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Helen Benedict's *Sand Queen*: Female Combatants in the Iraq War

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Abstract

US authorities justified their invasion of Iraq, in part, by claiming to be liberating Iraqi women from patriarchal oppression. Helen Benedict's *Sand Queen* challenges this assertion, exposing how the war embraced a colonial paradigm with which Iraq was long familiar. By documenting the gender-based violence a female American soldier faces from her own side, the book demonstrates contradictions in the liberation rhetoric of US authorities.

Keywords: American male martial heroism; female combatants; gender-based violence; Iraq War; sand queen

Three hundred thousand female combatants and 750 embedded journalists participated in the 2003 Iraq War.¹ The Pentagon placed these journalists with troops to ensure positive coverage, partly to justify the invasion by claiming to liberate Iraqi women from patriarchal oppression. However, embedded journalist Helen Benedict tells a different narrative.

In *Sand Queen*, Benedict weaves a documentary-style narrative out of actual events about US Army specialist Kate Brady and two fellow female soldiers guarding Camp Bucca, the army's largest prison camp in the *Um-Qasir* desert in southern Iraq. Kate meets Naema Jassim, an Iraqi medical student who offers her services as a translator in exchange for help locating her brother and father, who have been captured by American forces and are being held at *Abu Ghraib*. Eventually, Kate and her comrades endure severe sexual harassment from high-ranking officers, resulting in the deaths of her friends, while Naema loses her father and brother, who are tortured and executed in prison. Benedict discredits the traditional heroics of American male soldiers, criticizes the White House's deceptive strategy, and contests the portrayal of Iraq as a primitive nation.²

¹ Padilla 2023; Vaina 2006.

² The *Abu Ghraib* prison is located in the *Um-Qasir* desert.

Debunking the myth of American male martial heroism

Benedict, through her protagonist, Kate, reshapes the traditional image of American military heroism. David Lundberg notes that for mid-nineteenth-century American men, reticence about adversity was the norm, and it was often used by realist writers like John DeForest, Ambrose Bierce, and Stephen Crane to glorify combat veterans rather than critique the violence of war.³ In contrast, Benedict, in an interview with *The Guardian*, emphasized challenging the cultural perception of military institutions as guardians of national values.⁴ She interviewed American female veterans from Camp Bucca in Iraq, who described their conditions and the military institutions they served as brutal and meaningless. Consequently, *Sand Queen* portrays protagonist Kate Brady as a vulnerable soldier.

Kate is nicknamed “Sand Queen” by male comrades, “a pathetic slut too desperate and dumb to know she’s nothing but a mattress” – the term derogatorily referring to women receiving male attention due to the women scarcity.⁵ Kate and the other female soldiers⁶ are harassed and raped by their comrades-in-arms. Lee Ellis defines rape as an act of aggression to subdue women socio-economically and politically, rather than a sexual act.⁷ Tel Nitsan argues that “without viewing women’s bodies as commodities, without men experiencing a sense of entitlement...and/or a sense of superiority in ‘peacetime’ women’s bodies cannot be seen as spoils of war.”⁸

Nitsan asserts that rape is meant to degrade women and reinforce male dominance in both wartime and peacetime. In the story, women comrades must have “battle buddies” at night to avoid being hunted by fellow soldiers.⁹ Nevertheless, Kate is “harassed to death,” and Third Eye is “raped...[by Kormick] and Boner together.”¹⁰ When Kate tries to report the attack, Sergeant Henley dismisses it as “internal strife,” accusing her of disrupting the unit’s “cohesion.”¹¹ They minimize her suffering, alienating her as an intruder, threatening their masculine bond.

Henley threatens Kate, saying, “Sergeant Kormick...reported to me...that...you...behaved... in an indecent manner...he is a fine and dedicated soldier, kindly declining to press any charges in the hope you would not repeat this unacceptable behavior.”¹² He praises the abuser and condemns the victim. Eugenia DeLamotte argues that women’s gothic arises when institutions alienate “them and their concerns,” echoed by Kate’s remark, “We females are anyway.”¹³ The inability to report abuses highlights a military mentality rooted in broader governmental structures, reducing liberation claims to mere propaganda.

