Jinan and Thierry Oberlé


Farida Khalaf with Andrea C. Hoffmann


A fundamental component of the canon of slavery studies is the narrative. Having been dismissed or ignored for many years in New World scholarship, “by the 1970s slave testimony inspired a flood of important reconsiderations of slave life, and therefore, of the history of slavery more broadly.”¹

But do contemporary narratives have a place within that canon? While Laura Murphy has written extensively about the emergence of the “new slave narrative”² speaking of the political use and abuse of such narratives, there seems to be a more fundamental issue for slavery scholars: our own relationship with our subject of study when they become flesh and blood—the enslaved of today. When they speak, how do we listen?

Murphy recognized that the majority of two-dozen or so contemporary narratives have overtones of salvation, are focused on African victims, and have found their way into print with the assistance of Christian organizations. As such, a number of literary devices are used to effectively soften the message, making it palatable to ears, hearts, and minds of the conceived audience in ways that narratives of old had.

In two narratives considered in this review those devices appear once more to be at play. First published in French and in German, these two books testify to the re-emergence of the slave-trade after a century long hiatus: the contemporary narratives of two young Yazidi females enslaved by the men of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (*Isis*, a.k.a. *ISIS* or *Daesh*).

Historically, the move to abolish the slave-trade globally was predicated on abolishing state-sanctioned enslavement: the removal of the legal regimes in each country which allowed for slavery. The consequence of slavery no longer being protected by law was its effective end at the wholesale level: the end of the slave-trade. While contemporary courts have been willing to recognize individual instances of enslavement occurring today, the ability to enslave a

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large number of people has receded with the historical horizon in step with its legal abolition. Gone are the laws and the slave-markets ... until recently.

This is so, as ISIL, in parts of Iraq and Syria, had—during the time of these narratives—become a de facto State. Manifesting effective control over a large swath of territory, Islamic State had revived the slave-trade as legitimate within its self-styled caliphate.\(^3\) It was into the vortex of this maelstrom that two females—Jinan was 18 years old and Farida was 19 years old—were thrust, in 2014, as ISIL expanded northwards from its base in the midriff of Iraq and Syria to conquer the Yazidi heartland around holy Mount Sinjar.

Both narratives follow a common pattern: a tranquil, happy, ordinary life; followed by a sudden reversal of fortune of the highest magnitude: capture, looting and separation of men from women, and then single women from mothers and children. Transportation to where they are sold into slavery, the experience of that enslavement including marriage proposals and hospitalization; then escape, and reunification with family. The underlying theme throughout these testimonies is that of challenge, of subterfuge, and of rebellion in the face of attempts to steal one’s soul through the process of re-institution of the slave-trade.

In the pages of the French *Esclave de Daech*, we bear witness to Jinan’s testimony of enslavement, she is sold in a lot of six females, but too ill to be taken: “She is to be taken care of. Abdallah, you will then give her as a present to my men, but only after she is cured. One must not harm the merchandise.” After her recuperation Jinan is brought to join five others, locked in a section of a villa. These five make a pact that they will work in solidarity as a means of escaping: The leader of the half-dozen, Naline spells it out: “Our masters want to see us cry and make us have sex. This is their thing. Don’t fall into their trap. We will not give them their little pleasures. We resist!” (p. 114). Yet, overt resistance becomes impossible, as failing to convert to Islam is met with being manacled in the noon-day sun and threats of electrocution: “fixing the brown wire to your ear and the green to your sex. It will make sparks fly” (p. 127).

Violent sexual assaults are a common occurrence, but not specifically for Jinan, while mention is made of others, beyond her group; of Suzanne with “magnificent grey eyes” who is raped as a virgin then passed from various soldiers before finding herself in an apartment occupied by a brigade of ten men. “I had hoped that the American would be less cruel than the others, as he would have less prejudice towards a Yazidi Kurd,” but alas, the “American ripped

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\(^3\) See Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, "Revival of Slavery Before the Hour", *Dabiq*, Volume 4, 2014, pp. 14–17; which is specific to the Yazidi.