

# **An Amazon for Kobane? A Critical Analysis of the Media Discourse on Rehana, a Female Fighter Against the Islamic State**

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**Abstract:** This paper analyzes the online media representation of Rehana, a female fighter against the Islamic State. By using different theoretical lenses, such as critical discourse analysis and semiotic analysis, Rehana's portrayal in 28 online articles is deconstructed. Romanticized myths of female fighters have many times been a feature of (media) narratives on war. However, scholars argue that female fighters have continuously been framed in narratives which conform to gender stereotypes instead of challenging those. The same can be observed in this discourse: Rehana is described as an angel and a glorified counter-player to ruthless Islamic State fighters. Rehana herself however has no voice in this discourse and her individual story and agency is undermined.

**Keywords:** Gender stereotypes, sexist language, gender and media, female fighters, critical discourse analysis

## **Introduction**

On October 13, 2014, the Indian blogger Pawan Durani tweeted a picture of an armed woman in military uniform making a victory sign with her hand. The blogger wrote: "Rehana has killed more than a hundred ISIS terrorists. RT [retweet] and make her famous for her bravery" (Durani). This Tweet was consequently shared more than 5,000 times and the story or Rehana, the brave Kurdish fighter against the Islamic State (IS) in Kobane gained international media attention. Soon after, another image appeared on social media, of a male fighter holding the decapitated head of a young woman. Online sources claimed that

the picture was showing an Islamic State fighter with the head of Rehana. This image inspired an extensive international media discourse speculating whether Rehana had been killed. Shortly after, a Swedish journalist came forward on Twitter, claiming to have met the woman introduced as Rehana, saying that Rehana had not been killed and that she was also not a member of the official Kurdish forces in Syria, the YPJ (Drott, “Rehana has probably neither been beheaded nor single-handedly killed 100 IS fighters”). In a longer Tweet, posted on October 18, 2014, Drott explained that he had met the young fighter in Kobane on August 22 the same year during the initial ceremony of a “auxiliary home guard unit”, set up to support the Kurdish forces (Drott, “Rehana has probably neither been beheaded nor single-handedly killed 100 IS fighters”). The Swedish journalist insisted that Rehana was a former law student from Aleppo and called it “very unlikely” that she could have killed such a large number of fighters (Drott, “Rehana has probably neither been beheaded nor single-handedly killed 100 IS fighters”). In his tweet, Carl Drott criticized the media discourse on the female fighter by saying:

“It’s an affront to her that some people think that’s not enough, but that more fantastic details have to be invented, and it also devalues the very many completely true and even more fantastic stories coming out of Kobani. Unfortunately, there’s not an iconic picture for every fantastic story, and vice versa.” (Drott, “Rehana has probably neither been beheaded nor single-handedly killed 100 IS fighters”)

Iconic female warriors have been parts of historical myths and literature for a long time, such as the mythological figures of the Amazons. Amazons are said to have mutilated their right breasts in order to be able to shoot their arrows more precisely (Moruno: 7). Other stories of heroic female warriors are for example the legend of Jeanne D’Arc or more symbolically, the Marianne, icon of the French Revolution (Moruno 8). Unlike

Jeanne D'Arc, who had to dress up as a man and was later on hanged for her participation on the battlefield, nowadays women can openly join most armies. However, scholars argue that “the centrality of gender-based expectations of women who participate in wars has not disappeared with women’s increasing visibility in those conflicts.” (Sjoberg: 54) Even though women are participating in armed struggles and this participation is openly discussed in the media, often these representations harbor sexist connotations. In the case of Rehana, Kurdish activists have criticized this symbolic representation of the fighter, describing the mass media portrayal as “objectifying” (Alsaafin) and “simplistic, misogynistic, orientalist and patronizing” (Dirik). According to these activists, as well as the Swedish journalist Carl Drott, Rehana is presented in a sensationalist, fictional manner which undermines her personality and fails to see her as a real person.

Representation is a substantial mechanism within the production of meaning, as stated by Stuart Hall, “representation is the production of meaning through language” (16). Hall introduced a concept called the “circuit of culture” which describes the production of meaning in a certain cultural context (Hall: 1). Media representations are part of the circuit of culture and “They are representations that not only reflect societal and cultural norms but also instruct us how to act with respect to our gendered and other identities” (Struckman: 95). It is important to understand media representations as part of the circuit of culture, since “media representations contribute to our understanding, or misperception, of people in other parts of the world (Struckman: 95).

