

The Kurdish Women's Movement: Challenging gendered militarization and the nation-state

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“Here’s to strong women. May we know them. May we raise them. May we be them.”

i. **Dissertation Abstract**

The Kurdish female fighters of the YPJ/ YJA-Star women's guerrilla units have in recent events gained global recognition as one of the prime group of combatants fighting against the extremist terror group, Isis. The West's impression of the Kurdish female fighters as a phenomenon has largely brought to light the question of why the idea of a woman as a fighter in war proves to be something sensationalised, and widely perceived as unconventional. The emergence of the Kurdish female fighter thus brings into question the issue of gendered militarization, and the understanding of the ideological field of war as heavily masculinised.

This dissertation is an enquiry into the understanding as to how and why the implementation and preservation of gendered hierarchies exist within the field of war. Through the examining of feminist theories concerning war as gendered, in providing an insight into the ideological and political beliefs of Kurdish movement, and through the studying of testimonials from YPJ/ YJA-Star women combatants, this dissertation aims to illustrate the Kurdish female fighter as challenging gendered militarization.

The findings of this piece of research work can be regarded to substantiate to the idea that gendered militarization results in detrimental consequences such as sexual violence and rape against women in war torn countries. This dissertation also contributes to the understanding of the political views behind many Kurdish female fighters, and the PKK movement, as advocating gender equality.

ii. Preface

The Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan (PKK) contains one of the largest contingents of armed women militants in the world¹. Political views surrounding the party itself differ considerably, however one fact which is clear is that the advocacy of women's rights on the grounds of political, social and economic equality to men, plays a large role in the Party's Kurdish movement. The Women's Protection Units (Kurdish: Yekîneyên Parastina Jinê), also commonly known as the YPJ, and the women's guerrilla units (YJA-Star) are clear evidence of this. It can be suggested that Kurdish women have gained a sense of secured identity through the Kurdish women's movement through joining and supporting the (PKK) guerilla movement. In doing so, not only have Kurdish female fighters contributed significantly to the subverting of traditional gender roles and stereotypes, but also, very importantly, have brought to light the woman as a fighter, a soldier, a protector, a woman in war; roles more traditionally and culturally associated with men and masculinity.

The plight of the Kurdish and Alevi people – men, women and children – has for many years gone largely unnoticed by the Western world. Turkey and Iraq have witnessed the Zilan massacre of 1930, the 1938 Dersim massacre, the 1978 Maraş massacre, the Al-Anfal Campaign, the more recent Uludere massacre of 2011, and the ongoing siege of Kobani, – all provide horrific examples of the systematic ethnic cleansing and territorialisation against those identified as 'the other'. Roughly 30 million Kurds live in

¹ See, Yesim Yaprak Yildiz, 'Turkey and the PKK: The Kurdish women who take up arms', *BBC Turkish*, (2013) <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-21026273>> Accessed 12/12/14.

Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria and Armenia, though the Kurdish people to this day remain the largest ethnic group not to have gained their own permanent nation-state², a people without a land. As in many cases of statelessness around the world, women are almost always left vulnerable socioeconomically and politically, very often being victims of rape crime and torture, highlighting the negative aspects of the patriarchally ruled State which promotes a system of a society and government which regards men as the power figures. Turkey's masculinised nationalism, as well as international military strategy has provided the justification of acts of atrocity to be carried out against 'the other', often portrayed as in some ways degenerate, dangerous and threats to social, religious and economic order in countries around the world. Since its foundation in 1978³, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a group with strong Marxist-Leninist roots, has been met with much hostility. Strongly associated with violence after launching an armed struggle against the Turkish government in 1984, over calls for an independent Kurdish State within Turkey⁴ the word 'Kurd' became a somewhat tarnished and dirty word - a hostility which the successive Turkish government reflected in its "There is no such thing as 'Kurds'. They are simply 'mountain Turks'"⁵ belief. The result: reported acts of injustice, murder, rape and torture being carried out by Turkish government officials against those believed in some way to have links to the PKK party, or even associated with Kurds. The use of rape against Kurdish women as a scare tactic by Turkish police and government officials, although plentiful, has never been fully recognised by the Turkish government despite a few court trials which have come to light⁶.

I believe that in order to understand and make clear my argument concerning the views surrounding women in war, and in particular Kurdish female fighters, it is important to outline the role and function of the Kurdistan Workers Party, as well as the controversy and views from the West on the PKK. Not only is the idea of a female fighter arguably

² See, 'Who are the Kurds?', *BBC News Middle East* < <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-29702440> > Accessed 17/12/2014.

³ See, Abdullah Ocalan, "On the author" from *Liberating Life: Woman's Revolution* (International Initiative Edition, Germany, 2013), p.61.

⁴ See, Sevim Songul, 'History of PKK in Turkey' *Hurriyet Daily News* (Diyarbakir, 2009)

⁵ See, 'Islamic State: Why Turkey prefers Iraq's Kurds in fight against IS', *BBC News Middle East*. (2014) < <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-29694419> > Accessed 09/01/15

⁶ See, 'Trial Observation Report: Turkey's Shame: Sexual Violence Without Redress- The Plight of Kurdish Women', (Kurdish Human Rights Project, London 2003)

difficult to come to terms with and accept as being equal to a male fighter or soldier (something considered the norm) as feminist scholar Laura Sjoberg argues in *Gendering Global Conflict: Toward a Feminist Theory of War* (1979)⁷, but so too is the idea of a PKK guerilla being presented in a positive light. I want to explore the idea of the military, the State, and war as gendered by understanding the ways in which hidden gender stereotypes embedded in our cultural discourses, social institutions, and individual psyches work to preserve male power and oppress women. Throughout my work I will be looking at ways in which gender plays a role in the conflict and many injustices carried out against women, by providing discussion of whether the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) challenges the gender hierarchies which exist not only in the West but globally. I believe that there is a fundamental truth in some respects concerning the idea that the gendering of nation and the military leads to higher levels of gender discrimination against women, and the view of women being regarded as the 'weaker' sex. This gendered organisation and system of control plays a key role in the exploitation of women as well as what it means to be a woman.

I am particularly interested in the way in which socially and culturally constructed gender roles can not only be detrimental to everyday lives of women in many hidden ways, but how the normalisation of these gender roles is being implemented on a larger scale in war torn countries as a means to exert authority and control, and serve as reasons to segregate, rape, torture and murder. Understanding the problems which arise from gender in global politics paves a way to understand how gendering can fuel not only sexual discrimination, but racial discrimination also. Other issues which I would like to bring forward include; ideas on how the characteristics and privileges associated with the stereotypical male gender works in order to legitimize war and militarization, and how gendered representations lead to notions of honor, shame and protection - all of which play a part in the socially formed understanding of the predetermined roles of men and women in war.

⁷ Laura Sjoberg, *Gendering Global Conflict: Toward a Feminist Theory of War*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979)

Throughout my work I will be arguing that the Kurdish female fighters can be seen to challenge established gender hierarchies through their attempts to break away from hegemonic gendering and notions of sexual prejudice. I do however understand the political tension surrounding the PKK, and the conspicuous fact that the workings of the PKK movement go against that of many global States. I strongly believe that gendered militarization is problematic. It is arguably evident that Kurdish female fighters have formed a strongly strategic and progressive way of gaining gender equality within the PKK movement through challenging the notion of gendered militarization. A key indicator of a society's understanding of democracy and freedom is the situation of its women. It is important that I stress upon the point that although ideas and works on gendered militarization in general have been quite substantial, the same cannot be said for works and texts on gender and the Kurdish Women's Movement in particular. Therefore in order to support my argument and provide evidence for these claims I will be looking at essays, news stories, interviews and video sources from both western and Kurdish media and culture. I will interpret these through my examining of a range of theoretical feminist pieces of work by political philosopher Jean Bethke Elshtain, and theorists Judith Butler, and Laura Sjoberg, placing a strong focus on ideas on women in war, gender as a social construct and the Kurdish question.

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I. Introduction: A Conceptual Overview

The gendering of war and the warrior.

Through this piece of written work, I want to bring to the foreground and examine the ways in which the very notion of the military is gendered, and patriarchally constructed. I wish to explore how the gendering of war is particularly detrimental to the championing of gender equality, and give an understanding as to how and whether the Kurdish female fighters' subversion of traditional gender norms can be seen to pave the way to egalitarianism.

