Unravelling A Myth: Emergence of The Myth of Female Kurdish Fighters in Social Media

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Abstract

This analysis looks at images of Kurdish female fighters in social media. It argues that Kurdish female fighters have been objectified by international media and Kurdish politicians, who have realised the public relations value of images, and started to disseminate variegated images of Kurdish female fighters, particularly in the context of the war against DAESH (ISIS). The basic tenets of Edward Said's thesis remain relevant in orientalist and gendered representations of the actors involved in Syrian civil war, and therefore the study uses orientalism as an analytical tool to critically engage with dominant western depictions of female Kurdish fighters. To this aim, news images of Kurdish female fighters are semiotically analysed using Barthes' framework as proposed in his seminal work "Mythologies". The analysis aims to unleash the interrelationship between imagery and international and domestic politics using the concept of post-truth politics. The imagery of Kurdish female fighters is used by Western powers and Kurdish political groups to legitimize their political positions in the prolonged civil war in Syria.

Keywords: Female Kurdish Fighters, Myth, Semiotics, Roland Barthes, Social Media, Post-truth

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Bir Miti Çözmek: Sosyal Medyada Kadın Kürt Savaşçılar Mitinin Doğuşu

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Öz

Bu analiz, sosyal medyada Kürt kadın savaşçıların imgelerini incelemektedir. Makale Kürt kadın savaşçıların, özellikle DAEŞ'e karşı yürütülen savaş bağlamında çeşitli resimlerini yaymaya başlayan uluslararası medya ve imgelerin halkla ilişkiler açısından değerini anlayan Kürt siyasetçiler tarafından nesnelleştirildiğini savunmaktadır. Edward Said'in tezinin temel ilkeleri, Suriye iç savaşında yer alan aktörlerin oryantalist ve cinsiyetçi temsillerini açıklamaya devam etmektedirve bu nedenle oryantalizm, kadın Kürt savaşçılarının baskın batı betimlemelerine eleştirel bir biçimde bakmak için mevcut çalışmada analitik bir araç olarak kullanılmaktadır. Bu amaçla Kürt kadın savaşçılara ait imgeler, Barthes'in "Mitolojiler" adlı önemli çalışmasında önerdiği semiyotik (göstergebilimsel) yöntem kullanılarak analiz edilmektedir. Analiz, imgeler ile uluslararası ve iç politika arasındaki ilişkiyi hakikat sonrası kavramını da kullanarak açığa çıkarmayı amaçlamaktadır. Makale, Kürt kadın savaşçılarına ait imgelerin, Batılı güçler ve Kürt siyasi grupları tarafından Suriye'deki uzun süreli iç savaşta siyasi konumlarını meşrulaştırmak için kullanıldığı sonucuna ulaşmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kadın Kürt Savaşçılar, Mit, Göstergebilim, Roland Barthte, Sosyal Medya, Hakikat Sonrası

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1. Introduction

After the DAESH[1] attack on Ayn al-Arab (also referred to as Kobane) on September 15, 2014, Kurdish female fighters started to draw international attention, mostly spearheaded by the Western media. Since then female Kurdish fighters have been presented by Western media and Kurdish political actors alike as a crucial element in their fight against radical groups in Syria and beyond. A short BBC documentary[2] as early as January 5, 2014, has introduced "female Kurdish commanders" of the PKK, who take part in the group's terrorist attacks against Turkey and power struggle in Syria.In an earlier news article published by CP Reporter Samuel Smith[3] (October 15, 2014), a female commander had traced the history of all-female units back to the fight against the loyalists of Saddam Hussein in 1996. In October 2014, Air France's fashion magazine, the Madame, featured on its cover page a woman with a khaki jacket tied up under a belt bearing striking similarities to Kurdish female fighters. Similarly, The Swedish fashion retailer, H&M, had to offer an apology after being accused of modelling a new khaki jumpsuit in its Autumn/Winter collection, and therefore exploiting Kurdish women's fight in Syria and beyond. Even though the company apologized and claimed that its new line was not informed by the uniforms of Kurdish female soldiers, it had already become a hot topic on social media, and resented Kurds and feminists alike. While some social media users considered this a way to recognize and celebrate the brave female fighters, others accused the retailer of trying to capitalize on them with the 'peshmerga chic' garment.