This paper will analyze the representation of Rehana through applying different theoretical lenses. The question guiding the research is: how is Rehana, a female fighter against the Islamic State represented in the online media discourse and what are the implications of this representation for her agency? Firstly, I will present a literature review on the public

representation of female fighters which offers insights into the way militant women are framed in the public discourse. In order to find out how Rehana is presented through language, I will conduct a critical discourse analysis of the articles in the Rehana discourse, putting special emphasis on features of linguistic sexism. Furthermore, I will use semiotic analysis and particularly the features of 'myth' as described by Roland Barthes to analyze how meaning is generated in the discourse on Rehana. In many articles, Rehana is the protagonist of the story; however, anecdotes about the Islamic State transport the authors' opinion about, and interpretation of, the IS fighters. There are repetitive elements in the Rehana story which – when deconstructed through applying 'myth' - are found to convey particular political messages about the Islamic State. I will argue that this undermines Rehana's agency because it fails to go beyond superficial narratives of Rehana as an iconic antidote to misguided and backward Islamists.

### **Literature Review. Representation of female fighters: Stereotypical representations or symbols of liberation?**

In this paper, I am analyzing the media representation of Rehana, a female fighter against the Islamic State. Due to the currentness of the issue, there has been little scholarly work on the representation of Kurdish or non-Kurdish fighters in the ongoing struggle against IS. However, scholars have discussed the representation of female fighters in public discourse in other armed struggles such as the Israel-Palestine conflict, the Spanish civil war or in state armies. Most scholars heavily criticize the portrayal of female fighters by arguing that it draws on gender specific stereotypes and pushes women into a certain narrative, thereby undermining their agency and failing to represent them justly. However, scholars such as Dolores Moruno argue that in

some cases the representation of female fighters can be liberatory and emancipatory by giving visibility to women who defy traditional gender stereotypes.

The study of media representation of Muslim suicide bombers in the Israel-Palestine conflict has led Dorit Naaman to argue that the media reactions to female suicide attackers “highlight junctures of ideological crises in the perceived roles of women in armed struggles, religion and traditional gender settings.” (Naaman: 933) The author contends that women as active participants in wars challenge stereotypical gender roles of men as fighters and women as victims (Naaman 934). This constitutes a rupture in the dominant portrayal of gender roles, and for this reason in the case of Palestinian suicide bombers, mass media demonized Palestinian society for producing such “monsters” or described them as victims of patriarchy (Naaman: 942-943). This shows how the mass media portrayal of female fighters has made an effort to fit stories into conventional and stereotypical narrative frames instead of acknowledging women’s agency and personal motivations. Dorit Naaman concludes, that this representation “enables readers and viewers to maintain both the comfortable status quo and their preconceived notions about the Israeli-Palestine conflict” instead of having to challenge their own stereotypical expectations (952).

Laura Sjoberg argues that women’s experience in war has consistently been framed in a narrative of “beautiful souls”. Sjoberg contends that women’s relationship with war is described within a paradigm of innocence: wars are fought to protect innocent women; women are seen as a price in war and women’s peacefulness is constantly stressed (55-57). According to the author, this problematic representation stands in stark contrast to reality, where women have actually been active in war. As an example, Sjoberg explores the discourse on Jessica Lynch, an American soldier who had been captured by the Iraqi army in

2003. As stated by Sjoberg, “Lynch was characterized as brave beyond her femininity but nevertheless limited by it, needing an elaborate, public rescue” (60). Public discussion on the abduction and rescue of Lynch was focused on her sexuality and the threat of being raped by Iraqi soldiers (Sjoberg: 59). Furthermore, the soldier’s femininity was stressed and she was described as a girl who wants to become a kindergarten teacher (Sjoberg: 60). Sjoberg concludes by saying that as “women become more integrated into state militaries and non-state fighting forces, significant barriers to their ‘equal’ participation remain.” (65) The author argues that the “beautiful soul” narrative is dominant because warfare relies on justificatory mechanisms (67). Traditional gender roles, which proclaim that women need protection, serve to justify war and at the same time, continue to subordinate women (Sjoberg: 67).

Brian Bunk traced the representation of Aida Lafuente, a female warrior in the Spanish revolution and argues that the representation of Lafuente “served ultimately to reinforce traditional notions of gender behavior.” (Bunk : 99) Aida Lafuente took up arms and participated in the Spanish revolution on the side of the Republicans, however according to Bunk “The difficulties in reconciling her military actions with those generally associated with women in times of war led to ambiguities in the way Lafuente’s activities were depicted” (100). The combat activity of Lafuente threatened traditional gender stereotypes, and therefore: “many commentators resorted to conventional images of women in an attempt to counteract the unsettling ideal of a woman warrior.” (Bunk: 100) Bunk analyzes memories of AidaLafuente in poems, articles and political discourse and explains how the fighter became an icon of the revolution with symbolic value rather than a real person (Bunk: 115).