The role that gender plays in war is of greater significance than one may assume, however concealed it may be. The image of war strongly connotes patriarchy, masculinity and the man - an arena in which the woman is not welcome, and in many cases not believed to belong, unless she is in the role of the victim. To put it quite crudely, in the domain of war, a dominant reality which exists in many cases is that the woman is only ever the victim of war, and if not presented as the victim, she is invisible. This notion of gender and war contributes to the reason why the idea of the woman as a fighter, a protector, a soldier capable of killing in war and as being equivalent to the male soldier, is

an idea which is uncommon and met with much hostility in many societies and in war. What I hope to illustrate throughout my work is the extent to which the implementation of gender roles and hierarchies exist, particularly in the field of war. Moreover looking at what the preservation of gender hierarchy means for the condition of gender equality. I will be comparing and contrasting the utilising of gendered militarization with the ideological and political beliefs behind many Kurdish female fighters of the YPJ /YJA-Star guerrilla units.

In *Gendering Global Conflict: Toward a Feminist Theory of War*,⁸ Laura Sjoberg argues that gender and gender inferiority are key factors in the making and fighting of global conflict. In doing so she points to the often ignored importance of feminist theory of war- to be specific, the idea that war cannot be understood without considering gender as a primary unit of analysis⁹. Sjoberg states that “war is constituted by and constitutes gender and that gendering is a key cause of war as well as a key impact.”¹⁰ In essence, Sjoberg is bringing to the foreground the idea that notions of gender and war are very much related and patriarchally constructed. What I will continuously foreground throughout this piece of work is the importance of recognising the role which gender plays in war, since if we are to understand Sjoberg’s view to be true, it would suggest that the social construction of gender and the executing of gender roles in militaries works in normalising and legitimising acts of war, and ideas of militarisation. More precisely, this is achieved through the exploitation of existing notions surrounding masculinity and femininity. Consequently it is conceivable that the practice of war exacerbates this gendering which works to constrict and control women empirically through strengthening both the conventional image of gendered bodies, as well as preconceived gendered concepts. This organisation of gender, particularly in relation to war and the State can be argued to be a key culprit in the exploitation and control which takes place in war, hence why I will be taking into consideration the idea of statelessness in my work. Certainly, the idea of statehood is important to consider in the understanding of how gendering works

⁸ Laura Sjoberg, *Gendering Global Conflict: Toward a Feminist Theory of War*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979)

⁹ See, ‘Gendering Global Conflict: Towards a Feminist Theory of War - Laura Sjoberg - Book Review’, Gender and Development [< <http://www.genderanddevelopment.org/page/gendering-global-conflict-review>> Accessed 09/01/15

¹⁰ Laura Sjoberg, *Gendering Global Conflict: Toward a Feminist Theory of War*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), p. 6.

in war and in global politics. Statehood implies to a government of legitimacy which is recognised as an independent nation, with its own defined territory. I would argue that the idea of the nation-state is itself a gendered concept, made apparent through the importance territory plays in the definition and legitimizing of statehood, and the relationship between territory and masculinised militarisation. This argument, which I will further draw upon throughout my work, is namely supported and illustrated by the PKK movement¹¹, and many Kurdish female fighters who argue that the nation-state paradigm is strongly patriarchal, and has become a serious obstacle to social development, and serves mainly to oppress its people -in particular women.

Gender, State & War

Many feminist theorists have argued that national identity and gender are inextricably linked¹². It could be said that non-states such as Kurdistan which are represented as in need of protection from ethnic cleansing, financial stability and aid, are thought of as feminised by stronger, patriarchally constructed, more permanent States which view themselves as masculine powers of authority. If one is to speculate to parallels existing between being stateless in a system of nation-states, and being a female, a victim in war; both are very much regarded as invisible and helpless. To illustrate, Sjoberg appears to support this view;

Some states are aggressors, while other states are the victims of aggression. Some states are protectors, while other states require protection. Some states provide peacekeeping troops, international humanitarian aid, and other public goods, while other states do not serve those functions...Some states see their masculinity as affirmed in the interstate equivalent of rape and pillage, while other states see it in chivalry, honour, and a sense of the genteel.¹³

Here Sjoberg points towards how gender hierarchies exist, and are capable in structuring and ordering the positions of nation-states and ethnicities. It could be argued that the implementing of masculinization and feminization is used strategically by patriarchal

¹¹ Abdullah Ocalan, *Democratic Confederalism*, (International Initiative Edition, Germany 2011)

¹² Laura Sjoberg, *Gendering Global Conflict: Toward a Feminist Theory of War*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), p. 86.

¹³ Laura Sjoberg, *Gendering Global Conflict: Toward a Feminist Theory of War*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), pp.89-90.

States in order to define who and what is socially regarded as inferior and superior. As Sjoberg suggests, Feminization “is subordinating people, political entities, or ideas by associating them with values perceived as feminine.”¹⁴ However what can also be interpreted here is that notions of masculinity also differ amongst nations. In taking into consideration the idea of the metaphorical gendering of nation-states, I believe at this point it is tenable to argue that a result of this is: that in States where gender inequality is poor, deplorable acts such as rape are used in order to control women in order to continually make them aware of their gender’s inferiority. However feminization should not be assumed to only affect women, as the metaphorical feminization of nation-states demonstrates that such an enforcement of gender hierarchies affects not only men and women, but subdivisions and countries.

This piece of work will address the conceptual ideas surrounding gendering in war, looking at how masculinised states can thus be assumed to implement a patriarchal form of authority. One would suggest that such states would very much be hostile to the idea of a female fighter as this would imply that the woman has released herself from the shackles of traditional gender norms and in a sense taken on the stereotypical gender norms associated with men and masculinity, therefore posing a threat to social order. Such a woman may be regarded to have in a sense un-feminised herself, and therefore made herself less socially inferior. Jean Bethke Elshtain’s *Women and War* highlights the purpose of gender roles in maintaining social order through examining the idea of culturally made roles of women as “beautiful souls” and men as “Just warriors”.¹⁵ The images of men as Just warriors and women as Beautiful Souls has throughout time been imprinted through war and constructed traditional gender norms, believed to be the norm, and even to the extent of being considered natural. This is problematic in establishing the woman in war as a warrior, as the idea of the ‘Beautiful Soul’ positions women as mourners in war, and not fighters. As Elshtain points out in *Women and War*, “Nancy Huston suggests that the mourning of women, their tears and lamentations, is

¹⁴ Laura Sjoberg, *Gendering Global Conflict: Toward a Feminist Theory of War*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), p. 147.

¹⁵ Jean Bethke Elshtain, ‘Introduction: Beautiful Soul/Just Warrior’ from *Women and War* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 7.

“one of the goals of war”.¹⁶ This can be related back to Sjoberg’s argument of war constituting and being constituted by gender. Huston suggests that war has in a sense not worked if the tears and lamentation of women have not been achieved. The masculinised war is somewhat dependent on the perceived emotional responses carried out by what it regards as being the weaker gender, in order to gain a sense of self validation of its masculinity. This raises the question of what it means for dominantly male gendered militarization when women go against their societally given gender roles. Elshtain poses the question;

Has the emergence of the woman as a mobilized war worker, a soldier, a terrorist, a revolutionary, or the prime victim of total war (along with her children) shattered our notions of Beautiful Souls or Just Warriors?¹⁷

In my work I will be studying the idea of democratic confederalism - a proposed non-state social paradigm favoured by many YPJ/YJA-Star Kurdish female fighters, as well as many supporters of the PKK. I will further examine the idea of democratic confederalism and how it is claimed to challenge and combat gender hierarchies which are present in the nation-state in the chapter: ‘The Kurdish Female Fighter’. I will first however like to stress the power and authority which the State’s implementation of masculinity holds over its people, and which it exercises constantly upon women. Statistically, according to the Pentagon, more than 200,000¹⁸ women are in the active-duty military. In regards to the United Kingdom’s armed forces, according to the Ministry of Defence, the percentage of women in the UK Regular Forces was 9.9% in April 2014¹⁹- a 0.5% increase since 2008²⁰. It is important to point out that although many more women are joining military organisations, and are active in guerrillas, or perhaps groups deemed as terrorist organisations, this does not always mean that the woman is not under the control of male

¹⁶ Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Women and War* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), p.49.

¹⁷ Jean Bethke Elshtain, ‘Introduction: Beautiful Soul/Just Warrior’ from *Women and War* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 6-7.