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[1] The term DAESH (an Arabic acronym formed from the initial letters of the group's previous name in Arabic - "al-Dawla al-Islamiya fil Iraq wa al-Sham) has also gained currency thanks to the irritation it caused among group members for it is pronounced similar to an Arabic verb with a pejorative meaning, i.e., to crush something, to tread underfoot.

[2] Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-middle-east-25610424/who-are-the-female-fighters-of-the-pkk

[3] Samuel Smith, "ISIS Militants Fear Being Killed by Woman and Losing 72 Virgins for Martyrdom; Kurdish Co-Commander Defending Kobane Is Female," *The Christian Post,* October 15, 2014, https://www.christianpost.com/news/isis-militants-fear-being-killed-by-woman-and-losing-72-virgins-for-martyrdom-kurdish-co-commander-defending-kobane-is-female-128058/.

Figure 1. Madame's cover page[4]

The role of Kurdish female fighters became significant after the US and Western powers' decision to fight collaboratively against DAESH in Iraq and Syria and particularly more so after Turkey's military operations in northern Syria. Hence an abundant number of news articles have covered female Kurdish fighters in military camouflage, carrying machine guns and most recently killing themselves in suicide attacks against the Turkish army, an example of which can be seen in the following tweet from Rudaw English:

Figure 2. Rudaw English tweet - 28 Jan 2018

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4   The image is retrieved from https://tr.pinterest.com/pin/428545720783775403/.

News featuring female Kurdish fighters, as in the aforementioned example, and sanctifying the death of female fighters have spread on social media. In a study investigating news frames of female Kurdish fighters in British and French media, Mari and Baser[5] reveal that gendered portrayals of female Kurdish members of the YPJ are used by Western media to juxtapose their femininity to the "masculinity" of the female DAESH members. Therefore, a neat dichotomy underlies western media's fascination with female Kurdish fighters. Regardless of the similar "revolutionary ideals" they adhere to, DAESH is portrayed as a fundamentalist, religionist and misogynist terrorist group in contrast to the PYD, YPG and YPJ,[6] who are forcibly referred to as "Syrian Democratic Forces", which have been represented as liberating and women-friendly. Such discursive fight involves gendered and aesthetic signification both for international and regional audiences.[7] This paper seeks to analyse defining characteristics and functions of "the myth of female Kurdish fighter" within the context of Syrian civil war through the analytical lenses of orientalism and semiotics, and the results thereof will be discussed whilst drawing on the concept of post-truth politics.

2. Theory and Method

According to Said, Orientalism can be discussed and analysed as "the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient –dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the orient."[8] Therefore, Orientalism is crucial to examining the depictions by Westerners of non-Western subjects and the material power relations that emerge out of such depictions. In the aftermath of 9/11, the US War on Terror discourse has

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5   Toivanen, Mari, and Bahar Baser, "Gender in the Representations of an Armed Conflict: Female Kurdish Combatants in French and British Media." *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 9, (2016): 294–314.

6   These are Syrian offshoots of the PKK terror group.

7   Tuncay Kardaş and Murat Yesiltaş, "Rethinking Kurdish geopolitical space: the politics of image, insecurity and gender," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 30, no. 2-3 (2018).

8   Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 3.

been marked by orientalist and gendered depictions of the Middle Eastern or Islamic 'Other', and from there spread into official discourses and mainstream media outlets as well as social media in the western world.[9] The basic tenets of Said's thesis remain relevant in orientalist and gendered representations of the actors involved in the Syrian civil war, and therefore orientalism is used as an analytical tool to critically engage with dominant western depictions of female Kurdish fighters, and to demystify orientalist and gendered justifications of western intervention.