The representation of Chechnyan female suicide bombers in the *New York Times* between 1994 and 2004 is the topic of

research conducted by Sara Struckman. Chechnyan women have carried out over 65 percent of suicide attacks within a militant movement for independence from Russia and these women have been called “black widows” in the media discourse (Struckman 92). Struckman explains that in order to make sense of female suicide attackers, the authors of the *New York Times* relied on the narrative of the “black widow”: women avenging the death of their husbands or relatives (98). However, Struckman also found out that there were some attempts to go beyond this narrative and present a more “nuanced account” of those female militants (98). Nevertheless, Struckman argues that the “black widow” narrative forces women into a position subordinated to men, since “The *New York Times* never addressed the possibility that women could be avenging the death of a female family member or that men were involved in the movement to seek revenge for a dead or missing family member.” (101) Thereby women are robbed of political agency, since their motivation is connected to emotional reasons of vengeance instead of political reasons to fight for Chechnyan independence (Struckman: 103). According to Struckman, women are pushed into this narrative of revenge because these women have broken out of gender norms which led the media to “negotiate their actions” and “attempt to ameliorate those actions with explanations that remain consistent with femininity” (102).

In her essay “Becoming Visible and Real: Images of Republican Women during the Spanish Civil War”, Dolores Moruno analyzes photographs of female republican participants in the Spanish Civil War which lasted from 1936 to 1939. The author contends that through these photos, Spanish women gained visibility and the active role of women in war was highlighted (Moruno: 5). The author points out the importance of images in the representation of war and terms the Spanish Civil War a “war of images” in which “the representation of women took a central place within the visual rhetoric used by the Republican side for

mirroring an emerging model of the woman worker” (Moruno: 6-7). The image of Republican women actively participating in fighting diametrically opposed the image of women produced by their nationalist opponents of “the perfect married lady, ultra-conservative and Catholic, confined to the domestic sphere.” (Moruno: 7) The photos analyzed by Moruno display young female fighters who symbolically represent “all armed women, who joined the front” (8). Additionally, Moruno analyzes visual representations of female nurses, politicians and factory workers to show the wide range of women’s participation in the Spanish war. According to Moruno, “these photographs are testimony that women participated actively during the Spanish Civil War and, moreover, that they became conscious of their subjugated position, vindicating their liberation from sexual discrimination.” (13) To conclude, Moruno stresses the positive effect of this visual representation on women’s agency and emancipation in Spain (13).

Most authors criticize how female fighters have been portrayed in public discourse. Scholars such as Naaman, Bunk and Sjoberg contend that the representation of female fighters displays a struggle with women who defy traditional gender stereotypes. In response to militant women whose behavior is perceived as disruptive to traditional norms, various narratives are developed in the public discourse. Dorit Naaman found out that Palestinian women are described as victims of patriarchy while Laura Sjolberg argues that women are being represented in a style of innocence and terms this the narrative of “beautiful souls”. Furthermore, Brian Bunk contends that the Spanish militant Lafuente is being iconized and venerated while Struckman says Chechnyan suicide bombers have been framed as “black widows” that become militant to avenge male relatives. Only Moruno argues that the representation of female fighters in the Spanish civil war had a positive effect on their emancipation by making them visible. In the following chapters, I will use these research

results as a theoretical framework to explore how Rehana is represented. How do authors in the discourse on Rehana frame her womanhood within the context of armed fighting? Can this discourse empower Rehana by rendering her visible or do the authors push her into a certain narrative to rectify her non-traditional behavior?

### **Analysis of the media discourse on Rehana. Methodology and introduction to the analyzed articles**

In the following, I will carry out a critical discourse analysis of articles on Rehana in order to find out how Rehana is represented in these articles. On April 19, 2015 I conducted a Google News search, entering the terms “Rehana” and “fighter” in English, German, Dutch, French and Spanish. This search yielded many hundred results, which I subsequently filtered by these criteria:

- The web-page must be part of a news magazine
- The web-page cannot be a blog or a page of a political organization (but it can be affiliated with a political party)
- The medium cannot be part of social media (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram...)
- “Rehana” and her story must be either starting point or main topic of the article

After applying these criteria, I collected a selection of 28 articles. I incorporated all English language articles into my list that matched my criteria and appeared through my search and respectively one to three articles in German, Dutch, French and Spanish as a basis for comparison. I deliberately decided not only to analyze articles which appear in a certain online newspaper, but to analyze articles from a range of publishers to be able to capture the media discourse on Rehana as comprehensively as possible. This

method harbors positive and negative aspects. Among the positive aspects is, as mentioned before, that I can gather a more holistic understanding of the media discourse and follow its development over time. A negative aspect is that many newspapers, even across different countries, reproduce almost exactly the same articles, possibly based on news releases by press agencies.

