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The Book of Collateral Damage and *The Yellow Birds*: U.S. Hegemony and Divergent Narratives of War

Laleh Atashi[1]

Zainab Ibrahim Alvaan Alkaeebi[2]

Azra Ghandeharion[3]

Abstract

This paper is a comparative study of two war novels, namely *The Book of Collateral Damage* by Sinan Antoon and *The Yellow Birds* by Kevin Powers. Both Antoon, an Iraqi-American author, and Powers, an American writer, describe war critically but from very different points of view. In Antoon's novel, an Iraqi scholar living in the U.S. during the conflict tries to review the war, collect newspaper pieces of war news, and create a catalogue of the people, the land, and the human and non-human entities he knew before and during the war in Iraq. In Powers' autobiographical account, the narrator is a young soldier struggling with war trauma and trying to express his bereavement for his dead friend. Both novels address war trauma, but the dimensions of trauma and the way memory and remembering operate in the lives of the narrators are very different. This paper argues that the positionality of the authors determines the way they narrate war. The Iraqi scholar tries to revisit the past and finds recollection a therapeutic act, while the young American soldier is haunted by the memory of his lost friend, and forgetting often becomes a survival strategy for him. The approach used to answer the question: How is war trauma experienced differently on the two sides of the same battlefield? is a postcolonial one. The study draws on some ideas

1. Associate Professor of English Literature, Shiraz, Shiraz University (corresponding author) laleh.atashi@shirazu.ac.ir
2. Ph.D graduate of English Literature, Shiraz, The International Branch of Shiraz University za.alkaeeba@mail.um.ac.ir
3. Associate Professor of English Literature, Mashhad, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, ghandeharioon@um.ac.ir

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from postcolonial theoreticians such as Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak to analyse the two novels comparatively.

Keywords: Postcolonial criticism, narrative positionality, hegemonic discourse, war literature, collective memory

1. Introduction: Postcolonial Perspectives on Hegemonic Stability and the Literary Aftermath of the Iraq War

This article adopts a postcolonial perspective to analyse *The Book of Collateral Damage* by Sinan Antoon, an Iraqi-American novelist, and *The Yellow Birds* by Kevin Powers, an American novelist, from a comparative point of view. This approach is particularly suitable for the study of war literature, as the narration of war is deeply entangled with questions of unequal power relations. It matters who controls the discourse, and how the positionality of characters influences their interpretation and representation of the war. This research probes two accounts of the U.S occupation of Iraq, one by an Iraqi scholar in the U.S. and one by an American soldier who participated in the war; and puts the two accounts in a comparative framework to indicate the different forms of encounter between the U.S. and Iraq.

The encounter with the other can be studied within the framework of comparative literature. Comparative literature has the tendency to push boundaries, whether geographical nationalist borders or disciplinary limitations within literary studies. When postcolonial studies converge with literary studies, explains Sonkwé Tayim, comparative literature reemerges to criticize grand narratives, to bring marginalized voices into the cultural forum, and to redefine the relationship between nationality and other spaces and cultures: “The postcolonial theory therefore does not kill the nation, it describes its relationship to other spaces, while avoiding any centrism” (34). If in the past, the mission of comparative literature was to counter European nationalisms, in the postcolonial age, with the demographic mobility of people across the global geography, there is a shift away from Eurocentrism to allow other actors into the literary conversation. Understanding the convergence of postcolonial and comparative literary approaches is specifically important if we contextualize these two novels within the geopolitical realities that occasioned them, most notably the shifting international position of the U.S. in the early 21st century.

The U.S. had international status and eminence matching its material proficiencies and public rank especially during the 1990s after the Cold War. It also knew it was globally recognised as a hegemonic authority. However, the assaults of 9/11 in 2001 endangered its supremacy, and exposed contradictions inherent in the widespread pre-emptive strategies it had promoted in anticipation of uncontested global power. From a realist perspective, the U.S. was compelled to restore its international standing through decisive military engagement. Clark argues that Afghanistan in 2001 was not enough to create this awe-inspiring status, but the upheaval of an unruly enemy was the way to fulfil this goal. Attacking Iraq would enable the U.S. to reiterate and exhibit its power in no indeterminate terms to a universal audience (2011: 35). In 2003, Iraq was believed to be a forthcoming danger. It was consequently attacked after George W. Bush, the president of the United States, declared that Saddam Hussain was connected to Al-Qaida and was making artilleries of mass murder. The emphasis on the connection between Saddam Hussain and Al-Qaida helped to redefine Americanness, relating the American identity to the mission of protecting the world against terrorism. Tuastad considers that the United States imperialism in the Middle East uses neo-colonial policies that seek to govern such countries as Iraq and make the incessant political and financial hegemony legal in small Gulf nations (2003: 594). Klare explains that searching for oil has always been the most unassailable reason for U.S. armed activities in the Persian Gulf area (2003: 50). Kubursi and Mansur maintain that the war empowered Washington to strengthen its authority and benefit from the war against Iraq to establish its unwavering authority over the Middle East (1993: 10).