The earliest descriptions of warrior Kurdish women pertain to Orientalist examples penned by western observers.[10] Galletti[11] and Alakom[12] provide an extensive list of these earliest examples, which depict Kurdish women as warriors and leaders and thus essentially different from other women of the region. Distinctive features of Kurdish women as documented by orientalists have inspired Kurdish intellectuals in constructing a Kurdish nation. Çağlayan points out that Orientalism underlies the image of "free and warrior woman", which does not overlap with reality, and rightly argues that this image is used to mystify the fact that Kurdish women live under the pressure of a patriarchal Kurdish society.[13] With the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, Middle Eastern women have continued to be the focus of the orientalist gaze of western politicians and mainstream media. Syrian women together with children have been at the centre of humanitarian discourses on the refugee crisis, usually portrayed as victims and "speechless emissaries" in Malkki' terms.[14] Women captured by DAESH as slaves or even those joining DAESH ranks have been portrayed as poor

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[9]   Maryam Khalid, "Gender, Orientalism and Representations of the 'Other' in the War on Terror," *Global Change, Peace & Security* 23, no. 1 (2011): 15-29, https://doi.org/10.1080/14781158.2011.540092.

[10] Handan Çağlayan, *Analar, Yoldaşlar, Yanrıçalar: Kürt Hareketinde Kadınlar ve Kadın Kimliğinin Oluşumu*, [Mothers, comrades, goddesses: the construction of women and identity of women in Kurdish movement], (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2007).

[11] Mirella Galletti, "Western images of Women's Role in Kurdish Society," in *Women of a Non-State Nation: The Kurds*, ed. Mojab, S. (Costa Mesa, California: Mazda Publishers, 2001), 209-25.

[12] Rohat Alakom, Kurdish Women: A New Force in Kurdistan (in Kurdish), (Sweden: Spånga, Sweden, 1995).

[13] Çağlayan, *Analar, Yoldaşlar, Tanrıçalar.*

[14] Liisa H. Malkki, "Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization," *Cultural Anthropology* 11, no. 3, (August 1996): 377-404.

victims of a fundamentalist group, whereas women joining the YPJ have been represented as active and heroic fighters by western politicians and media. The obsession[15] or fascination[16] of westerners with female Kurdish fighters led to a binary treatment of women taking part in the Syrian civil war. Images of often young and beautiful female Kurdish fighters have been used by US and European media outlets and politicians to legitimise their ethno-policies and political alliance with the PYD, an offshoot of the PKK, which is officially recognised as a terrorist organisation by the US, the NATO, and the EU. Therefore, female Kurdish fighters have been represented as active and modern agents (western-like) in opposition to non-western, passive and poor women enslaved by fundamentalist groups and tyranny. Images of female Kurdish fighters with military outfits and machine guns have garnered a lot of media attention, and were shared by activists in social networking sites. Projecting orientalist fantasies on women, such depictions also reflect material power relations. They are used to legitimize the US alliance with the PYD and therefore the western intervention in the Syrian civil war.

For the data, the article uses a social media story pertaining to a female Kurdish fighter, dubbed as 'Kurdish Rehana'. Using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach introduced in his *Mythologies*, the analysis seeks to examine how an image turns into a myth, in Barthes' terms.[17] Until now, a range of signs, including still images, have been analysed via semiology. As Penn[18] explains, semiology provides the analyst with a set of analytical tools for analysing sign systems systematically. The aim of semiotics analysis is to uncover how sign systems generate meanings. As a discipline, it emerged out of the work of the structural linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913). Saussure offered a two-dimensional model for the linguistic

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15   Ruwayda Mustafah Rabar, "Western Media Is Obsessed With Kurdish Female Fighters Battling ISIS," *Global Voices,* November 19, 2014, https://globalvoices. org/2014/11/19/western-media-is-obsessed-with-kurdish-female-fighters-battling-isis/

16   Dilara Dirik, "Western fascination with 'badass' Kurdish women," *AlJazeera,* October 29, 2014, https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/10/western-fascination-with-badas-014102112410527736.html

17   Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Trans. Annette Lavers, New York: The Noonday Press, 1957, 1972).