This analysis of the Rehana discourse is based on the methods and principles of critical discourse analysis. The aim of critical discourse analysis is to “understand, expose and ultimately resist social inequality.” (Van Dijk: 352) Critical discourse analysis acknowledges that power relations are constructed discursively and in order to dismantle these existing power structures, a discourse must be analyzed and deconstructed. Scholars of critical discourse analysis contend that the power of hegemonic groups is “integrated in laws, rules, norms, habits and even a quite general consensus” and thus shows itself in discourses (Van Dijk: 355).

The collected articles display a broad spectrum of online media outlets, ranging from tabloid magazines such as the British *Mail Online* and *Mirror*, the Australian *news.com.au*, the German *Bild*, the Swiss *20 minuten* and the Dutch *metronieuws* to online magazines focused on politics and business news such as the German *Focus* and *Süddeutsche*, the *International Business Times* and the *BBC*. Furthermore, articles on Rehana were published in right-wing and conservative news media such as *Breitbart News*, *Western Journalism* and *The Christian Post*. Most newspapers published articles in the “World”, “Abroad”, “Middle East” and “Politics” sections, only some articles were published under “Social Media” sections, explicitly referring to Twitter where Rehana’s picture was published originally. An exception to this is the American right-wing magazine *Breitbart News*, which included the Rehana story in their “National Security” section.

There have been three waves of articles covering the Rehana story: Firstly, the initial articles that picked up the story of Rehana fighting against IS on social media, published between October 14 and October 21, 2014. The first articles describing Rehana's story focus on the seemingly sensational fact that she is a woman fighting for the Kurdish forces. *Fars News*, an Iranian online magazine has the title: "Kurdish Female Fighter Kills 100 ISIL Terrorists Single-Handedly in Kobani" ("Kurdish Female Fighters Kills 100 ISIL Terrorists Single-Handedly"). Another article calls Rehana an internet star and mentions that she reached "world fame" through having killed this large number of her opponents ("Kurdische Kämpferin wird Internet-Star").

Secondly, articles that claimed the young women had been killed by Islamic State fighters, after IS claimed having done so through social media (Thornhill). These articles were published between October 16 and October 30, 2014 with most articles going online on October 27 (8 articles were published on this date). Many articles mention the possible murder of Rehana in the headlines, stating that she was "beheaded" or "decapitated". Most articles either announce that Rehana was killed or speculate if she was killed.

Thirdly, articles that delivered background information on the case and called Rehana either "a myth" or claimed to reveal her true identity. These articles were published between October 27 and November 6, 2014. Some articles offer context about Kurdish female fighters and their current struggle against the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. Additionally, articles problematize that her story was picked up by many online news magazines without being able to verify her story.

Most articles show one of the two photos of Rehana, presented in Fig.1 and Fig.2. In Fig. 1, Rehana is shown in the first row of a military assembly comprised by men and women. She is in the center of the picture; next to her on both sides are

two women, with Rehana being the only person wearing full military uniform. All other people shown in the picture are wearing only military vests but civilian clothing such as jeans and jumpers, with some of the women wearing headscarves and others not. Each person in the photo is holding a rifle in their right hand. From this picture it becomes clear that Rehana is not presented as part of a professional army, but rather as part of a makeshift militia or a group of volunteers. The second photo is a close-up of Rehana, also in a green army uniform and a black vest. Rehana is holding her rifle in the right hand and is forming a victory sign with her left hand. Rehana is smiling and looking into the camera directly, behind her is a group of men wearing casual clothing and army vests. While there is much to be said about these photos portraying Rehana, for the purpose of this paper, I will focus on the representation of Rehana through language.

## **Language and Sexism**

In order to deconstruct the portrayal of Rehana, a special emphasis has been placed on the way that Rehana is presented through language. Critical discourse analysis aims to bridge the gap between the micro and the macro level of analysis since notions such as power or hegemony on the macro level are articulated through language at the micro level (van Dijk 354). According to this method, power and inequalities are produced, replicated and upheld through language (Mesthrie et al.: 310). Sara Mills argues that sexist language is not an individual slip of the tongue, but that it is grounded in “institutionalized inequalities of power” (Mills: 1). Mills argues that language is not neutral, but that it depicts “a site of struggle over word-meaning, which is often a struggle over who has the right to be in certain environments, speak in certain ways and hold certain jobs” (2). According to Mills, elements of sexist language can be statements

that “rely on stereotypical and outdated beliefs” when a woman is expected to behave in a certain way due to behavior that is seen as typically female (2). Another element of sexist language can be considering “men’s experience as human experience” and seeing women’s activities as subordinate to men’s activities (Mills: 2). Mills argues that it is not language itself which is intrinsically sexist, but that language is informed by the power relations of the context it is placed in, as stated by Cameron:

