

Repackaging Syrian Refugees as Zombies: An Archetype of Dehumanization

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Abstract: Syrian refugees have been dehumanized to the extent that they have been recast by propagandizing media as zombies. In truth, the isolation of refugees in camps is intentional and media propaganda primes refugees to become the ultimate scapegoat, hearkening back to ancient vegetation rituals to appease the gods. Although we cast Syrian refugees as monsters, in the end it is the world, who watches a country be reduced to rubble and its denizens brutalized and murdered, who are the true monsters.

Index Terms—Dehumanization, Syrians, zombies, zombie apocalypse, scapegoating, primal rituals, genocide, Hitler

I. INTRODUCTION

The lurching, skeletal, flesh-eating Zombie has become pop culture royalty, and a vehicle by which Syrian Refugees are recast as mindless zombies, with the media deftly utilizing propaganda to influence worldwide perceptions, and subsequently engender apathy. While the zombie figure receives cult hero status, the zombie apocalypse theme extends beyond Hollywood, as the new discourse for federal agencies. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), The Pentagon and The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) have all co-opted the zombie and its apocalyptic message for use in crisis training drills and social media campaigns regarding safety. The zombie is marginalized as a scapegoat: a diseased, cannibal, who threatens humanity, therefore he must be exiled and destroyed to save humanity and progress society forward. There is no empathy for zombies because although they were once living beings, they are no longer considered human; therefore to destroy him restores world order. Syrian refugees, are synonymous with zombies in that the world treats them as outcasts, or in postmodern terms as, “the other,” who is an outlier of subhuman status [5].



Fig 1. A Syrian zombie horde seeks asylum.

Syrians who flee their war torn country, enduring treacherous journeys to seek haven, are then sent to refugee camps, where they live in deplorable conditions in overpopulated, food scarce, unsanitary slums. Although Syrian families risk their lives to seek asylum, they are vilified by media outlets, who portray them as violent, disease carrying, brainwashed religious fanatics and terrorists. And, though the world has advanced technologically, its primal rituals of isolating, discrediting, and sacrificing those who are marginalized, are well-documented in historic accounts of Native American displacement, Nazi death camps, Japanese and Canadian internment camps, Communist blacklisting, homosexuals during the AIDS crisis, and post 9/11 Muslims in America since 9/11. Syrian refugees, labeled radical Muslims and tainted with the blood of 9/11 have, from 2011-2017, remain polarized zombies, propagandized as a plague carrying, terrorizing threat to human life, whom other countries fear and despise. In refugee camps, Syrians are placed under a quasi-quarantine, and subjected to isolation, starvation, illness, rape, and murder [11].

The First Zombie

The containment and control of Syrian refugees, shares characteristics with the original zombie, portrayed in the silent film, *White Zombie* (1932). This early zombie movie addressed the political theme of humans turned into mindless slaves. Based on both voodoo lore and political conflict in Haiti, this American, silent, Pre-Code zombie movie starred Bela Lagosi as “Murder” Legendre, a voodoo master who transforms a young woman into his zombie sex slave. The allegorical film comments on dangers of U.S imperialism, in its occupation of Haiti, and the subsequent abuse of Haitians as susceptible, weaker humans [16]. Tony Williams (1983) describes how characters in *White Zombie* mirrors past and present political drama stating, “In a different way from Legendre, Madeline condenses the guilt feelings occasioned by U.S. occupation. She personally experiences what has happened to Haiti, moving from the freedom of

life to the slavery of death [16]. Controlled by her zombie master, Madeline transforms into a shell of her former self, devoid of her own thoughts, who is then sexually violated by Legendre. Similarly, Syrians in refugee camps who are controlled against their wills, interrogated, beaten, and raped to gain information [11]. Syrian women without a husband are particularly vulnerable and families marry off their pre-teen daughters in order to protect them. Overall, Syrian refugees are identified as the “other” in relation to the world, which signifies, “a power relationship...articulated on the basis of two elements which are each indispensable...“the other” (the one over whom power is exercised) be thoroughly recognized and maintained to the very end” [5]. For a refugee, newly identified as one controlled and scapegoated, assumes a new identity; it is inconsequential who Syrians were in their former lives, because as of now they are regarded as a lesser human, therefore justifying their controller’s demeaning, abusive treatment.