18   Gemma Penn, "Semiotic Analysis of Still Images," in *Qualitative Researching with Text, Image and Sound: A Practical Handbook*, ed. Martin W. Bauer & George Gaskell, (London: Sage, 2007).

sign, composing of a signifier (sound-image) and a signified (concept). For him a linguistic sign does not link a name with an object but a sound-image with a concept, suggesting a relationship which is arbitrary.[19] Saussure defines semiology as "a science that studies the life of signs within society",[20] and argues that the study of linguistic sign system is part of this wider discipline. Barthes presents a clear and detailed model of this discipline with regard to the analysis of images. Drawing on Saussure's structural analysis of the linguistic sign, Barthes defines myth within what he calls a *second-order semiological system.*[21] The associative total of a concept and an image, namely the sign in first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second, which is illustrated in the following figure.
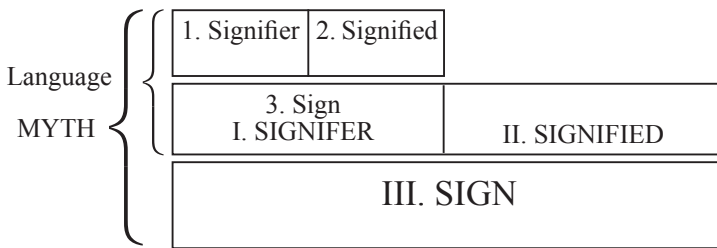
Figure 3. Spatial illustration of the first and second order sign systems[22]

As can be seen in the figure 3, the sign in the first order becomes an empty signifier in the second order, what makes it a tool for signification. At the first level (denotation), the required knowledge to understand the sign are of linguistic and anthropological nature, whereas in the second level the reader has to possess further cultural knowledge.[23] Barthes devoted much of his attention to myth as a form of second-order signification. For him, myth is always a robbery of language[24] implying that it robs the sign off

19   Saussure, Ferdinand de, Charles Bally, and Albert Sechehaye. *Course in general linguistics*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966).

20   Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 16.

21   Barthes, *Mythologies*, 113.

22   Barthes, *Mythologies*, 113.

23   Penn, "Semiotic Analysis of Still Images," 230.

24   Barthes, *Mythologies,* 131.

its denotational meaning, and fills it with a socially shared interpretative resource. A Mmth hides nothing as it only naturalises ideologies and norms of a culture. In the context of visual representation, the still image with the denoted message serves to naturalise the connoted message, and the task of the semiologist is to unpack this naturalisation process by drawing attention to the constructed nature of the image and so to unravel the power relations hidden by the myth. In brief, the female Kurdish fighter myth is rendered first by removing the denotational meaning of the image in question and later by filling the image with new meanings. However, in order to put this into context we need to understand how social media (re) produces meanings using a nascent concept, i.e., post-truth.

In 2016, post-truth was declared the word of the year by the Oxford English Dictionary, and is defined as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief."[25] The concept of post-truth politics can be seen as a situation "where appeals to emotion are dominant and factual rebuttals or fact checks are ignored on the basis that they are mere assertions."[26] The concept of post-truth politics is related to an epistemological crisis as to social media's role in spreading knowledge in modern democracies.[27] Dahlgren accounts for this process as "an emerging political culture of distrust that undermines shared assumptions about social reality and the pathways to legitimate knowledge".[28] Research on false information and fake news[29] calls for a distinction between *misinformation* and *disinformation.* Though a handful of research uses both terminology interchangeably, and in most research the concepts are treated separately depending on the un/intentionality of misleading news.[30] As such,

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[25]   https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/post-truth

[26]   Jane Suiter, "Post-Truth," *Political Insight* 7, no. 3 (2016), 25-27, https://doi. org/10.1177/2041905816680417

[27]   Peter Dahlgren, "Media, Knowledge and Trust: The Deepening Epistemic Crisis of Democracy," *Javnost - The Public* 25, 1-2 (2018): 20-27, https://doi.org/10.1080/1318 3222.2018.1418819

[28]   Dahlgren, "Media, Knowledge and Trust," 26.

[29]   For an overview of the literature see, Johan Farkas & Jannick Schou, "Fake News as a Floating Signifier: Hegemony, Antagonism and the Politics of Falsehood," *Javnost - The Public* 25, no. 3, (2018). https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2018.1463047

[30]   Farkas and Schou, "Fake News", 299.

misinformation denotes unintentional forms of misleading information and disinformation is referred to as intentional forms of such information. The intentionality aspect of disinformation can be discerned in examples, where a political group produces and spreads false information in order to affect public opinion.[31] In this paper, we define disinformation (in the age of internet technologies) as a new type of political communication, which aims to achieve political goals either in form of aggrandising a political group's legitimacy or gaining further support for the group's political objectives. In terms of signification, disinformation or fake news is similar to what the post-Marxist philosopher Laclau terms a "floating signifier,"[32] that is to say, "a signifier used by fundamentally different and in many ways deeply opposing political projects as a means of constructing political identities, conflicts and antagonisms."[33] This conceptual framework is in accordance with Barthes' analysis of myths, and therefore will be utilised in this study to unpack the role of social media myths in politics.