¹⁸ See, ‘By the numbers: Women in the U.S military’, *CNN International*: 2013
<<http://edition.cnn.com/2013/01/24/us/military-women-glance/>> Accessed 09/01/15

¹⁹ See, ‘UK Armed Forces Personnel Report’, *Ministry of Defence* (2014)
<https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/312539/uk_af_annual_personnel_report_2014.pdf> Accessed 09/01/15

²⁰ See, Victoria Bone, ‘Women in the British armed forces’, *BBC News*(2008)
<<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7463636.stm>> Accessed 09/01/15

authority. This assumption is a dangerous one which could be seen to undermine the women's movement. As Sjoberg suggests in regards to women as soldiers;

While several militaries have developed policies specifically aimed at the integration of women into their ranks, those policies have not generally reached the level of "mainstreaming" gender. Instead, these women are allowed to participate in a military force still dominated by masculinities...A woman soldier, then, is a woman who can demonstrate her masculinity without losing her femininity. She is included in wars not because militaries have questioned or changed their privileging of masculine values, but instead because she is willing and able to adopt to those masculine values in her participation in these militaries.

Militarized masculinity remains a standard- it just becomes a standard that women can approximate, if not meet. Still, what women must do is to be *masculine enough* without losing femininity. Therefore, though women increasingly fight in wars, they often get caught in a gender-stereotype catch-22: they take all the risks that men do, while missing both the reward and the elusive status of equality. The result has been "the preservation of the discursive structures of gender-subordination even in gender-integrated militaries."²¹

Taking Sjoberg's argument into account, one could argue that the impression often given surrounding gender equality in society, in the work place and here in militaries and war is but an illusion, as the root of the problem of gender inequality is not being addressed. This root would of course be patriarchy and its enforcement of gender segregation and discrimination. What can be understood from Sjoberg is that although the presence of women in military environments, generally speaking, is becoming more and more to be considered acceptable, this acceptance is a tolerated one. The idea of a woman being "allowed to participate in a military force" suggests that her participation in the military force is tolerated by those whom are believed to more naturally and traditionally belong in such an environment - men. Women are given permission by the patriarchal state to participate in war, however this participation is also restricted as in many militaries across the world, women are not yet able to fill the exact same military roles as men are. Thus women are not even given the permission to be able to fully perform the male gender to

²¹ Laura Sjoberg, 'Women as Soldiers' from *Gendering Global Conflict: Toward a Feminist Theory of War*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), pp. 234-235.

the same extent as men in the military, meaning they are unable to reach the same levels of gender equality. In regards to the ongoing debates in the United Kingdom surrounding whether women should be able to serve in the infantry, the Royal Armored Corps or the Household Cavalry where they would be involved in close combat there remains much hostility²². Although many would argue that the UK should be working towards gender equality in the armed forces, prominent military figures remain opposed to the idea. Colonel Richard Kemp, the former commander of British forces in Afghanistan, expresses such hostility and gender prejudice in his aptly titled article, 'Female Soldiers Just Lack The Killer Instinct'²³ published in *The Times*. Kemp goes on to state in his article; "Ministers want equal opportunities on the battlefield but women will harm the warrior ethos." Kemp appears to embody the views of the patriarchal nation-state in his views on women as soldiers, posing women in the battlefield as a possible threat to mankind and masculine dominance. He seems to suggest and support the patriarchally constructed gender roles of masculinity and femininity; femininity being the inferior of the two, and concluding that as women must certainly maintain only feminine values, they "lack the killer instinct" possessed naturally by men and necessary for war.

The Kurdish Movement - Challenging the nation-state paradigm

A key aim of my research work is to incorporate theories and opinions concerning gendered militarization and the relationship between the state and gender hierarchies, with examples demonstrating how the Kurdish female fighter and the PKK movement claim to challenge existing and prejudiced gender constructs. As Catherine MacKinnon explains, "feminization is something that can happen to anyone. It is only that we assume it is natural to happen to people identified as women."²⁴ This issue is one recognised by the PKK movement, a movement which claims to have moved away from nationalism and which rejects the idea of the State. For the PKK, gender inequality is regarded as

²² See, 'Women at war: should female soldiers serve in close combat?', *The Week* (2014) <

<http://www.theweek.co.uk/uk-news/61399/women-at-war-should-female-soldiers-serve-in-close-combat>> Accessed 10/01/14

²³ Richard Kemp, 'Female Soldiers Just Lack The Killer Instinct' (2014) <<http://richard-kemp.com/female-soldiers-just-lack-the-killer-instinct/>> Accessed 23/12/14

²⁴ Catherine MacKinnon, *Only Worlds* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993)

something which must be addressed in the party's "Women's Liberation Ideology"²⁵. The party promotes the term 'Jineology' which is believed to be; "...a fundamental scientific term in order to fill the gaps that the current social sciences are incapable of doing. Jineology is built on the principle that without the freedom of women within society and without a real consciousness surrounding women no society can call itself free."²⁶

The Kurdish female fighters of the Women's Protection Unit (YPJ) are a strong example of women who have objected to these given traditional gender norms by taking on more militarised roles, and therefore destabilised the notions of Beautiful Souls and Just Warriors. This is because these women through their own choice and sense of freedom have opted for a lifestyle and job role traditionally believed to only be appropriate for men. Through taking on the role of fighters they are blurring the lines of not only the notions of Beautiful Souls and Just Warriors, but the male and female gender also. Bejan Ciyayi, a Kurdish female fighter of the Women's Protection Unit (YPJ) provides an example of one such female who has rejected the traditional gender roles of the society of which she grew up in;

I joined the PKK (the Kurdistan Workers' Party) when I was 16, along with a group of friends. I was never married; it seemed pointless to me to get married and bring a child to his world, before making it a nice place to live for children.²⁷

Ciyayi's breaking away from the role of wife and mother very much relates to the question posed by Elshain about whether the new roles many women now have the opportunity to attain have shattered the traditional notions of patriarchy constructed gender roles. I believe it could be argued that the emergence of the woman as someone with a strong presence in war in particular does do away with gender roles. This is something positive for women's liberation as it suggests that although there exists much sexual discrimination towards women across the world, the fact that female fighters such

²⁵ See, Delal Afsin Nurhak, 'The Kurdish Woman's Liberation Movement' <<http://www.pkconline.com/en/index.php?sys=article&artID=180>> Accessed 12/12/14

²⁶ See, Delal Afsin Nurhak, 'The Kurdish Woman's Liberation Movement' <<http://www.pkconline.com/en/index.php?sys=article&artID=180>> Accessed 12/12/14

²⁷ See, Gareth Platt, 'A Kurdish Female Fighter's War Story: 'I don't know how many I've Killed in Kobani - I Don't see Isis as Human'', *International Business Times* (2014) <<http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/kurdish-female-fighters-war-story-i-dont-know-how-many-ive-killed-kobani-i-dont-see-1471412>> Accessed 18/12/14

as Ciyayi exist and have gained world recognition can be seen as a symbol of the further dismantling of constricting gender roles. However one may argue that the extent to which a woman must go in order to be recognised as an individual with the attributes of the typically male role of a Just Warrior, requires a great deal of what Judith Butler refers to as expressions of gender.

Butler in her essay titled, "Performative Acts And Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory", argues that "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender...identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results"²⁸. Butler stresses that the male and female genders are always performative, and the field of war can be seen as a dominant field of the performance of the male gender. It could therefore be suggested that for a woman to be accepted by society and the State as possessing the values and qualities of a Just Warrior she must demonstrate her ability to perform the male gender, which in war is strongly associated with the ability to be violent, to kill, and to be fearless. However this again goes to suggest that the male gender is regarded as superior to the female gender, and that only the male gender belongs in war as it is the only gender believed to be capable of such violence, courage and strength. Here I would agree with Sjoberg who suggests that the purpose of war is not a battle of survival but a battle of masculine dominance. Sjoberg could be seen to agree with Butler's views on gender performance in her views on war; "Instead, it [war] is a competition of masculinised dominance in which states, as gendered actors in a gendered system, are out to dominate rather than to survive."²⁹ This clearly paints a picture of the dominance, power and authority of the patriarchally constructed male gender and how it affects global politics and the everyday life and mind-sets of State citizens.