The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, observed through the lens of Hegemonic Stability Theory, features a noteworthy paradox. While the theory asserts that a dominant power can enforce order and stability on the international system, the Iraq War showcases the catastrophic failure of such a theory when put in practice. Far from establishing order and stability, the invasion ruined Iraq's infrastructure, depleted its social capital, and left the nation struggling with lasting instability and insecurity. The conflict transformed Iraq into a fractured society filled with violence, disarray, and socio-political disintegration (Abdullah 2017:109). After 2003 in Iraq, prose fiction arose as one of the chief media outlets to sustain memories of the past and envisage

possibilities for the future.

The historical background of the U.S. invasion is important to know because it can reveal the degree to which war novels are complicit with U.S. war politics, or the extent to which they resist U.S. hegemony. The representation of Iraq in contemporary narratives reveals a descent from tyranny and oppression to a splintered existence submerged in violence, looting, sectarian conflict, and unemployment. Hamdan and Salameh compare Iraqi war fiction, especially those written by Antoon, to a relay race, whereby each narrative hands over the baton to the next, collectively presenting a multifaceted depiction of Iraq's turbulent political and social history (2023: 64). Such literary works do not merely illustrate the failure of hegemonic control but also underscore the broader human costs of imperialistic interventions.

2.Theoretical framework: Post colonialism, representation, and hegemony in war narratives

Postcolonial criticism bears witness to the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the contest for political and social authority within the modern world order. Postcolonial perspectives emerge from the colonial testimony of third world countries and the discourses of minorities within the geopolitical divisions of east and west, North and South. They intervene in those ideological discourses of modernity that attempt to give a hegemonic "normality" to an uneven development and the differential, often disadvantaged, histories of nations, races, communities, peoples (Bhabha 1994: 171-172). The emphasis on the discursive practices is the main tenet of postcolonial theories. Edward Said, in *The World, the Text and the Critic,* notes that books must be judged in terms of their circumstanciality, he defines texts as "worldly" and explains that "they are events, and, even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless a part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted" (Said 1983: 4).

This article situates the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq within the broader framework of neocolonialism, a concept that highlights the persistence of imperial structures under the guise of democracy, humanitarianism, or economic aid. As Kwame Nkrumah famously argues, "Neo-colonialism is also the worst form of imperialism. For those who practise it, it means power without responsibility and for those who

suffer from it, it means exploitation without redress" (Nkrumah 1965:5). This quote indicates the persistence of colonial mechanisms in Third World countries and the Global South, and how easily those exercising interventionism evade responsibility for their actions.

The concept of Hegemonic Stability Theory helps us gain a deeper understanding of the macro-political discourse that legitimized the war. It explores how the hegemon (in this case, the United States) creates a world order through military, economic, and political dominance, ostensibly to secure peace and stability, but in practice helping to preserve a monopoly on power. This hegemonic order frames war as an inevitable step taken for the greater good of the world, thereby legitimizing, humanizing, and necessitating conflict in a patronizing manner. Meanwhile, alternative ways of understanding and narrating war are pushed to the margins of the discursive field.

The postcolonial approach allows us to read through the dominant discourse (Hegemonic Stability) and critically examine the mechanisms of representational violence. It helps unpack the complex interactions between the positionality of the narrator and the way war is framed and represented. This approach also reveals the extent to which narrators are either complicit in or resistant to the hegemonic framing of war, shedding light on how discourse shapes both perception and memory in the context of conflict. If we bring together what Spivak warns against in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) and Edward Said's notion of "contrapuntal reading" in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), we can establish the theoretical framework for this paper. Spivak cautions that the voice of the subaltern is rarely audible, and that privileged voices claiming to represent the subaltern ultimately fail to provide genuine agency to those presumed voiceless. By contrast, Said, writing five years later, theorizes an active method of reading to get access to marginalized voices. In *Culture and Imperialism*, he explains that he adopts "contrapuntal reading" in his interpretation of Western literature in order to "take account of both processes, that of imperialism and that of resistance to it, which can be done by extending our reading of the texts to include what was once forcibly excluded" (66–67). Said is therefore more optimistic than Spivak, maintaining that contrapuntal reading can make the different sides of unequal power relations visible and audible.