3. Analysis: The Birth of A Myth

In August 2014, just before DAESH started its ambush on Ayn al-Arab, Swiss correspondent Carl Drott went to the city to celebrate the establishment of the first brigade composed of volunteers. This protection unit would keep an eye on public order and support the local police. In front of lined male guards, a female member, the only one wearing full fatigues, attracted attention. Drott went to meet this lady and interviewed her. Drott found out that the lady in military uniform was actually a law student, who had left her education and decided to volunteer for the unit after losing her father in a DAESH attack. Drott forgot to ask her name. However, she was already taken a medium shot photograph. On the following day, August 23, this photograph was published on a blog called "Bijikurdistan", and actually received no attention until *Slemani Times*, an English language news website, enclosed this photograph in the following tweet asking for international help for the YPG.

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[31]   Farkas and Schou, "Fake News", 299.

[32]   Ernesto, Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005).

[33]   Farkas and Schou, "Fake News", 300.

Figure 4. Slemani Times' tweet - 27 Sep 2014

Receiving more than 200 retweets at the time, the photograph was the harbinger of other stories and myths regarding the same woman. Now, dubbed as "Kurdish Rehana", she became the focus of several other stories and tweets, which mentioned her as killing DAESH members and as one of the victims of DAESH beheadings. Supporters of DAESH shared photos of DAESH fighters holding up a female head, which assumedly belonged to the Kurdish Rehana. An example for the former line of representation came from an Indian journalist and activist, with more than 35 thousand followers, who tweeted about her saying "Rehana has killed more than a hundred ISIS terrorists in Kobane."

Figure 5. Pawan Durani's tweet -13 Oct 2014

In this way, the myth of "the angel of Kobane" was born, a myth which needed to be debunked by DAESH and maintained by pro-Kurdish propaganda in the Syrian civil war. Having felt uncomfortable the way the photograph was used, Drott published a facebook message, in which he told his followers that this lady known as Rehana and having killed 100 DAESH members, was probably still alive and not even a member of YPJ. This was one of the earliest samples of attractive female Kurdish fighters in military uniforms, which were reproduced through social media. Therefore, in order to demistify the myth, the Slemani Times' message together with the enclosed photograph was chosen for analysis in this paper. However, it has to be noted that highly aestheticised images of young female Kurds have been featured in hundreds of news items and book covers.[34] The following section presents findings of the semiotic analysis first at the level of denotational and then connotational meanings of the message. In the final section, political implications of the findings are discussed.

4. What Does the Image Denote and Connote?

To start with the denotational level, the photograph features a young woman in full military camouflage. Her right hand rests on the barrel of her rifle, and she holds up her left hand to make the V sign for victory. Standing in front of a line of other half camouflaged and casual looking men, she is foregrounded. She looks cheerful in the photograph. The text above the photograph uses quotation marks, as if what is said in the message belonged to the woman in the image. Putting aside the grammatical incongruity in the message,[35] there are no references to the source, even if it was a truthful quotation. We can only infer that this was said by the lady

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[34] For a few examples see; Elizabeth Griffin, "These Remarkable Women Are Fighting ISIS. It Is Time You Know Who They Are." *Marie Claire*, September 30, 2014; Meredith Tax, *A Road Unforeseen: Women Fight the Islamic State* (Bellevue Literary Press, 2016); Erin Trieb "Meet the Kurdish Women Fighting ISIS in Syria." *NBC News*, September 10, 2014, http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-terror/meet-kurdish-women -fighting-isis-syria-n199821; Michael Kanpp, Anja Flach, and Ercan Ayboga, *Revolution in Rojava: Democratic Autonomy and Women's Liberation in Syrian Kurdistan*, (Pluto Press, 2016).

[35] Although the message seems to quote from the lady in the photograph and quotation marks are used, the use of third person objective pronoun, instead of first person, points to a grammatical incongruity.

in the photograph, who is assumedly fighting for the YPJ and asking for international help for the group.