Another important reality which Sjoberg highlights is that women in militaries are almost always referred to as women soldiers or female fighters unlike men who are

²⁸ See, Judith Butler. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." in: *Theatre Journal*. Vol. 40, No. 4, pp. 519-531, December 1988. (English)

²⁹ Laura Sjoberg, *Gendering Global Conflict: Toward a Feminist Theory of War*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), p. 98.

simply referred to as soldiers or their military title. The foregrounding of the sex of women in war appears to have to be mentioned, which one could argue works as the previously discussed process of feminization does - to subordinate. In my references to the Kurdish women's movement throughout this thesis, I too refer to the YPJ and YJA-Star combatant units as female fighters, as do many of the women themselves, the PKK, as well as the Western media. However it is problematic and untrue to state that the term female fighter is used to subordinate by the PKK movement and all forms of media, although it can be assumed that certain medias may take such an approach. The YPJ and YJA-Star women's' combatant units demonstrate clear ideological and political differences to the State militaries which Sjoberg appears to refer to. In the State militaries what Sjoberg suggests is that a woman soldier is accepted and tolerated within the military on the basis that she is able to adapt and perform her masculinity. Again this supports Butler's argument about the performativity of gender. The woman soldier must also maintain her femininity, which she must continue to perform outside of the male dominated field of war. I would argue however that as soon as the woman soldier leaves this masculinised environment of war, she enters into another more subtly masculinised environment which is the everyday world. Both these environments co-exist in the patriarchal State. This performing of masculinity whilst maintaining one's femininity is what contributes to and keeps together what Sjoberg calls "the preservation of the discursive structures of gender-subordination". If a woman was not to conform to this she would be a threat to patriarchal social order and nation-states.

I would therefore suggest that sexual equality cannot fully be achieved in a patriarchal nation-state, as the idea of gender equality does not work to benefit patriarchy, but instead to dismantle it. Patriarchy would be unable to maintain its maximum power if it were to regard sexual equality of great importance, and so it does not. This is a view shared by the former head of the PKK Abdullah Ocalan who in his *Liberating Life: Woman's Revolution* manifesto states;

Power has reached its full capacity in the form of the nation-state. It derives its strength mainly from the sexism it spreads and intensifies by the integration of women into the labour force as well as through nationalism and

militarism. Sexism, just as nationalism, is an ideology through which power is generated and nation-states are built.³⁰

Ocalan's description of the nation-state depicts the image of the patriarchal state having attained its maximum strength through the accomplishment of implementing both implicit and explicit modes of sexism. It is although important to recognise as being true that patriarchy takes many forms, and that many inequitable structures have arguably been the result of long institutionalised forms of sexism. Therefore it must be recognised that such invisible practices of sexism are often the most difficult to combat. Ocalan strongly suggests that there is a hidden agenda to the integration of women into nationalism and the military which works to feed into the preservation of such sexism and patriarchal power, or as Sjoberg would call "structures of gender-subordination." I would suggest that such a patriarchal power is at its most extreme when structures of gender-subordination are popularly perceived to be natural rather than constructed.

As the nation-state and patriarchy appear to be extremely fixated upon maintaining power and order through institutionalisation it could be suggested that the patriarchal nation-state is very often a capitalist one. This understanding would go to suggest the exploitation of women in order to profit the nation-state economically. Ocalan's argument also highlights the Marxist idea of Louis Althusser's theory on ideological state apparatus which suggests ways in which society and the State imposes its ideology upon its citizens either by coercion or persuasion. In 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus' (1970)³¹ Althusser states that there is a distinction between state power and state apparatus, and that although ideological state apparatus may appear as very different from what he refers to as repressive state apparatuses, the two work hand in hand in order for the patriarchal nation-state to maintain power. Althusser defines the ideological state apparatus as follows;

³⁰ Abdullah Ocalan, Chapter five, "All Slavery is based on housewifisation" from *Liberating Life: Woman's Revolution* (International Initiative Edition, Germany 2013), p. 28.

³¹ Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus' (1970) from *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, Monthly Review Press (1971) < <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm> > Accessed 22/12/2014

They [ISAs] must not be confused with the (repressive) State apparatus. Remember that in Marxist theory, the State Apparatus (SA) contains: the Government, the Administration, the Army, the Police, the Courts, the Prisons, etc., which constitute what I shall in future call the Repressive State Apparatus. Repressive suggests that the State Apparatus in question 'functions by violence' – at least ultimately (since repression, e.g. administrative repression, may take non-physical forms).

I shall call Ideological State Apparatuses a certain number of realities which present themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialized institutions...we can for the moment regard the following institutions as Ideological State Apparatuses (the order in which I have listed them has no particular significance):

- the religious ISA (the system of the different churches),
- the educational ISA (the system of the different public and private 'schools'),
- the family ISA,
- the legal ISA,
- the political ISA (the political system, including the different parties),
- the trade-union ISA,
- the communications ISA (press, radio and television, etc.),
- the cultural ISA (literature, the arts, sports, etc.).³²

In terms of ideologies concerning gender, the patriarchal State can thus be seen to exert its state power through use of the state apparatus, whether this be through use of the repressive or the ideological state apparatuses. I would argue that the use of ideological state apparatuses work strongly to achieve the naturalisation of gender constructs as ideological state apparatuses exist in the everyday life of State citizens, and most ISAs have throughout time been naturalised themselves. The family, the trade-union and religion for example, generally speaking are not assumed to work as institutions or state apparatuses, as they represent to some extent; the natural, the private and the bringing together of people(s).

One may conclude that the fact that gender hierarchies and the performance of gender roles exists within the family unit is perhaps a key indication to the level of gender

³² Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus' (1970) from *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, Monthly Review Press (1971) < <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm> > Accessed 22/12/2014

inequality which patriarchy and the nation-state has been able to implement implicitly within society. I believe that gender constructs play a large role in the organisation of society, and can strongly affect the roles of men and women in war. These gender constructs, over time, through patriarchal implementation have appeared to be naturalised in society, arguably undermining issues of gender prejudices. The fact that gender constructs and the often false and biased ideologies which come hand in hand, have reached such a large scale in that the gendering of states, races and nationalities, is something very problematic. This level of gendering can also be seen as the root of many problems, as well as the perceived justification for many injustices, often against women in war torn countries. In the following chapter titled 'Women and the Kurdish Movement' I will provide a more detailed analysis of the role of women in the Kurdish movement, looking at how the movement claims to challenge gender inequality through empowering women. In the chapter, 'The Female Body in War', I will examine ideas around how the body is gendered, and the consequences of this gendering in relation to the field of war, by looking at sexual violence and rape as a militarized weapon of war.

II. Women and The Kurdish Movement

In this chapter I would like to foreground the moral principles and political ideas of the Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan (PKK), and examine how the movement explicitly points to feminism as offering women liberation. The views of the PKK are very much reflected by female combatants of the Women's Protection Units (YPJ/YJA-Star), and can be seen to offer a key reason as to why many Kurdish women, as well as women from other ethnic minorities, decide to take up arms in the YPJ/YJA-Star. The idea of 'Democratic Confederalism', a term coined by Abdullah Ocalan offers a move away from nationalism and the nation-state structure, which can be regarded as oppressing women. The patriarchal nation-state can be understood as a key reason why "women are

disproportionately situated at the bottom of the socioeconomic scale in all societies”³³. The women of the YPJ/YJA-Star combatant units can be seen to have transgressed the idea of the invisible women in war to the existence of the woman as visible in war. I would like to look at what the Kurdish Movement offers women, and how regardless of the gender constructs which exist worldwide, many Kurdish women of the YPJ/YJA-Star combat units have to some extent proven that women can be regarded as equals in the field of war. I will be looking at testimonials from women within the Women’s Protection Units (YPJ/YJA-Star) in order to provide an argument to how these women claim to gain such a sense of freedom.

One could understand that to be stateless in the system of nation-state makes one vulnerable socially, economically and politically. It can be argued that for a woman in such a position, she is made more susceptible to male oppression, gender prejudices and inequality often exerted upon her through acts of violence, sexual abuse and rape which work to feminize her as the victim and preserve patriarchal gender constructs. As Dilar Dirik argues (2014);

One indicator of a society’s understanding of democracy and freedom is the situation of women. For, what use is “a Kurdistan”, if it will end up oppressing half of its population? Kurdish women face several layers of oppression as members of a stateless nation in a largely patriarchal feudal-Islamic context, and hence struggle on multiple fronts. While the four different states over which Kurdistan is divided display strong patriarchal characteristics, which oppress all women in their respective populations, Kurdish women are further ethnically discriminated against as Kurds and are usually members of the lowest socioeconomic class.³⁴

One can understand here the reasons why many Kurdish women choose by their own free will to join the YPJ/YJA-Star ranks, as for a woman who is stateless, the reality of living in accordance to degrading and constricting gender roles does not lead towards any sense of liberation. The Kurdish Movement, through its acknowledgement of the

³³ See, Laura Sjoberg, ‘Anarchy, structure, gender and war(s)’ from *Gendering Global Conflict: Toward a Feminist Theory of War*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), p.77