“If we take it that no expression has a meaning independent of its linguistic and non-linguistic context, we can plausibly explain the sexism of language by saying that all speech events in patriarchal cultures have as part of their context the power relations that hold between women and men...This varied and heterogeneous context is what makes expressions and utterances liable to sexist interpretation.” (qtd. in Mills 3)

I contend that the representations of Rehana are informed by sexist notions and ultimately display a struggle of coming to terms with a woman who defies traditional gender norms. First of all, Rehana is described in roughly two categories of words: either as a “fighter”<sup>1</sup> or a “warrior”<sup>2</sup> or in a more ideological and figurative sense as an “angel,”<sup>3</sup> “icon,”<sup>4</sup> or “poster girl.”<sup>5</sup> While

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<sup>1</sup>For example, the following articles: “Kurdish Female Fighter Kills 100 ISIL Terrorists”; Agee; “Kurdische Kämpferin wird Internet-Star”; Kharel; “Claims Famous Kurdish Peshmerga Fighter Rehana May Have Been Decapitated”; “Kurdische Kämpferin Geköpft”; Chastain; “Kurdische Kämpferin Wird Zum Internet Star”; “Isis Decapita à Rehana”; Varghese “Female Kurdish Fighter 'Rehana' is Alive”.

<sup>2</sup> For example: Varghese “Female Kurdish Warrior Rehana Who Killed 100 ISIL Fighters Beheaded?”; Kharel; Schachtel; Varghese “Truth About 'Rehana’”.

<sup>3</sup> For example: “Qui Est l’Ange de Kobané”; Braidy; Schulte von Drach; Gover; Rakusen *et al.*

<sup>4</sup> For example: “Ist Kurden-Ikone Rehana Wirklich Tot?”; „Rehana, Icon van de Koerden in Kobani“; „Qui Est l’Ange de Kobané?“

“fighter” and “warrior” describe Rehana based on her actions and that she is wearing a military uniform and holding a rifle, the second group of words describes her based on a moral judgement about what she is doing. Describing Rehana as an “angel” highlights the saintly, caring, self-sacrificing and devoting side of Rehana over the armed fighter Rehana who is said to have killed 100 ISIS fighters. By supposedly participating in armed fighting, Rehana is entering a men’s domain, this act challenges dominant notions of femininity.

Notions of femininity and masculinity are inscribed in gender stereotypes, which are “organized, consensual beliefs and opinions about the characteristics of women and men,” which “describe who women and men *are*, but they also tell what they *should be*.” (Kite 561-562) There are societal expectations which include “attitudes toward appropriate roles for the sexes” as well as “perceptions of those who violate the modal pattern” (Kite 562). Rosenkrantz and Brovermann identified a cluster of characteristics commonly attributed to women which consists of characteristics such as “warm,” “kind” and “concerned for others’ welfare” (qtd. in Kite: 562). While stereotypical notions of femininity and masculinity are culturally specific, a study by Williams and Best has shown that across 30 countries, men were associated with “higher agency” and women were associated with “higher communion” (qtd. in Kite: 562). Assigning certain character traits and roles in society to people based on their gender is problematic because these stereotypes “reproduce naturalized gender differences” which “function to sustain hegemonic male dominance and female subordination.” (Talbot: 472) As participant in armed fighting, Rehana defies these expectations of traditional gender stereotypes accorded to women. Media articles attempt to adjust the image of Rehana by emphasizing these nurturing and caring characteristics through calling her an “angel”.

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<sup>5</sup> For example: Thornhill; Paraszczuk; van Eyken; Martin; Smith.

Looking at the articles itself in more detail, it also becomes clear that Rehana is described with much attention granted to her looks. An article published on 27 October 2014 in the Dutch online magazine *AD*, describes Rehana as “pretty” and “beautiful” while speculating whether she has been killed or not (Van Eyken). Other articles describe Rehana as “attractive,” (“Rehana, icoon van de Koerden in Kobani”) or “delicate” and highlight her “sweet smile” (“Kurdische Kämpferin Geköpft”) and label her as a “beautiful resistance fighter” (“Ist Kurden-Ikone Rehanawirklich tot?”). Rehana’s age is being mentioned repeatedly in articles describing her as “young” (Varghese, “Female Kurdish Warrior Rehana who Killed 100 ISIS fighters beheaded?”; “Claims Famous Kurdish Peshmerga Fighter Rehana May Have Been Decapitated”). This redundant focus on Rehana’s looks and age trivialize her activity as a fighter and undermines her agency. Rather than posing questions about Rehana’s possible motivations to join an armed struggle and delivering background information on the Syrian crisis or the situation in Kobane, some articles focus on Rehana’s appearance.