³ Lundberg 1984, 4, 376.

⁴ Benedict 2012.

⁵ Benedict 2011, 129.

⁶ There are only three female soldiers in the camp: Kate, Third Eye, and Yvette.

⁷ Ellis 1989.

⁸ Nitsán 2012.

⁹ Benedict 2011, 69.

¹⁰ Benedict 2011, 49 and 169.

¹¹ Benedict 2011, 152 and 151.

¹² Benedict 2011, 184.

¹³ DeLamotte 1990; Benedict 2011, 122.

Nonetheless, Kate chooses to report these insults, hoping to shield future soldiers and bring attention to the military. This decision comes at a cost: Kate and her partner, Yvette, who helped “report Kormick,” are punished with “the first line” convoy mission, resulting in Yvette’s death and deepening Kate’s guilt.¹⁴ Thus, compounded by grief and rape, Kate transforms into a “robot.”¹⁵ She dehumanizes herself and becomes emotionally detached to fit in.

For Benedict, the military reduces women to sexual weapons. Lindsey Feitz and Joane Nagel attest to women in the military’s use as “sexualized weapons of war and propaganda.”¹⁶ The U.S. government exploits female soldiers, politicizing their participation. According to Eisenstein, “when women [join] the armed forces, they legitimize militarism, lending cover as ‘gender decoys’ deflecting the hypermasculine nature of the military and war...in ways they didn’t sign up for when they enlisted.”¹⁷ Therefore, Kate says Kormick has her talk to Iraqis, thinking that the sight of a female US soldier “wins hearts and minds,” highlighting her role as a tool of seduction rather than combat.¹⁸

Benedict critiques the US government and media for misleading Americans with the WMD narrative and depicting Iraqis as primitives and terrorists.¹⁹ This echoes in the story when Kate uses “stinking animals” to describe Iraqis and, in retaliation for Yavett’s murder, callously shoots the Iraqi boy’s donkey, making “blood ooze from its ears and mouth” while the boy mourns.²⁰ She blames the boy and his animal for her friend’s death, despite the responsibility lying with their officer for assigning them to a dangerous convoy. Notably, Benedict meticulously describes the donkey’s killing to emphasize Americans’ outrage against Iraq and media distortion, echoing Kate’s perplexed response, “I don’t know why [I killed the donkey].”²¹ Kate, driven by her uncertainty, conditioned beliefs in heroism, and meeting her parents’ expectations of targeting the bad guys – Iraqis – believed she was “doing the right thing.”²² Thus, Benedict highlights how this misconception justifies the American public’s appetite for war and its ethical consequences.

Kate thought she was going to Iraq to fight evil, but is shocked to discover the evil is within her military brotherhood. Eventually, she loses her identity and pride as a woman with her “period stopped” and “hair falling out,” forgetting “how to walk feminine; [otherwise] the guys won’t leave her alone,” returning home, unable to “stand [her parents]...God...blood is in [her] eyes and soul...pale skin, empty eyes...half robot, half human.”²³ Kate loses her sense of self.

Naema Jassim: The voice of an Iraqi woman

Another falsehood that Benedict refutes is the stereotypical image of Iraqi women as illiterate and oppressed. She counters this by portraying an educated Iraqi woman – a medical student – stating that in 2003, Iraq had “a lot of secular freedom for women, even

¹⁴ Benedict 2011, 322 and 135.

¹⁵ Benedict 2011, 241.

¹⁶ Haytock 2015, 3.

¹⁷ Feitz and Nagel 2008, 202.

¹⁸ Benedict 2011, 15.

¹⁹ Benedict 2012.

²⁰ Benedict 2011, 164 and 314.

²¹ Benedict 2011, 313.

²² Benedict 2011, 71.