³⁴ See, Dilar Dirik, ‘What Kind of Kurdistan for Women?’ (2014) <<http://kurdishquestion.com/woman/what-kind-of-kurdistan-for-women.html>> Accessed 04/01/15

prejudices women face, and its foregrounding of the fact that a nation-state is unable to offer women full equality, is understandably a movement which can be seen to offer a possibility of this freedom and liberation. In rejecting the idea of the State, the women of the YPJ/YJA-Star units are in a sense slowly but surely walking towards liberation. However such a reality gives the problematic impression that in order for women to gain sexual equality and fully overturn and dismantle patriarchal gender constructs, they must arguably take rather extreme measures such as taking up arms and physically defending themselves, their communities and their political and ideological beliefs. Reasons for why many Kurdish women take up arms appear to be present in many of their testimonials: Bejan Ciyayi, a Kurdish female fighter of the Women's Protection Unit (YPJ) who I have previously mentioned, says, "There are ideological, political and sociological reasons behind my desire to fight against Isis. I have sworn to defend the Kurdish people against all evil."³⁵ I believe that what proves problematic is that the field of war can be regarded as representing masculine dominance and ideas of defending and protecting the ideological patriarchal nation-state. The people of the Kurdish Movement however, appear to be against the issue of masculine dominance and the ideological patriarchal nation-State. One could argue that even if the women combatants believe that they are gaining a sense of freedom through taking up arms in the YPJ/YJA-Star units, they are still actively taking part in war, which is arguably still very heavily dominated by men. I would still however support the idea that the women of the YPJ/YJA-Star units have transgressed traditional gender stereotypes through taking up arms and being perceived as taking on the gender characteristics generally associated with masculinity. It is true that actively fighting and putting one's life on the line in the field of war may be regarded as rather extreme lengths to go to in fighting for women's liberation, however it can be argued that, "wartime, uprisings, social unrest often provide women with space to assert themselves and to demand representation in ways that normal, civilian life would not

³⁵ See, Gareth Platt, 'A Kurdish Female Fighter's War Story: 'I don't know how many I've Killed in Kobani - I Don't see Isis as Human'', *International Business Times* (2014) < <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/kurdish-female-fighters-war-story-i-dont-know-how-many-ive-killed-kobani-i-dont-see-1471412>> Accessed 18/12/14

permit.”³⁶ For women to be actively engaged in social responsibilities carried out on many different fields and terrains, which are traditionally associated with men and masculinity, it can be suggested that this activism works to legitimize women’s demands for emancipation.

A dominant view which appears to be shared by many Kurdish women and women fighters of the YPJ/YJA-Star units is that gender equality and the liberation of women is essential for the progression of the emancipation of humankind. One female member of the Kurdish BDP party- “the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party, founded in 2008, which mandates that 40 percent of its representatives be women”³⁷, expresses: “The state and the men's mentality is the same thing: to oppress a woman...We believe that when the woman has freedom to think then the Kurdish question will be solved.” Abdullah Ocalan reflects this belief in *Liberating Life: Women’s Revolution* in which he states;

The extent to which society can be thoroughly transformed is determined by the extent of the transformation attained by women. Similarly, the level of woman’s freedom and equality determines the freedom and equality of all sections of society...For a democratic nation, woman’s freedom is of great importance too, as liberated woman constitutes liberated society. Liberated society in turn constitutes democratic nation. Moreover, the need to reverse the role of man is of revolutionary importance³⁸.

From looking at the ideas represented by Ocalan, a key figure in the Kurdish Movement, it can be understood that the YPJ/YJA-Star units would claim to be fighting for a liberated society and democracy. It is strongly suggested that a liberated society and a democratic nation which has rid itself of masculine and patriarchal ideologies are essential steps towards the emancipation of women and society.

³⁶ See, Dilar Dirik, ‘What Kind of Kurdistan for Women?’ (2014) <<http://kurdishquestion.com/woman/what-kind-of-kurdistan-for-women.html>> Accessed 04/01/15

³⁷ See, Jenna Krajeski, ‘Kurdistan’s Female Fighters’, *The Atlantic*, (2013) <<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/01/kurdistan-female-fighters/272677/>> Accessed 10/01/15

³⁸ Abdullah Ocalan, “Democratic modernity: Era of Woman’s Revolution” from *Liberating Life: Woman’s Revolution* (International Initiative Edition, Germany 2013), p. 57.

In understanding the PKK as having Marxist-Leninist political roots, I would suggest that Marxist thinking appears to be very influential in the ideological beliefs of the Kurdish Movement, and an aversion to capitalism appears to be very much present in the beliefs of many Kurdish female fighters. One combatant of the YPJ/YJA-Star units identified as Desine combatant expresses such a view;

I am now a free woman, brave and able to defend myself and my people. I fight for the enslaved woman, help their liberation from oppression. I believe capitalism enslaves women. In capitalism men dominate, while women are the underdogs. The main problem is that women accept this oppressive system...Capitalism first oppressed the European women...I want to ask why many European women are still oppressed?³⁹

It can be argued that often many women who are identified as militant rebels or terrorists are left out of scholarly analyses. As Sjoberg argues; “violent women are rarely characterised as having chosen their violent actions, and even more rarely portrayed as having made a reasoned choice⁴⁰.” Contrary to such prejudiced belief, testimonials from Kurdish female fighters such as Desine combatant appear to show the reasoning and political beliefs behind the decision to having chosen the undertaking of violent actions and killing in war. One can understand that the image of a woman as violent and as a killer in war is one which society approaches with hostility as such characteristics are a far cry from the ideological gender role of the woman as maternal and passive. In regards to Desine combatants questioning why many European women are still oppressed, it can be understood that society is in a sense more accepting of ‘the other’ non-western woman being associated with violence and unfeminine characteristics. I would suggest that the Western understanding of ‘the other’ non-western woman as possessing unfeminine and thus unnatural characteristics, can be understood as rather orientalist. In support of why Desine combatant and many of her comrades believe the European woman to be oppressed, one could suggest this to be because capitalism is much more strongly present in the western world. This implies that the nation-states of the Western world, or nation-

³⁹ See Rozh Ahmad, Short film: ‘YPJ Kurdish Female Fighters: A day in Syria’ (2014) < <http://kurdistantribune.com/2014/ypj-kurdish-women-fighters-day-syria/> > Accessed 06/01/15

⁴⁰ Laura Sjoberg, ‘Gendered tactics’ from *Gendering Global Conflict: Toward a Feminist Theory of War*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), p.232.

states which have adopted the capitalist system of the West, are nation-states in which patriarchal gender constructs are more naturalised and thus, stronger and more oppressive. In relation to war, one example of this which I would suggest is the previously discussed issue of the fact that women in the United Kingdom are still not permitted to take up the same military roles as men in the armed forces. The Kurdish Movement and the women of the YPJ/YJA-Star units may regard this fact as oppressive, hence why they regard themselves as free women, “brave and able to defend.” For the women of the YPJ/YJA-Star units, there appears to be no requirement to gaining male permission in order to act in war. One can argue that in nation-states which oppress women, masculinity is very much foregrounded as representing power, hence this power is regarded as something which permission must be gained from.

One may argue that “the fact that Kurdish women take up arms, traditional symbols of male power, is in many ways a radical deviance from tradition⁴¹.” This deviance from traditional gender roles is an issue which has been implied in much of the Western mainstream media’s reporting on Kurdish female fighters. The presence of women combatants in Kurdish society is not a new phenomenon. As one female Kurdish guerrilla fighter Zîlan Diyar writes;

The whole world is talking about us, Kurdish women. It has become a common phenomenon to come across news about women fighters in magazine, papers, and news outlets...To them, our rooted tradition is a reality that they only recently started to know. They are impressed with everything. The women’s laughter, naturalness, long braids, and the details of their young lives feel like hands extending to those struggling in the waters of despair.⁴²

The Western media’s understanding of Kurdish female fighters as a common phenomenon can be seen to reflect the idea that Western society regards the idea of women’s identity as equal militant combatants in war as something inconceivable. Diyar’s

⁴¹ See, Dilar Dirik, ‘The Representation of Kurdish Women Fighters in the Media’ (2014) <<http://kurdishquestion.com/woman/the-representation-of-kurdish-women-fighters-in-the-media.html>> Accessed 05/01/15

⁴² See Zilan Diyar, <<https://tendancecoatesy.wordpress.com/2014/12/27/kurdish-women-fighters-the-light-of-the-world/>> Accessed 05/01/14. [This piece originally appeared in Yeni Özgür Politika (2014) in Turkish with the title ‘Vakti Geldi’ (English trans: ‘The time has come’) found at <<http://www.yeniozgurpolitika.org/index.php?rupel=nuce&id=36153>>

referring to the fact that Western media places much focus on the physical appearance of the Kurdish female fighters can be seen as something which works to undermine the Kurdish female fighter's role in war as something trivial, whereas these women are fighting for their lives and their political beliefs. Some may argue that this trivialisation of the phenomenon of the Kurdish female fighter arguably works to make these women into instruments of war, or as Judith Butler would argue, the extensions of the instruments of war⁴³. To regard a human being as an extension of the instruments of war, is to pay no regard to the fact that these human beings have their own identity and beliefs. To understand female fighters as instruments of war is to dehumanize, as Sjoberg argues; "when the mainstream literature recognizes women as weapons, it is often in an abstract and dehumanised sense that makes women's violence seem so counterintuitive⁴⁴." Of course this does not work in the ultimate favour of the Kurdish movement and the ideological and political beliefs of the YPJ/YJA-Star combatants. It can be argued that the deliberate trivialisation and sensationalising of the Kurdish female fighter works to "distract from the fact that the vast majority of Kurdish women join the struggle out of conviction, out of a desire to fight oppression, that they are conscious actors who want to determine their lives autonomously. It becomes obvious that the 'instrumentalized victim' discourse is an attempt to discard the consciousness of these struggling women⁴⁵."