Additionally, an article claims that Rehana is fighting in an all-women’s battalion of the Kurdish forces also called the “Peshmergettes” (Van Eyken). The article uses a modified version of the Kurdish forces in Syria, the Peshmerga. Thus, instead of describing these women and their battalion as part of the Kurdish forces, the author singles out the female fighters by giving them an invented name which is ‘female version’ of the original name of the fighting forces. This is a consequence of the aspect of linguistic sexism that Sara Mills terms “imply[ing] that men’s experience is human experience” (Mills: 2). Being part of the Peshmerga is considered a male experience, fighting in the Kurdish forces is considered a male activity. Therefore, women cannot be considered a part of the Kurdish forces, but have to be singled out and named differently. It is seen as exceptional that women are fighters, but still their battalion is described as a by-

product, an attachment to the *male* forces; this portrayal trivializes women's activities in the forces.

The portrayal of Rehana and the language that is used to describe her is excessively concerned with the way that Rehana looks which constitutes a sexist viewpoint since it reduces her to her physical appearance. Also, the apprehensiveness by many authors to simply describe Rehana as a fighter or combatant and instead terming her an angel or an icon show that there seems to be an underlying difficulty of accepting female participation in armed struggle. By calling Rehana an icon or a poster girl, her possible activity in the fight is downplayed and by exalting her to the status of an angel, a softer, saintly side of her is emphasized which seems to be more comfortable and less contradicting to her womanhood for many journalists. Through the use of language such as discussed above, a sometimes subtler, sometimes more overt form of linguistic sexism comes to light.

### **The construction of meaning in the media discourse on Rehana**

“What the world supplies to myth is an historical reality, defined, even if this goes back quite a while, by the way in which men have produced or used it; and what myth gives in return is a natural image of this reality.” (Barthes: 141)

### **Semiotics**

In the following, I will explore how meaning is generated in the media discourse on Rehana. Reading the different articles, it becomes clear that there is a high level of intertextuality, a concept in post-structural analysis which is associated with Julia Kristeva. Intertextuality describes the relationships between texts and postulates that “Each text exists in relation to others, and

textual meanings are dependent on such relations.” (Chandler and Munday 143) Articles report similar details of the Rehana story, which is certainly also due to the current situation in Kobane and other parts of Syria and Iraq, where it is highly dangerous for journalist to investigate. For this reason, media outlets pick up stories that have been reported by other media organizations without being able to verify them. There are several elements in her story which are highlighted in nearly every article, such as: Rehana is part of Kurdish forces fighting the Islamic State, Rehana is said to have killed 100 IS fighters, Rehana might have possibly been killed herself and Islamic State fighters are particularly afraid of being killed by a woman. In the following, will apply Roland Barthes’ theory to an element of the Rehana story in order to show how meaning which refers to wider cultural notions and stereotypes is generated through these anecdotes.

Roland Barthes was greatly influenced by semiotics which is the study of signs. The key to semiotic analysis is to view a text as a system of signs which are related to each other and connected to other texts (Barker: 78). Practitioners of semiotic analysis argue that words or stories do not hold an essential meaning; but that meaning is produced by the way these signs interrelate with each other (Barker: 77). Semiotic analysis has its roots in the discipline of Critical Linguistics and the idea that text can be analyzed like language (Berger: 6). Ferdinand de Saussure, the founding father of structuralism argued that a sign is composed by two parts: the signifier and the signified. The signifier is the sound or image of a word, while the signified is the concept that stands behind it. These signs “are commonly organized into a sequence that generates meaning through the cultural conventions of their usage within a particular context” (Barker: 77). Thus, stories or words do not have essentialist meanings themselves, but meaning is generated through cultural conventions and the context they are placed in.

## The concept of 'myth' – according to Roland Barthes

Roland Barthes further developed semiotics and showed how the study of signs can be expanded in order to study how meaning is generated through signs in cultural practices (Barker, 78). According to Roland Barthes, a sign is based on two levels of meaning-production: connotation and denotation. While denotation is the literal and descriptive level of text, connotation is the level of text that connects to wider cultural practices and associations (Barker: 79). When connotations of a text become naturalized and help us make sense of the world around us in a seemingly essential way, they can be called myths (Barker: 79). In *Mythologies*, Barthes argues that myth is “a mode of signification” or “a type of speech” rather than a concept, because it is dependent on context and generates meaning when it is embedded in a certain discourse (Barthes: 107).