²³ Benedict 2011, 18 and 260 and 174.

more than in any other Muslim country in the world because Saddam's regime is secular."²⁴ UNESCO noted that Iraq's education system was "one of the best in the region" (March 28, 2003), which the famous Iraqi blogger "Riverbend" documented in her 2004 memoir.²⁵

To reflect this, through the character Naema, Benedict gives a voice to an Iraqi woman to show the West's failure to understand the country's people. Naema is portrayed as a self-determined personality who "stands tall and proud, her back straight, her gaze clear and hard."²⁶ Kate thinks Iraqi women "weren't allowed to do anything except get married," and she has come to rescue them from patriarchal suppression, offering them an opportunity to be equal to men.²⁷ Naema corrects Kate's misinformation:

Do you know nothing of my country?...My father is a professor of engineering and a poet, my mother is an ophthalmologist—or they were until your war took away their jobs...[my brother]...wants to be a singer... plays his guitar day and night.²⁸

Before 2003, Iraqi families, despite Saddam's dictatorship, adhered to a robust civil law that upheld gender equality. However, the invasion disrupted state security, leading society to rely on tribalism, causing tribal authority to trump civil law. This likens Naema's family fleeing Baghdad for a village, and she fears living the life of her grandmother, who had been married off at a young age, saying²⁹:

some fundamentalist clerics...are trying to obliterate the rights Iraqi women have had for fifty years... How are we women—how is our culture—to survive?³⁰

In 2011, UNESCO reported that illiteracy among women surged to 26.4%. Recently, conservative Islamist parties have pushed for laws permitting nine-year-old marriages and other abuses against women.³¹

Benedict parallels the violence inflicted by US soldiers on Iraqis with that faced by female combatants, reducing them to mere Others. For "reduction of being," they torment Naema's family, capturing and humiliating her 13-year-old brother and father, previously tortured by Saddam's police.³² Soldiers "stamped their filthy boots down on [their] necks...bound

²⁴ Benedict 2012; TEDx Talks Benedict 2017.

²⁵ Riverbend is the pseudonym for a young Iraqi woman who published a blog called "Baghdad Burning" (2003) to report the daily events of the war, which was then published and translated into many languages. It was longlisted for BBC Four's Samuel Johnson Prize for non-fiction in 2006 and received third place in the Lettre Ulysses Award for the Art of Reportage in 2005. Available at: <https://riverbendblog.blogspot.com/search?q=18+public>.

²⁶ Benedict 2011, 91.

²⁷ Benedict 2011, 91.

²⁸ Benedict 2011, 91.

²⁹ Benedict 2011, 12.

³⁰ Benedict 2011, 101.

³¹ As of August 2024, a coalition of conservative Shia Islamist parties in the Iraqi Parliament, the largest bloc in parliament, pushed toward amendments to the Personal Status Law of 1959. The new personal status law would be based on Sharia law, aiming to lower the legal age of marriage for girls to just nine years old, which is illegal under the 1959 law. In addition to depriving women of inheritance and custody of their children, alongside other laws: https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/protests-iraq-law-sectarian-allow-child-marriage-may?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=Social_Traffic&utm_content=ap_2igu4gogut

³² Schinkel 2010, 45.

their hands...and pulled those horrible hoods over their heads [to be taken to *Abu Ghraib*].”³³ Noam Chomsky argues that torture in American society has deep roots, rejecting the White House’s portrayal of *Abu Ghraib*’s incident as an isolated event, seeing it as reflective of the broader American military institution.³⁴ Thus, the execution of Naema’s father and brother symbolizes the colonizers’ devastation of Iraq’s peace, culture, and education.

Benedict ends the story with Naema abandoning school to manage her family and Kate, the moral voice, lamenting: “I didn’t protect [Third Eye, who committed suicide]...Yvette...or Naema’s dad or her little brother. I’ve killed so many [Iraqis],” illustrating the triumph of evil over good.³⁵

Conclusion

Sand Queen shows the absurdity of the war, dismantles the myth of the heroic American savior, and refutes the coalition’s claims of liberating Iraqi women. The soldiers, with a purportedly liberatory mission, violated their female comrades and silenced Naema, who “had no voice to them, no existence.”³⁶ In this way, Benedict’s story challenges the U.S. narrative of liberation, revealing how the U.S. military imposed its own misogyny on a country it claimed to be liberating from patriarchy.

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³³ Benedict 2011, 13.

³⁴ Stone 2014.

³⁵ Benedict 2011, 176.

³⁶ Benedict 2011, 130.

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