This active consciousness is demonstrated in the testimonial of one Kurdish female fighter in her account of a fellow comrade's suicide attack;

One of my comrades, Arin Mirkan, recently blew herself up, and she is not the first female fighter in the Kurdish freedom movement to carry out such an attack. She followed a long line of such martyrs. Whenever there has been a threat of genocide against our people, Kurdish women have resorted to such actions.

However, [the suicide attack] is not a tactic of our fight. It is not even approved of by our organisation. This kind of action is completely decided by the person carrying it out. It is not even a type of attack. It is a sacrificial

⁴³ Judith Butler, 'Introduction to the paperback' from *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable* (London and New York: Verso Books 2010), p.5.

⁴⁴ Laura Sjoberg, 'Gendered tactics' from *Gendering Global Conflict: Toward a Feminist Theory of War*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), p.232.

⁴⁵ See, Dilar Dirik, 'What Kind of Kurdistan for Women?' (2014) < <http://kurdishquestion.com/woman/what-kind-of-kurdistan-for-women.html> > Accessed 04/01/15

action, the person undertaking such an action is sacrificing her life in order to defend her people from a force wanting to commit genocide⁴⁶.

The Kurdish Movement can be seen to demonstrate that the consciousness of these women is very much alive and active, and that patriarchal culture itself is being dismantled to some extent. The political beliefs behind the women combatants of the YPJ/YJA-Star units is consistently foregrounded within the Kurdish Movement, and one example of this is that in Turkey, the Kurdish HDP political parties “proudly represent at least 40% women.” One can argue that “the strength of the resulting women’s movement illustrates that the point in establishing structures such as co-presidency (one woman and one man sharing the chair) and 50-50 gender splits in committees on all administrative levels is no mere tokenism to make women more visible⁴⁷.”

Through my examining of the political beliefs and incentives behind many Kurdish women and Kurdish female fighters, it can be concluded that the Kurdish female fighters of the YPJ/YJA-Star units are actively challenging the gendered notions of the nation-state paradigm. It strongly appears true that women’s liberation and gender equality are key motivators for many women of the YPJ/YJA-Star combatant units, as well as for many people of the Kurdish movement. Understanding the role which social and political beliefs play in contributing to why many women decide to take up arms as combatants is important in legitimizing the Kurdish female fighter, as it provides the understanding that she herself has chosen to actively fight in the field of war. This is important to establish as it strengthens the idea that the Kurdish female fighter has made the decision to fight in war out of her own free will. It can be concluded that the Western media’s depiction of the Kurdish female fighter as a controversial phenomenon supports the idea that the women of the YPJ/YJA-Star combatant units have to a certain extent managed to

⁴⁶ See, Gareth Platt, ‘A Kurdish Female Fighter’s War Story: ‘I don’t know how many I’ve Killed in Kobani - I Don’t see Isis as Human’’, *International Business Times* (2014) < <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/kurdish-female-fighters-war-story-i-dont-know-how-many-ive-killed-kobani-i-dont-see-1471412>> Accessed 18/12/14

⁴⁷ See, Dilar Dirik, ‘What Kind of Kurdistan for Women?’ (2014)<<http://kurdishquestion.com/woman/what-kind-of-kurdistan-for-women.html>> Accessed 04/01/15

transgress patriarchal gender hierarchies and traditional gender roles. This implementation of gendering by the State is an issue which I will discuss and examine in more detail in the next chapter of my work.

III. The Female Body in War

Having outlined ideas concerning gendered militarization, and the use of gender hierarchies both in society and in the field of war, I would now like to take into consideration the gendering of the human body. However before addressing how the use of gendering contributes towards the controversy surrounding the idea of female fighters in war, I believe it is important to first foreground the impact, and in many cases the consequences of the gendering of the female body in war. Gender very much falls into two dominant separate categories; male and female, and in many societies the

differences, and sometimes inequalities of these two categories are believed to ultimately be determined by the behaviour of an individual who regards themselves as either male or female. It is true however that the understanding of behaviour as gendered has proved problematic for many feminist theorists such as Judith Butler, who argues that gender is a performative spectrum rather than a predetermined binary. In this chapter I will be examining the treatment of the female body in war in relation to the gendering of war. The issue of rape as a war tactic is one which I would like to address and discuss to form an understanding of how rape is and has been used throughout time⁴⁸ to control by exerting upon its victims the idea of authoritative and powerful masculinity. I will be arguing that there exists a significant relationship between the implementation of gender constructs, and the use of rape to 'feminize' certain groups and communities. I will particularly be looking at rape used as a weapon of war against the Kurdish community, an issue I have previously researched and written on concerning the reported acts of rape and torture of Kurdish female prisoners by State officials in Turkey.⁴⁹ Taking into account the use of systematic rape against women by repressive state apparatuses such as militaries, I will be considering the difficulties women face in gaining a sense of equality in the field of war.

Before discussing the nation-state's implementation of gendered categorization, and previously discussed ideas on metaphorical 'feminization' and 'masculinization,' I believe that an issue which must be addressed in the discussion of the female body in war, is the issue of rape. In particular the question of why, and how rape has become a standardised weapon of war. It cannot be ignored that rape and sexual abuse are not only a by-product of war, but are used as deliberate military strategies.⁵⁰ As I have previously touched upon, the use of rape in war is to carry out and implement ideologies around masculinity and femininity upon certain groups and minorities, in order for militaries and States to

⁴⁸ See, Unicef, 'Sexual Violence as a weapon of war' <<http://www.unicef.org/sowc96pk/sexviol.htm>> Accessed 09/01/15

⁴⁹ See, Meral Duzgun, 'Turkey: a history of sexual violence', *The Guardian, International Development Journalism Competition* (2013) <<http://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2013/jun/10/turkey-history-sexual-violence>> Accessed 09/01/15

⁵⁰ See, Laura Smith-Spark, 'How did rape become a weapon of war?', *BBC News*, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/4078677.stm>> Accessed 03/01/15

exercise their masculinity and dominance. The opportunistic rape and pillage of previous centuries has been replaced in modern conflict by rape used as an orchestrated combat tool⁵¹ which serves as a way for the assaulter to maintain control by means of ethnic cleansing and relying on the idea of honor which is in many societies associated with women. I would like to foreground the idea that the extent to which the implementation of metaphorical 'feminization' and 'masculinization' exists, is a contributing factor to why systematic sexual violence against women occurs in the field of war. The biological fact that women are the reproducers of communities and nation-states can be seen to contribute to the ideology which fuels the use of the rape of women as a strategic tool in war. It can be understood that the rape of the female body is regarded as the metaphorical rape of the nation, community or race it represents. Sexual violence is often used to destabilise communities and sow terror, a view confirmed in Amnesty International's *Lives Blown Apart* report⁵²;

Women and girls are more likely to be the target of sexual violence, especially rape. Women face extra, sometimes insurmountable, obstacles to obtaining justice, because of the stigma attached to survivors of sexual violence, and women's disadvantaged position in society. Whether civilians or combatants, refugees or displaced people, the impact of war weighs particularly heavily on women.