At the connotational level, we will start the analysis by elaborating on the interactive meanings of the accompanying photograph. In Kress and van Leeuwen's terms,[36] this is a demand and medium close shot photograph. Following Halliday[37] (1985), Kress and van Leeuwen define demand images as the ones, in which participant's gaze (and gesture if present) demands that the viewer enters into some kind of relation with him or her. The specific kind of relation between the participant and the viewer can also be signified by other means. For instance as in our case, the represented participant may smile, in which case the viewer is invited to enter into social relation of affinity with her. Also the slightly tilted head forms a vector, leading the eye from left to right and from top to down reaching at the gun. The tilted head can also connote submission and subordination, especially when considered with the thin golden bracelet on the left hand. Head canting, as Goffman[38] explains, entails lowering one's height, which in most cultures symbolise submission and subordination. As for the size of the frame, medium close shot, the relation between the viewer and the participant can be identified as that of a far personal distance. She is close but not so close to the viewer. A certain degree of distance is kept between the viewer and the represented participant. Another significant element through which an image sets up relations with the viewers is composition of the whole, which relates to the way in which representational and interactive meanings are integrated into a meaningful whole.[39] The woman in the image at stake is the most *salient,* in other words the most eye-catching element in the composition. This is not because she is foregrounded and placed in front of long shot images of males (which are seen at far and impersonal distance) but also because she is in sharper focus and receives the greatest amount of light. Depending on these representational and interactive patterns through which the image sets up certain relations at the second level with the reader

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[36]   Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (London and New York, Routledge, 2006), 124.

[37]   Michael Halliday, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (London,: Edward Arnold, 1985)

[38]   Erving Goffman, *Gender Advertisements* (London: Macmillan, 1979).

[39]   Kress an Leeuwen, *Reading Images,* 176.

requires cultural knowledge, which Barthes calls *lexicons*. Building on the denotational inventory, the second level of signification leads to the reader's interpretation, which has a certain degree of freedom dependent upon his or her lexicons. Therefore the twitter message (including the image) at stake assumes that the woman in the photograph is a female Kurdish fighter combatting against DAESH, and who can sacrifice her life for this cause and that international help is needed. The accompanying image suggests that Kurdish women are different from women in the Middle East , and therefore stand ahead of their patriarchal societies. In brief, an anonymous woman with a gun and in military camouflage, the signified at the denotational level, has turned into a signifier in the second order of signification leading up to the myth of Kurdish Rehana. The whole process of signification can be summarised as in the following table:

Table 1. Summary of findings

Denotation	Sytagm	Connotation / myth	Cultural knowledge
Text, female figure, posture, clothing, gun	syntax, camera angle, composition, light	heroic female Kurdish fighter	Western culture, Orientalism

At the level of discourse, disinformation on Kurdish Rehana can be described as a floating signifier. In Laclau's discourse theory, social reality is constructed in discourse through hegemonic struggles over its meaning and discourses are contingent and historical constructs.[40] Within this framework, floating signifiers are part of a hegemonic struggle to impose "the right" of a discourse onto the world. Therefore, the myth of Kurdish Rehana can be viewed as a floating signifier which closes the discourse on Kurdish female fighters by fixing it to a certain image of female fighter and excluding others. Overall, the myth of Kurdish Rehana features as floating signifier, which epitomises a discursive struggle over meaning.

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[40]   For Laclau's discourse theory see, Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Times* (London: Verso, 1990); Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 1996); Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005).

5. Discussion

Orientalism still feeds popular culture. Media reports glamorising female Kurdish fighters taking on DAESH caricaturise these women as a novel phenomenon. News producers and even fashion magazines appropriate female Kurdish fighters for their own sensationalist purposes by picking the most "attractive" fighters for interviews and exoticise them as "badass Amazons".[41] As can be seen in the following Independent news, female Kurdish fighters are depicted as sympathetic enemies of fundamentalist groups, often in a Hollywood movie style. Such depictions project orientalist fantasies on Kurdish women and oversimplify the political situation in conflict-ridden Syria. Therefore, the legitimate struggle of eastern women to exist in a war - raged in their homeland - is turned into a bizarre comic novel.