Myth is a “second-order semiological system” since it relies on already existing signs (consisting of signifier and signified) and gives them new meanings linked to a broader discourse or cultural conventions (Allen: 43). The aim of myth, according to Barthes is “giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal.” (142) Thus, myth is a way to disguise ideology by taking a fact or a story out of its historical context and make it seem natural and ahistorical. Barthes argues that “myth is depoliticized speech” (142) because it takes notions such as power, colonialism and imperialism and it “purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of a fact” (143). Furthermore, myth simplifies issues or events because it “organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves.” (Barthes: 143)

## The “Paradise Story”

In the media discourse on Rehana, certain parts of her story as well as of the context of the Kurdish struggle against the Islamic State are repeated in many of the articles. One of these features of her story is that fighters of the Islamic State are particularly afraid of being killed by women, since this would destroy their prospect of entering paradise. This information is being used in seven articles on Rehana collected in my database.<sup>6</sup> In four of these seven articles, ‘experts’ are the source of this information, in one of the articles; it is a Kurdish female fighter who the comment is attributed to. In *Western Journalism*, the American politician of the Republican party Ed Royce is cited saying “[IS fighters] apparently believed that if they were killed in battle, they went to paradise as long as they were killed by a man.” (Agee) The article also claims that for IS militants “death at the hand of a female is a one-way ticket to hell” (Agee). Another article on *news.com.au* also cites Congressman Ed Royce saying that “Fundamentalist jihadists fight believing their martyrdom on the battlefield will be rewarded with 72 virgins upon their arrival in heaven.” (“Claims famous Kurdish Peshmerga fighter Rehana may have been decapitated”) According to the authors, IS fighters are afraid of being killed by women because that would destroy their chances of meeting those 72 virgins in heaven (“Claims famous Kurdish Peshmerga fighter Rehana may have been decapitated”). In another article published on *International Business Times*, the historian and writer Andy Robertshaw elaborated on the role of Rehana saying: "It tells the Kurds they

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<sup>6</sup>In these articles the „Paradise Story“ is mentioned: Agee; Varghese, “Female Kurdish Warrior Rehana who Killed 100 ISIS fighters beheaded?” ; “Claims Famous Kurdish Peshmerga Fighter Rehana May Have Been Decapitated”; Paraszucuk; Chaistain; ”Isis decapita a Rehana”; Gover.

have got an ace on their side - which is nice to know. It's also a way of making the jihadis uncomfortable because they believe they won't go to heaven if she kills them." (Gover) In some articles, the "Paradise Story" has thus become a part of the narrative on Rehana.

### **Applying myth to the "Paradise Story"**

Barthes argues that the deconstruction of myth serves to break down pervasive meanings in modern bourgeois or dominant culture (Allen 52). In the following, I will apply myth to the "Paradise Story", in order to expose how meaning is constructed in this prevalent component of the Rehana discourse. In *Mythologies*, Barthes does not offer explicit instructions to analyze and deconstruct myth; however, he does explain its features, rhetorical forms and purposes. One of the rhetorical features of myth as described by Barthes is the "privation of history" (Barthes 151). Myth makes the information seem eternal and natural, it seems like "nothing is produced, nothing is chosen" (Barthes 151). In the "Paradise-Story", the content is deprived of its history on multiple levels. Firstly, the statement that IS fighters believe to go to hell if they are killed by a woman is represented as a fact. There is no evidence of an IS fighter being interviewed or mentioning this, or even a jihadist from another group making this statement. Thus, there is no source from the group in question, only outsiders such as foreign 'experts' and a Kurdish fighter are making this statement. Secondly, it is represented as a religious aspect or Islamic belief. However, there is no engagement with religious principles that could serve as evidence for this claim. Furthermore, there is no scholar of Islam or religion cited who could verify that Islamist fighters will not go to heaven if killed by a woman based on religious sources. Thirdly, there is no context provided about the religious beliefs of members of the

Islamic State. The story is being conveyed outside of history and questions such as: are members of the Islamic State following a certain Islamic tradition that supports this claim? Are these ideas common to all believers of Islam? What is the background of the Islamic States' campaign in the Middle East? By presenting this story without exploring its historical background or providing facts to prove the story history is removed from the story, as described by Barthes: "This miraculous evaporation of history is another form of a concept common to most bourgeois myths: the irresponsibility of man." (Barthes 152)