The fact that women are almost always the targets of sexual violence and rape in war, can be regarded to confirm the idea that gender based prejudices and acts of violence are not incidental in the field of war, but are embedded into all aspects of warfare. Here I would like to introduce an example regarding sexual violence against Kurdish women, demonstrating how organised rape is used and legitimised by authoritative state apparatuses. The reported rapes of Kurdish women by State police in Turkey are regular practice in Turkish prisons, and have reportedly been used on many Kurdish and Alevi

⁵¹ See, Laura Smith-Spark, 'How did rape become a weapon of war?', *BBC News*, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/4078677.stm>> Accessed 03/01/15

⁵² See, *Lives blown apart: Crimes against women in times of conflict. Stop violence against women* (Amnesty International Publications: London 2004)

women to enforce fear and to humiliate.⁵³ One such example I myself reported on⁵⁴ is of the case of Hamdiye Aslan who was told she was being arrested for sheltering the Kurdish rebel movement, the PKK; a charge she denied. As reported in the 2003 'Trial Observation Report: Turkey's Shame: Sexual Violence Without Redress- The Plight of Kurdish Women', (Kurdish Human Rights Project, London); the victim states; "I was blindfolded, stripped naked, beaten...and they tried to put sticks up my anus. I fainted."⁵⁵ I believe this case highlights the role which ideas of honour and shame play in the use of rape as a militarized tactic. It supports the idea that rape is often strategically used on women to send a message of fear to the community of which she belongs to, and to attempt to inflict shame upon these communities. The rape of women is regarded by such militaries and nation-states as the emasculating of 'the other'. I believe that the strong link between ideas around honour and women plays a devastating role in a society in which the concept of patriarchy is very dominant. As Abdullah Ocalan argues to this idea being an issue which Kurdish society must address;

The phenomenon of the so-called honour killings is the symbolic revenge for what has happened in society in general. Woman is made to pay for the obliteration of society's honour. Loss of masculinity is taken out on woman. Except for woman's honour, the Kurdish male, who has lost both moral and political strength, has no other area left to prove his power or powerlessness.⁵⁶

One can thus argue that wartime sexual violence, as well as domestic sexual violence largely affects people and bodies identified as female and therefore expressing feminization when perpetrated by men.

In regard to the understanding of gendered nationalism, and strategic feminization which works to incentivise rape as a war tactic, Sjoberg argues;

⁵³ See, Meral Duzgun, 'Turkey: a history of sexual violence', *The Guardian, International Development Journalism Competition* (2013) <<http://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2013/jun/10/turkey-history-sexual-violence>> Accessed 09/01/15

⁵⁴ See, Meral Duzgun, 'Turkey: a history of sexual violence', *The Guardian, International Development Journalism Competition* (2013) <<http://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2013/jun/10/turkey-history-sexual-violence>> Accessed 09/01/15

⁵⁵ See, 'Trial Observation Report: Turkey's Shame: Sexual Violence Without Redress- The Plight of Kurdish Women', (Kurdish Human Rights Project, London 2003), p.16.

⁵⁶ Abdullah Ocalan, "Women's Situation in Kurdish Society" from *Liberating Life: Woman's Revolution* (International Initiative Edition, Germany 2013), p. 40.

As a result, “rape in war, ethnic-national war in particular, becomes a powerful symbolic weapon against the ‘enemy.’” Because “women are seen as precious property of ‘the enemy,’” women and their bodies become territories to be seized and conquered⁵⁷. Women’s (raped) bodies in these interactions are not violated humans or injured people but tablets for sending messages to the men who witness and cannot prevent the violation and injury. War rape as a tactic then subordinates the material existence of women and/or the feminine to the symbolic communication of men and/or the masculine.

In this dynamic, raping women perceived as belonging to an enemy asserts dominance over that enemy. Inger Skjelsbaek notes that this feminizes “both the sex and the ethnic/religious/political identity group to which the victim belongs.”⁵⁸

I would therefore suggest that crimes such as sexual violence and rape inflicted on women are not inevitable, but calculated and accepted, whether this be carried out in the family home or by independent insurgent groups or State militaries. The YPG/YPJ Kurdish combatants are an example of a combatant group who wish to tackle such gender prejudices and acts of rape in war. They can be regarded as attempting to subvert the patriarchal gender constructs which are reflected onto the female body. One female fighter, Bejan Ciyayi, when asked about whether the Sunni Islamist rebel group, The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) is “terrified of the women it is fighting in Kobani”⁵⁹, answered;

IS see women as sex objects. And yes, this does motivate me when I fight against them. This is why I know IS is scared of us women in the YPJ. They know how they treat women, and they know we are aware of what they do and can feel our resentment and hatred of them.

This is what makes us such big enemies, our approaches to women. We have made the liberation of women a central idea to our struggle, whereas it has made rape central to its way of life.

⁵⁷ Annick Wibben, *Feminist Security Studies: A Narrative Approach* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 10, citing Laura Bush.

⁵⁸ Laura Sjoberg, ‘Gendered tactics’ from *Gendering Global Conflict: Toward a Feminist Theory of War*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), p. 222.

⁵⁹ See, Gareth Platt, ‘A Kurdish Female Fighter’s War Story: ‘I don’t know how many I’ve Killed in Kobani - I Don’t see Isis as Human’’, *International Business Times* (2014) < <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/kurdish-female-fighters-war-story-i-dont-know-how-many-ive-killed-kobani-i-dont-see-1471412>> Accessed 18/12/14

The success of women in Kurdistan is the success of all women against the patriarchal system in the world and this makes me very happy.

Ciyayi here reflects her comrades' ideological and political views which clearly take issue with that of IS. I would argue that IS are of course not the only extremist rebel group which implement patriarchal gender constructs and derogatory views, as such use of rape as a weapon of war, though less overtly, is also applied by nation-states. The idea that the IS fears fighting against women in the YPJ reflects the idea that the IS fear the fact that the patriarchal gender constructs which they themselves rely on, are being overturned by women. A military group which goes along with the ideology that female bodies do not belong as equals to male bodies in the field of war can be understood to be apprehensive to the reality of Kurdish female fighters. The existence of female fighters in war destabilises patriarchal gender constructs, and works to de-feminise the female body. I believe it can be argued that Kurdish female fighters such as Ciyayi, through their activism in the battleground, are claiming back the female body from other patriarchal authoritative forces. In doing so they can be understood to be liberating themselves to a certain extent, in claiming their own independence, and rights to participate in war, not as victims, but as warriors.

In order to stress how the Kurdish female fighters challenge gendered militarization, I would argue that the female body, as in many other domains, is sexually objectified and feminised in the field of war. This sexualisation of the female body also contributes to reasons why the idea of the Kurdish female fighter, and women serving on the front line proves problematic and controversial for many. The ideological battlefield of war can be regarded as a territory dominated by male bodies. One may go to suggest that, "war as an institution depends on gendered images of combatants and civilians."⁶⁰ Whether they fight in war as soldiers, or are labelled as terrorists, rebels, revolutionaries or insurgent groups, all are titles traditionally believed to belong to male bodies, and thus masculinized. One may further argue that civilians in war are feminized as they are

⁶⁰ Laura Sjoberg, 'Gendered tactics' from *Gendering Global Conflict: Toward a Feminist Theory of War*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), p.144.

represented as the victims of war and those who are ultimately deemed weak and in need of protection. Their lives lie in the hands of the masculine State military. One can relate this to the previously discussed idea of (male) 'just warriors' and (female) 'beautiful souls'. This idea, I believe, paints a clear picture of the use of gender constructs in war, as well as the relationship that exists between gender and nationalism. Anne McClintock states that, "all nationalisms are gendered, all are invented, and all are dangerous."⁶¹ From this argument one can understand nationalism and the idea of the nation as incorporating ideological gender constructs in order to mark clear distinctions between the roles men and women are expected and accepted to take on. Such gender constructs also arguably work in war to portray women's bodies as the battleground in which the fighting of war and the exertion of masculine dominance and territorialisation takes place. I would argue that in war, the human body, and in particular the bodies of women are not regarded to belong to themselves, but instead to what they are perceived to represent. In this sense, human bodies in war are made into objects, and the idea of individual identity is completely stripped away. Ultimately human bodies in war are made into instruments of war. As Judith Butler (2009) argues;

The body, in my view, is where we encounter a range of perspectives that may or may not be our own. How I am encountered, or how I am sustained, depends fundamentally on the social and political networks in which the body lives, how I am regarded and treated, and how that regard and treatment facilitates this life or fails to make it livable. So the norms of gender through which I come to understand myself or my survivability are not made by me alone. I am already in the hands of the other when I try to take stock of who I am...It follows, then, that certain kinds of bodies will appear more precariously than others, depending on which versions of the body, or of morphology in general, support or underwrite the idea of the human life that is worth protecting, sheltering, living, mourning...Such views of lives pervade and implicitly justify contemporary war.⁶²

Butler brings to the foreground the problematic idea that the human body, whether male or female, young or old, is treated according to gender constructs and ideologies

⁶¹ Laura Sjoberg, 'Gendered tactics' from *Gendering Global Conflict: Toward a Feminist Theory of War*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), p. 222. 145