Naming the Disease

Disease propaganda is used as a media tactic to portray Syrians as plague carriers, and to further denigrate them by inciting panic, reporting their “volcanic ulcers” or an “outbreak” situation in the refugee camps [8]. Contagious diseases attributed to Syrian refugees in propaganda, identifies them as carriers of Ebola, tuberculosis, measles, polio, scabies, hepatitis A, cutaneous, mucocutaneous, and visceral leishmaniasis. More outlandish media sites claim that diseased Syrians are part of a secret bioterrorism program and claim, “The likelihood of an epidemic of a zombie-like infectious disease is very real” [15]. Responsible news agencies attempt to debunk reports that Syrians carry a flesh-eating disease, noting that leishmaniasis is carried by sand fleas, not people and is treatable [1]. However, media competition is fierce, therefore most media outlets report sensationalized news to increase readership. This shift in public perception of Syrians, from victims of war to contagious plague carriers, results in a lack of societal empathy. Adolf Hitler similarly engaged in disease propaganda, intentionally identifying Jewish people as vermin, who spread Typhus and Lice to the masses [14]. This downgrading of Jews from human beings to plague carriers, was intentional in furthering his ultimate plan to imprison, torture and murder millions in concentration camps.

Syrian refugees themselves remain perplexed as to why Westerners treat them with derision. An anonymous woman living in the camps commented, “A great many people are having trouble distinguishing between ‘Islam’ and ‘ISIS’ [11]. She cited a lack of education of those who read propaganda. The recent ban of Syrians entering the United States was in part due to propaganda that ISIS seeds refugee camps with insurgents, poised and ready to spread terrorism as soon as they identify targets [11]. Syrians refugees garner little sympathy due to the identity written for them

By the media. Instead of a group struggling to survive after a devastating war, they are portrayed as a dangerous rebel faction, in collusion with ISIS, who thrive on violent acts.

Ancient Scapegoats

The archetypal scapegoating and sacrificing of those identified as “others,” in this case Syrian refugees, is justified through society’s pervasive fear of difference and the sacrifice of exiles to end perceived chaos. This tendency to scapegoat and sacrifice began in Pagan culture and <http://jrdsjournal.wixsite.com/humanities-cultural>

continues today. In James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, he explains the ritual to ensure the fertilization of fig trees was to hang black and white vines on a human scapegoat, who was then beaten to death [6]. Frazer asserts that all societies are violent and in turn sacrifice the weak to appease the gods, choosing, "public scapegoats, who carried away with them the sins, misfortunes, and sorrows of the whole people" [6]. This annual "ritual" was held to continue progress in times of uncertainty, and every scapegoat is exiled, then sacrificed to the Gods. Like Hitler's need for a "final solution" to exterminate other humans to make Germany strong, Syrians are considered a terrorist threat and are refused entry to countries, tortured and murdered to keep society safe. Due to the perception of Syrians as scapegoats or subhuman, other countries do not accept them, nor attempt to integrate them into their culture, but instead abandon them in refugee camps

Zombies of the World

Ritual scapegoating and sacrifice recurs throughout history and around the world. Viet Thanh Nguyen, a Vietnam refugee, describes the "stateless refugee" as, "zombies of the world, the undead who rise from dying states to march, or swim toward our borders in endless waves" [9]. Syrian Refugees also come from the waters in makeshift rafts, risking their lives because they have nowhere else to go. They leave Syria to escape certain death in a warzone, losing friends and family members on the arduous journey to safety. Despite their courage, they are not granted safe haven, instead they are isolated in camps, a refugee waste land. In his famous postwar poem, T.S. Eliot describes an "Unreal City" that is a death-in-life for survivors displaced after World War 1, the first fully mechanized, catastrophic war:

I had not thought death had undone so many.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.
Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,
To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours
With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine.
There I saw one I knew, and stopped him, crying: "Stetson!
"You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!
"That corpse you planted last year in your garden,
"Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year? [4]

Eliot describes crowds of zombified people on a bridge, listening to a death knell, torn apart by violence,

who can barely breathe from their palpable despair, yet they keep moving from mere habit. He alludes to ancient vegetation rituals in which an effigy or “corpse” is planted to gain favor with the gods and allow crops to flourish [4]. These zombies, while still functional, are not able to feel

fully alive, which mirrors lives of Syrian refugees who have lost their homes, loved ones, and their previous identities. They remain trapped between life and death, while viewed with suspicion

and accusations. The father of Alan Kurdi, a Syrian toddler whose body washed up on Turkish shores after their boat sank, said that the publication of his dead son’s photo “made no difference” in the level of concern about the deaths of thousands of Syrian refugees [2]. At the time, there was outrage over photos of five children who drowned and politicians “promised change,” yet the conflict in Syria continues [2].



