Arab men's psyche is justified through Kurdish male comrade, "They think that they killed by a woman keeps them from getting to Heaven and from getting virgins, that come with it." The secrets of ISIS cannot be disclosed to so called woman and Al Britani demands that he will only talk to 'a man' and disgraces women.

Another instance also adds to this attitude when Lady Kurda and Laura try to save a child, Lady Kurda while fighting exhausts her bullets. She decides to use a grenade for suicide while the three ISIS soldiers decide that they would share her. This is evident from one of the men's words: "We share her, but I go first". The crooked, devilish men are behaving just like wild animals with dirty instincts in mind.

A prominent comment is made on the institution of marriage. When Zara questions Laura if she is married, Laura grins and responds that she is not foolish enough to step into the mirage of a wedding. Traditionally, marriages happen between a superior Man and an inferior woman. Women should be subservient to a man in each and every respect. Even the marriage vows conform to the long held patriarchal pattern and portray wife as weak counterpart of her husband. However, Laura is in love with someone, but she is not ready to fall into the rattrap of marriage. She discloses that, “It (marriage) is probably the only stupid thing I managed to avoid doing”.

The long institutionalized division between male and female continues to exist even in the modern society. Men and women are treated differently and even men and women soliders are differentiated as Zara recounts that “If it’s a war, why do I feel so ashamed when men come back from the battlefield, they show us their wounds; we look at them like heroes. But for me, I feel ashamed”.

The violence inflicted upon women is common and widespread all along the history. Comrade Belkacem’s sister Katia died before she was born. In 1990s Algeria, jihadists announced that they will kill the women who refuse to wear veil. When Katia went to school, she refused to do so and later on her father found her lying dead in “her own blood, attacked by the neighbors.”

In war, women are abducted and shared or raped. They can are silenced and stands as mute witness to the pathetic circumstances. The completing misleading interpretation of a girl’s virginity and sexual intercourse is framed by Arab men. They take women and their emotions for granted. They never anticipate what rape entails. A woman is completely shattered when one force on them and the experience clouds on their mind for the rest of their lives. It’s a pleasure seeking experience for men but women are drastically stripped of their normal lives forever. Being born as a girl is a blessing but it is due to domination of men, women suffer in the world. Overtime, women are subjugated and kept inside their house while men act tyrannical around them. Zara has tolerated profusely and so did all female characters in the film.

Conclusion

Equality for men and women is just an illusion. Many women in different countries don't have the much desired independence on their lives and majority is basically ignorant about their basic civil rights. Women during war don't have the words 'choices', 'decisions' or 'voice' with them to fight against the oppressive opponents. It is their fate to endure all the hardships men inflict on them and keep silent in the family. A true and lucid juxtaposition of misogyny and male chauvinism, *Soeurs D Armes*, presents crude picture of how men treat women as 'mere objects'. Fourest has explicitly endorsed upon the task to showcase the situation of Yazidi women during the ISIS invasion in 2004. The atrocities and attacks (including verbal, physical and emotional assaults), the women characters in the film comes to terms with are discussed in the study. Women needed to be treated equally with men not only in mere words but in all practical aspects. In order for a civilized society to truly develop in spirit and authority, respect for women and taking them to the forefront is necessary. The study has meticulously focused on minute realms in the life of women where male chauvinism and misogyny persisted.

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