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Guest House for Young Widows: Among the Women of ISIS

Jessica Arbing

BOOK REVIEW

Moaveni, A. (2019). *Guest house for young widows: Among the women of ISIS*. Random House, pp. 338. ISBN: 9780399179754


HISTORY Published 23 August 2022

Guest House for Young Widows: Among the Women of ISIS by Azadeh Moaveni (2019) is a captivating piece of immersive journalism that follows the narratives of 13 women affiliated with the Islamic State (ISIS) at the height of its occupation. Moaveni portrays the lives of ISIS women spread out across the United Kingdom, Germany, Tunisia, Syria, Turkey, Libya, and Iraq as they attempt to migrate towards Syria. The author converts her qualitative interviews with the women directly into gripping historical prose. She emphasizes that this book does not justify the terrors of ISIS but, rather, intends to deconstruct the stereotype of the female jihadist. This is exemplified by the way many young people were manipulated by tactful propaganda that called for aid in the fight for religious equity and social justice. Moaveni explains, “These stories do not tell the comprehensive story of all ISIS women ... the context is there to illuminate

not to justify” (p. 335). Though the interviewees’ names and identifying information are altered to maintain anonymity, as a reader, I could not help but see parts of myself in the text as a young woman: in Nour’s passion, in Asma’s intellect, in Rahma’s stubborn will, and in the infamous vulnerability of the Bethnal Green girls.

Simultaneously, Moaveni emphasizes that the women in these stories share more commonality with the men among them than with women of other countries (p. 329). Although I would be quick to categorize this as a piece of academic feminist research, readers are reminded that Western feminist movements have repeatedly been exclusionary to Muslim women (p. 327). Traditional academia creates a disconnect between the global understanding of ISIS and the qualitative perspective of ISIS women’s lived experiences, and it is evident that Moaveni intends to fill this gap. While she panders to the

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empathy of the Western reader, the larger underlying theme is how Western culture, and ever-present Islamophobia, has contributed to the rise of ISIS.

The stories in **Guest House for Young Widows** are divided into five parts, which are bookended by a prelude and epilogue of ethnographical accounts. Parts one to three describe the socio-political lives of the female characters prior to the Syrian civil war. The book subtly highlights how their lives were always politicized. For example, at a young age, Nour and Asma struggle, in different ways, with understanding how and if they should outwardly display their religiosity. At the same time, Lina and Emma seek escape from oppressive forces in their lives and embrace their search for autonomy. A real strength of these sections is how Moaveni captures the way ISIS capitalized on the feeling of "otherness" and vulnerability felt by many young Muslims in the post-9/11 world. By doing so, the book challenges the discourse that these women arrived at extremism due to "hard childhoods," lack of a moral upbringing, or some desire to become ISIS brides (p. 322). On the contrary, we see that many of the women's lives included loving families, higher education, and economic stability. What truly led them to extremism had more to do with the socio-political events and structures of the time (e.g., the Arab Spring).

The book's first few sections are at times confusing, as the stories jump around geographical place and time. However, Moaveni holds the reader's hand by effortlessly stringing major themes and commonalities throughout each story. Another strong theme within the book is the instrumentality of social media in the recruitment and rise of ISIS. It is fascinating, yet unsurprising, that platforms such as Tumblr, Twitter, Facebook,

YouTube, and WhatsApp were used to propagandize resistance narratives and provide a community for which many young Muslim people longed. The author states, "Joining ISIS was not unlike joining a rebellion," and with the string of anti-Muslim hate crimes on the rise in the West, rage among young Muslim people amplified feelings of victimization and misunderstanding that, Moaveni explains, ISIS used as a call to action (p. 114).

The latter parts of the book showcase the grim reality of the ISIS occupation and how it troubled the lives of many of its members. For those residing in Syria at the time, the city shifted to an economy that operated on an ISIS-first basis, while the policing of civilian lives increased. The al-Khansaa Brigade, a harrowing all-female branch of the police, enforced rules on dress code and punished those who did not abide. Moaveni tells of friends whipping friends for wearing abayas that were too tight, and we see how the women married to ISIS soldiers suddenly become widows as quickly as they became wives. While this is a turning point for many of the book's main characters, it also exemplifies the level of perceived power and casual justification for torture that ISIS used. It was at this point that many ISIS women began to notice what we, as readers, know comfortably in hindsight: ISIS was blatantly disregarding the tenants of Islam; its rise to power was never really about religious equity but about control.

As the book enters its conclusionary stages, we read of the "guest houses" that operated for ISIS widows. These were real, hostel-like residences where ISIS widows resided in a limbo state, waiting to remarry. The guest houses in the book function as an overarching metaphor for the female experience within ISIS. It is explained that "the guest house for widows was a place

of such deliberate torment and uninhabitability that few women could stay long without going mad. This was precisely the intention" (p. 251). Living within the ISIS occupation was much like residing in a guest house: you either withstand the horrors or you comply with the wishes of ISIS. The unsettling, and real, conclusion to the book leaves many of the women's stories with echoes of grief, isolation, judgment, fear, and uncertainty.

Guest House for Young Widows: Among the Women of ISIS is a heart-breaking and brilliantly researched book that humanizes the experience of ISIS affiliates. Moaveni's fierce writing demands the respect of the reader and provides a controversial perspective that others would likely shy away from. What truly carries her writing to excellence is how likable, relatable, and critical these women's vignettes are. This book debunks stereotypes, leaving the reader with the eerie realization of what mainstream media sources often leave out: the rise of extremism and the "War on Terror" were largely due to oppressive global, social, and political poli-

cies. Moaveni expertly dives into these big-picture realities through the captivating lives of everyday women. Expertly investigated and comprehensively written, **Guest House for Young Widows** would appeal to international researchers, policy-makers, historians, and those interested in an alternative perspective on the global rise of the Islamic State.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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