A distinct rhetorical feature of myth according to Barthes is that it makes identification with the subject of the myth impossible to its reader. As stated by Barthes, "The petit-bourgeois is a man unable to imagine the Other" because "the Other is a scandal which threatens his essence." (152) This feature is very prominent in the "Paradise-myth": IS fighters are brutal and ruthless but at the same time feel scared for reasons that the reader cannot comprehend. This element of the story does not offer information about Rehana, who is the protagonist of all articles I am analyzing, but it serves to detach the reader from the IS fighters. As Barthes explains it: "common sense rebels" and "the Other becomes a pure object, a spectacle, a clown." (153) According to Barthes this leads to a sense of security because the Other is perceived as so different, so far away that he can no longer threaten the reader. However, I contend that in the case of the Islamic State, the opposite is true. Especially with a media discourse strongly focusing on fighters returning to Europe, an irrational IS fighter does threaten the reader, since he could return to live in the same country as the reader of this article. The perceived irrationality in the fears of the fighters ridicule the fighters, but at the same time, not being able to relate to them, renders them even more threatening and dangerous to the reader.

Another element of myth is that myth has an intention. In contrary to the system of signs according to Saussure where signifier and signified are matched arbitrarily, the second-order semiotic system of myth is always motivated (Barthes 124). Barthes contends that myth always contains motivation and analogy, even though this analogy is often incomplete since “myth prefers to work with poor, incomplete images” (125). The intention of myth is political since myth is “depoliticized speech” (Barthes 142). At the denotative level, the “Paradise Story” is telling us “Islamic State militants are engaging in armed fighting but they are afraid of being murdered by a woman due to their religious beliefs about afterlife.” At the connotative level however, this story emphasizes the religious paradigm that this fight is placed in and perceives this aspect of the fighters’ belief as irrational and superstitious. In some articles the story is even used to ridicule the fighters, for example in an article which is titled: “Awesome: This Female Fighter Has a Unique Advantage That Has ISIS Scared Out of Their Minds” (Agee). This article celebrates the “Paradise Story” and describes Rehana as a heroine fighting against the brutal but irrational IS fighters. In the article, the author describes the “Paradise-Story” as a “loophole” in the “promise” for Islamists to receive a “spot in heaven” (Agee). The power of myth according to Barthes, is that it comes across as natural. Especially in a discourse on the Islamic State which is installed in a religious paradigm, the fact that IS fighters’ actions are motivated by their hopes and fears for the afterlife seems plausible to the reader. Through the “Paradise Story” though, the reader can see the jihadi as irrational and silly and assert her own superiority over these misguided fanatics.

Through applying Roland Barthes’ concept of myth to the “Paradise-Story”, it becomes clear that this anecdote presents the fighters of the Islamic State as irrational which allows the reader to feel superior over the fighters. The mechanisms of ‘myth’

naturalize this story; it becomes a fact that Islamist fighters are afraid of being killed by women. Additionally, the reader becomes detached from the fighters, their beliefs are conceived of as absurd and exotic and radically different to the belief of a ‘civilized’ reader. That this story was chosen by different authors to be part of their reporting on Rehana even though it does not provide information on her shows that the discourse is also used to shape public opinion on the Islamic State. Rehana is used as a sympathetic entry point to a story about the conflict in Iraq and Syria, but within the articles on Rehana, information about IS takes a significant role.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I analyzed the online media discourse on Rehana, a female fighter against the Islamic State. This discourse unfolded in October and November 2014 and has produced many articles on the young woman, 28 of which I collected and critically analyzed. I problematized the representations of Rehana and argued that the portrayal as represented in the articles undermines Rehana’s agency. This claim is consistent with many scholars who have analyzed the portrayal of female fighters in other contexts and have mostly criticized that the representations of these fighters display a conflict of writing about women who defy traditional gender stereotypes of peacefulness and domesticity. This defiance is consequently rectified by presenting female fighters within certain fixed narratives. Through a critical discourse analysis focused on linguistic sexism, I showed that Rehana is being venerated to the status of an angel which downplays her active and possibly aggressive position as an armed fighter. Furthermore, through extensive attention devoted to her looks, Rehana is objectified and her femininity is emphasized.

I argued that Rehana is used as a cover-up to transport meaning on the Islamic State. Through semiotic analysis and applying the features of myth to an anecdote frequently displayed in articles on Rehana, I showed that notions of Western superiority in opposition to IS fighters are conveyed. This external framing of Rehana's activities, the objectification and presentation of Rehana as an angel as well as using Rehana as an antidote to seemingly irrational and misled Islamists constitute an account of Rehana which undermines her agency. Through different tools such as linguistic description and myths about IS, an account of Rehana is being constructed which leaves little room for Rehana to speak for herself.

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