Figure 6. Independent news article featuring a female Kurdish fighter[42]

This line of representation is part of the ambition of Western powers to use a terrorist group, namely the PYD, YPJ and alike, as proxies against

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41   Dirik, "Western fascination," 2014.

42   Retrieved from https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/kurdish-angelina-jolie-fighter-reportedly-killed-fighting-isis-a7231431.html

another terrorist group, namely ISIS. As Luttwak[43] once succinctly termed, we are living through a 'post-heroic' period, in which Western powers are no longer eager to send their own troops to pursue their strategic interest in the Middle East. Instead, they use proxies. Regardless of the risks it involves, the United States, the United Kingdom and other Western powers have adopted the military forces of the PYD as proxy fighters in the armed conflict against DAESH in Syria.[44] With the help of US air power, the PYD, YPJ and PKK have attacked majority Arab populated towns using the pretext of driving DAESH completely out of northern-Syria. This alignment has had serious repercussions. Picking a single political group as the only representative of Kurds runs against the historical experience and diversity of Kurds living in the region. The gains made by the PYD with the support of the US and other Western powers has caused the resentment of Syrian Arabs, exasperating the ethnic and political schisms in the region. Last but not least, threatened by the extension of PYD controlled areas, Turkey has shown in its most recent Operation Olive Branch and earlier Operation Euphrates Shield that it will now allow an autonomous PYD controlled area on its southern border, even if this might set Turkey against its 'strategic partner', the US.

As it has been shown in this analysis, the myth of female Kurdish fighters has been appropriated by Western powers in the pursuit of their interests in Syria. The PYD and its military forces have also used similar images in their media channels and social networking platforms to legitimise their fight and receive further support from Western powers. Analysing the construction and function of myths, Barthes in his *Mythologies* says "however paradoxical it may seem, *myth hides nothing*: its function is to distort not to make disappear."[45] Barthes considers the relation, which unites the concept of the myth to its meaning as essentially a relation of *deformation*.[46] Considered within this analytical approach, what is distorted in the myths of "Kurdish Rehana" or "Kurdish Angelina Jolie"

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[43]   Edward N. Luttwak, "Toward Post-Heroic Warfare," *Foreign Affairs* 74, no. 3 (1995): 109–22. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/yugoslavia/1995-05-01/toward-post-heroic-warfare.

[44]   Rod Thornton, "Problems with the Kurds as proxies against Islamic State: insights from the Siege of Kobane", *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 26, 6 (2015): 865-885.

[45]   Barthes, *Mythologies,* 120.

[46]   Barthes, *Mythologies,* 121.

is what is full, i.e., meaning. The meaning is distorted by the concept, not abolished. The Kurdish woman continues to exist in the concept as the concept needs it. However, the Kurdish woman is deprived of memory, becoming alienated by the concept. Therefore what the myth signifies turns into natural so that the concept transforms history into nature for readers. Therefore, once naturalised the myth is consumed by readers, who establish a natural link between the image of a female Kurdish fighter and the concept it signifies. Looking from the prism of Orientalism, the Western imagination of female Kurdish fighters takes almost by default as its starting point the difference between western women and eastern women. When eastern women begin to be like their western counterparts, as exemplary in the case of female Kurdish fighters, the myth emerges. However, this is not a total transformation, as the semiotic analysis in this paper has shown. The female Kurdish fighter still bears "eastern qualities", submission and subordination. What makes her significant in the eyes of western readers, however, is the binary opposition in which she becomes the antidote of poor and female victims suffering from fundamentalist and tyrant eastern men.

Considering the concept of post-truth politics, it can be argued that disinformation on female Kurdish fighters are instrumental in the discursive fight over what is really taking place in Syria and beyond. The Kurdish groups, supported by Western powers and the US in particular, are granted with political legitimacy through the myth of Kurdish female fighters. Images of female fighters in wars and revolutions, either in the form of popular revolts or military takeovers, taking place in the Middle East, are instrumental in various aspects. First, women have always been the target of top-down modernisation projects of governments in the Middle East and their Western allies. Since women have been the focus of "emancipatory" and "democratising" attempts, they provide double legitimacy for the groups, which use images of tough Middle Eastern women for their PR purposes.

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