

## What Happens to Women in Warfare? The Story of the Trojan Women Then and Now

On the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq by the U.S. forces, Nadjie Al-Ali stated in an interview that it was women who lost the most during the 2003 war (CBC News 2023). Indeed, women caught in the middle of war have always found themselves deprived of their identities, dispossessed, and objectified with their bodies and entire beings turned into commodities to be exploited or bartered. Al-Ali's observation about the Iraqi women, describes a universal condition experienced by women in the aftermath of imperialistic or civil warfare, expressed already in 415 BCE by Euripides in his tragedy *Trojan Women*. In this paper, I discuss the collective experience of war-captive defeated women through a parallel reading of Euripides' *Trojan Women* and Christine Evans' *Trojan Barbie*, a play that reimagines the aftermath of the legendary Trojan war against the chaotic and tragic reality of modern warfare. My analysis is also informed by the harrowing experiences of real-life women who lived through the war in Iraq (Al-Ali 2007) and the Syrian civil war (*Queens of Syria* 2014).

*Trojan Women*, written in the backdrop of the Athenian attack on the island of Melos and the Sicilian expedition, addresses the fates of the fragile collective of the captive women of Troy who find themselves without a city and family after the sack of their land, waiting to learn what their future will be at the hands of the Greek generals. Euripides' play stages the torment of the women who exist in a state of limbo in a relentlessly male dominated world. *Trojan Barbie*, first written in 2003-2004 when the Iraq war was happening, dramatizes, like its ancient counterpart, the objectification of women in war which fundamentally damages the integrity of the female body and systematically abuses the integrity of the mind (Melloy 2009). Evans' play breaks Euripides' tragedy apart, like war does to the female body and mind, and then puts back together

the “limbs,” emphasizing how warfare renders women a disjointed version of their past self. In *Trojan Barbie*, past and present are in constant contrast exposing the irrevocably altered reality of female war captives waiting in a camp to find where and who they will end up being.

As Evans’ *Andromeda* asserts, “There is no life in another country. You’ll always be a foreigner, stuck on the wrong side of the looking-glass” (Evans 2015). Women restrained in the liminal space of the Greek winners’ tents or the contemporary camp are detached from any form of their identity (Zapkin 2017) and exist like broken dolls who voice their agony for simply existing since it seems that there is no way of resisting their current status. Here, I argue that reading and watching these stories of different and unique female war experiences, yet of a fundamentally similar suffering, opens up for contemporary audiences a space for reflection on the intertemporal impact of war on women, and at the same time facilitates a space for healing. Storytelling re-empowers the victims by enabling them to rework, rather than merely relive their past experiences of suffering (Jackson 2002), and as such makes them agents of their experience, assigning them a role that they were previously denied. Finally, I contend that these past and modern portrayals of female stories and experiences in warfare challenge us to reconsider the place and impact of war in ancient and modern societies, like Athens and the United States respectively, where “those in power do what their power permits, while the weak have to accept it” (Thuc. 5.89.1).

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