Fig 2: A Turkish police officer stands next to a Alan Kurdi's body off the shores in Bodrum, Turkey, on September 2, 2015 after a boat carrying refugees sank while reaching the Greek island of Kos.

Egyptian political satirist Bassem Youssef, claims that propaganda has caused the "systematic dehumanization" of refugees stating, "This kind of rhetoric --- spreading fear and suspicion against the other -- is not something new. We're used to it in the Middle East... You always need something to hold on to, an enemy to direct your hatred to, to cover up your incompetence and your failure" [17].

Syrian Men as Muslim Monsters

Oddly, Middle Eastern news agencies report that Syrian men rape women and commit terrorist acts because of their Islamic beliefs. The media portrays Syrian men as zombified religious fanatics, who blindly follow Allah and commit atrocities to please their God. Ironically, the <http://jrdsjournal.wixsite.com/humanities-cultural>

word Islam means “subservient and “submissive” and in 1964, Islam was accepted by the Second Vatican Council who determined that Muslims, "together with us adore the one, merciful God" [13]. Although Syrians and other Muslims receive bad press for acts of misogyny, genital mutilation of women, and violent aggression, these specific practices occurred in Arab culture long before the practice of Islam [7]. As for the source of violence, Arab men admit to feelings of “humiliation and emasculation,” living under authoritarian rule that fuels their feelings of aggression [11]. People are horrified by media accounts of unaccompanied Syrian women and children raped in refugee camps, then blaming Syrian men as barbarians who commit violence against their relatives. In reality, it is the case of young girls, who are forced into early marriage by their families for their protection, and who are later attacked by their husband’s relatives [7]. In the refugee camps, 500 Syrian refugee marriages take place each month, with 170 of brides are under the age of 18 [7]. The actual accounts of men, women, children raped in refugee camps is glossed over by media, who rationalize that Syrians commit acts of violence because they are Muslim terrorists, hence they deserve violent and inhuman treatment.

End of Days

In December, twenty Syrian women, who had remained in warring Syria, committed suicide to escape rape and murder at the hands of the Assad regime. One of these women, a nurse, wrote a suicide letter that stated: "I am committing suicide not due to no reason but because I do not want several members of the Assad Regime to savour raping me while just yesterday they were afraid to say the word 'Aleppo'" [3]. The Syrian war officially began in 2011, as a response to peaceful, anti-government protests. In 2017, Syria has been reduced to rubble, yet the world continues to watch the spectacle of a country being wiped off the map, with its people dead or displaced. When Hitler exterminated human lives in concentration camps, it was a state secret, with coded language and hidden burial sites. Today, images of Syrians refugees burnt alive, their children injured and dead, and women, taking their own lives to avoid being raped and murdered plays out in the media like a horror movie. Recent travel bans in the United States designate that Syrians are permanently banned from entry, and there remains the threat that those living in America will be deported [9]. Though the ban has been temporarily lifted, the vetting process for Syrians is restrictive and they must wait years for final approval. Not everyone used media to marginalize refugees, for example Brandon Stanton, creator of *Humans of New York*, has used his site to tell stories of refugees in America and those trying to gain access, citing the unfairness of vetting Syrians to the extent that “I interviewed twelve families...only those holding Ph.Ds, or having severe disabilities” [18] were allowed entry. He has brought significant attention to counter the stories of hate, xenophobia and ignorance in regards to Syrians seeking asylum. Refugee Fareed Zakaria, a student, who was refused entry, gave an emotional appeal stating, “We just want to live in peace...we want to work and study...to live somewhere safe” [18]. Can our world afford to repeat this ancient ritual of exile, torture and murder to progress society? Syrians are cast in the role of marginalized, violent, disease bearing zombies, but in reality they are not the monsters. Unlike the secret confinement, murder and burial of Hitler’s victims, the plight of Syrian refugees is public genocide that plays on all news outlets; to deny asylum for people whose lives are in jeopardy leaves the stains of Syrian blood on the world’s hands.

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