⁶² Judith Butler, 'Introduction to the paperback' from *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable* (London and New York: Verso Books 2010) p.53.

implemented and preserved by the nation-state. Therefore this gives an indication of a lack of freedom resulting from sexual inequality, which affects the treatment of women in society and arguably, more extremely in war. It can be understood that the nation-state is able to decide which types of bodies are regarded as victims worthy of protection, which are regarded as functioning as soldiers and fighters, and which are not regarded at all. These views are projected onto the field of war, and can be seen as contributing to violence against women, in particular in the form of rape used as a weapon of war. To relate back to the idea of the female body in war as sexualised, as an illustration of this I would like to draw upon women in ground combat roles in the United Kingdom's armed forces. One consternation which appears to exist within the armed forces is the affect which the presence of women in ground combat roles will have on their male counterparts. The 2009 government review on the matter; *Women in Ground Close Combat Roles: The Experiences of other Nations and a Review of the Academic Literature*, states;

None of the work that either has been, or could be, done can illuminate the key question of the impact of gender mixing on the combat team in close combat conditions. Given the lack of direct evidence, from either field exercises or from the experience of other countries, the Secretary of State concluded that military judgement must form the basis of any decision. The military viewpoint was that under the conditions of a high intensity close-quarter battle, group cohesion becomes of much greater significance to team performance and, in such an environment, the consequences of failure can have far-reaching and grave consequences. To admit women would, therefore, involve a risk with no gains in terms of combat effectiveness to offset it.⁶³

One would suggest that for such a fear of gender mixing in the military to exist and be acknowledged by the Ministry of Defence, makes clear the strength of the enforcement of patriarchally constructed gender norms. This government review treats the idea of the working together of men and women in the military as ultimately having detrimental "far-reaching and grave consequences", which does not create an example of the United

⁶³ See, Cawkill, Rogers, Knight and Spear, *Women in Ground Close Combat Roles: The Experiences of other Nations and a Review of the Academic Literature* (Defence Science and Technology Laboratory UK: 2009), pp.7-8.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/27406/women_combat_experiences_literature.pdf> Accessed 03/01/2015

Kingdom as recognising gender equality. The review arguably implies that the ultimate problem posed by gender mixing is that women could be a distraction to men on the frontline - moreover that the female body could be a distraction to men on the frontline, and act as something which could potentially lead to a collapse of the nation-state. Such a view can be regarded as rather primitive and benighted, rather than achieving any sense of modernity. I would pose to this government review, the question of whether the YPJ and YPG female fighters which make up between 7,000 and 10,000⁶⁴ of the Kurdish forces fighting in Syria, and embrace arms along with their male "comrades" of the People's Protection Units, are not a form of "direct evidence" of the positive impact of gender mixing on the combat team in close combat conditions. The views expressed in this government review appear to suggest that the female body is problematic, or moreover that the female body's transgression into the masculinised domain of war and its shedding of the gender norms enforced upon it, proves problematic. This can only be understood as being regarded as problematic by the nation-state. I would argue that this arguably ascertains that the nation-state believes that the female body belongs to the nation-state, and such a review published on account of the Ministry of Defence is the clarifying and reiterating of this belief. As a state apparatus the Ministry of Defence is able to justify and legitimize its belief that the female body is distracting and ill-fitting in the masculinised field of war. For many who implement Marxist thinking, such as the PKK, this can be seen as something rather problematic as it suggests that what is regarded as "... true knowledge [savoir] which is aware and a false knowledge [savoir] which ignores"⁶⁵, is determined by the nation-state. One can suggest that in regards to the gender constructs imposed upon women and supported by the nation-state, this can be thought of as false knowledge. As Jacques Ranciere argues; "False knowledge oppresses, true knowledge liberates."⁶⁶ The nation-State can thus be seen

⁶⁴ See, Gianluca Mezzofiore, 'Syria: Isis Jihadis Terrified of Fanatical Kurdish Women Soldiers who will Deny Them Place in Paradise', *International Business Times* (2014) <<http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/syria-isis-jihadis-terrified-fanatical-kurdish-women-soldiers-who-will-deny-them-place-paradise-1468887>> Accessed 04/01/15

⁶⁵ See, Jacques Rancière, 'Thinking Between Disciplines: an Aesthetics of Knowledge', *Parrhesia* No. 1 (2006). p. 3. [Retrieved and accessed from Blackboard on 23/12/2014]

⁶⁶ See, Jacques Rancière, 'Thinking Between Disciplines: an Aesthetics of Knowledge', *Parrhesia* No. 1 (2006). p. 3. [Retrieved and accessed from Blackboard on 23/12/2014]

as a dictatorial authority which uses the implicit implementation of gender constructs to categorise the female body and oppress it.

As has been noted, one may conclude that the patriarchal nation-state envisions the practice of war and the battleground, as a terrain in which gender constructs must be apparent. The strategic emasculating of 'the other', and in particular women's bodies is done in order to assert masculine dominance and authority. In examining the presence of the female body in war, the use of rape as a militarized weapon of war can to be seen as a way in which this emasculation is carried out - the victims of which are largely bodies identified as female. It can be understood that the raping of women "becomes a metaphor for national humiliation"⁶⁷ which works to destabilise communities, and assert patriarchal gender ideologies. I will conclude by stating that such an association between the raping of women, and the idea of the loss of honour exists due to the implementation of gender hierarchies within society and within the field of war. Examples which I have drawn upon, demonstrating how militaries and nation-states justify and legitimize the use of rape as a militarized tactic, can only be concluded to support the fact that for one to be categorised as feminine, is to be classed as inferior to the masculinised man. Ultimately, in examining the female body in war, the Kurdish female fighter can be perceived as challenging and actively fighting against derogatory notions surrounding the gendering of the female body, through reclaiming the female body as equal to that of the masculinised man.

⁶⁷ Laura Sjoberg, 'Gendered tactics' from *Gendering Global Conflict: Toward a Feminist Theory of War*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), p.221.

IV. Conclusion

This piece of research work has focused on the Kurdish female fighter in relation to theories on the issue of gendered militarization. It has established that although gender hierarchies appear to strongly be apparent and active in militaries and the field of war,

the Kurdish female fighters of the YPJ/ YJA-Star women's guerrilla units have to a certain extent, challenged notions of traditional gender roles. However that is not to say that gendered militarization and the implementation of gendered hierarchies do not still remain as matters in need of further critique. In order to provide examples of how gender hierarchies implemented by nation-states work to enforce gender prejudices, this dissertation has taken into consideration feminist theorists such as Laura Sjoberg and Jean Bethke Elstain who argue that war cannot be understood without considering gender as a primary unit of analysis. In understanding gender as a key subject for analysis in the field of war, this research work has argued and found that many injustices and crimes carried out against women, such as sexual violence are the disastrous consequences of the preservation of gender constructs by the nation-state. It can be concluded that the implementation of the metaphorical 'masculinisation' and 'feminisation' in the field of war, is very much instrumental in the portrayal of the feminine body as sexually objectified and victimized. The military has been understood to play a key role as a repressive state apparatus, in the legitimizing and justifying of gender inequality through the nation-state's preservation and legitimization of traditional gender roles. Throughout this dissertation I have maintained the argument that the preservation of gender hierarchies, often implicitly carried out by nation-states, do not allow for the progression of gender equality. This research work has demonstrated that this is a cause for concern recognised by the PKK movement, and expressed by many Kurdish women, and combatants.

In the examining of the political beliefs and incentives behind many Kurdish women and Kurdish female fighters, through looking at testimonials of YPJ/ YJA-Star combatants, this research work, I believe, has contributed to the conviction that Kurdish female fighters are actively challenging the gendered notions of the nation-state paradigm. In examining the ways in which traditional gender constructs are used implicitly by nation-states to preserve notions of masculinity and femininity, such constructs have been demonstrated

as contributing to gender inequality. This dissertation has evidently shown that the foregrounding of the Kurdish female fighters of the YPJ/ YJA-Star women's units is vital in demonstrating the falsity of traditional gender roles in society and in the field of war.

One can conclude that this piece of research work has contributed to the literature concerning Kurdish female fighters, which at present there is not an ample amount of. This research work does acknowledge the fact that although theoretical perspectives and criticisms, as well as works on gendered militarization in general have been quite substantial, the same cannot be said for the Kurdish Women's Movement. Therefore in regards to the lack of theoretical work on Kurdish female fighters, this piece of work does recognise its limitations. However I believe that in all, this research work does work to give a strong understanding of the political motivation behind many YPJ/YJA-Star female fighters.

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