Although only two novels are examined in this paper rather than the whole

body of war literature, the selected texts can be read as counterpointing voices within the same genre, offering apt examples of the disjunctions in critiques of war. In *The Yellow Birds*, the American soldier critiques war policies, directly or indirectly, by highlighting his guilt, suicidal thoughts, and psychological despair. In contrast, the protagonist of Sinan Antoon's *The Book of Collateral Damage* exposes, through his everyday life, the fissures in American anti-war discourse: the meaningful gaps in leftist critiques of U.S. foreign policy and the silences embedded in symbolic student protests within American academia. His reflections on daily life in an American university perhaps provide the clearest example of a contrapuntal reading of war. Moreover, his hybrid identity grants him the privilege of perceiving aspects that remain invisible to those with only a single vantage point.

3.Literature Review

War literature often relates the lasting trauma of those who lived through conflict. War survivors whose stories shape war literature often remember the traumatizing violence of war and try to come to terms with the horrors of war. Most of the essays written about these two novels address the psychological outcome of war as experienced by the protagonists and how they feel the urge to write the uncommunicable trauma. In some cases, the argument is mainly focused on the individual's psychological state, and in other cases the social and political aspects of remembering the traumatic past are also addressed. The review that follows includes articles written on the two novels, *The Book of Collateral Damage* and *The Yellow Birds*, mostly addressing the interaction between trauma and memory. Webster (2021) explores the intertextual references in *The Book of Collateral Damage* and explains how the Arabic title – *Fihris*—invokes *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, provided by Ibn al-Nadim, and how this intertextuality is lost in translation. She also investigates Antoon's creative use of "collateral damage" in his novel and how he addresses the urge to write about the war and the impossibility of an accurate indexing of the destruction brought about by war.

While Webster highlights the significance of intertextuality in the novel, Abu-Fares and Al-Shetawi (2023) use trauma theory to examine the lives of Iraqi people after the war and the social dimensions of the conflict, as represented in Antoon's novel. They analyse Antoon's portrayal of the personal trauma of individuals as it

intersects with the collective trauma experienced by the whole nation during and after the war. Bani-Mufrrij (2024) moves beyond trauma to offer an innovative reading of *The Book of Collateral Damage* by adopting an ecocritical approach to the novel. The writer argues that Antoon, when indexing the unending destruction of war, gives voice to human and non-human entities and moves from an anthropocentric outlook to a biocentric perspective and finally to an ecocentric vantage point. The paper highlights the way Antoon's novel depicts an inclusive world while narrating the widespread destruction of the war. The papers written on Antoon's novel included in this review mostly comment on the way remembering and indexing, in their continuous form, are creative strategies used by the novelist to stitch together the fragments left in the wake of war.

As far as Powers' novel is concerned, however, the tragedy of the American soldier seems to be present through the seasonal imagery repeated in the novel. Therefore, unsurprisingly, most of the papers written about this novel emphasize the lasting trauma and critique the concept of victimhood as represented in the novel. Mann (2016) examines the personal trauma of Private John Bartle, the young protagonist of *The Yellow Birds*, and investigates the way he is victimized not only by the war but also by the social and political atmosphere that promoted the contemporary war politics of the U.S. after 9/11. Precup (2017) also talks about the war trauma experienced by John Bartle in *The Yellow Birds*, but she emphasizes the role of memory and remembering the past as a conscious strategy to come to terms with the traumatic war experience. Wright (2019) addresses the role of memory and remembering in *The Yellow Birds* by highlighting the contradiction in war literature, the need to remember the war and the impossibility of communicating what really happened during the war.

Alosman and Mydin (2020) also probe the concept of trauma and have analysed the survival psychology of the two main characters of *The Yellow Birds*, namely John Bartle and Daniel Murphy, to show the different stages of survival psychology that each character goes through. They note that Bartle recovers, but Murphy cannot overcome the trauma and loses his life during the war. This paper highlights the fact that the terror of war might never be overcome and that war trauma continues operating in the lives of soldiers even after the war. Alosman and Omar (2022) explain

how victimhood in *The Yellow Birds* can be a political strategy to support the pro-war discourse. They argue that although both Iraqis and Americans were victims of war, the novel tends to remain silent about how the people of Iraq were victimized during the war and overemphasizes the trauma of the American soldiers.

Iqbal et al (2024) compare different versions of victimhood in Iraq War narratives, namely David Abrams's *Fobbit* (2012) and Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* (2013). Our research aligns with the comparative approach in this paper, which argues that victimhood must be problematized when the authors' perspectives differ. They also show how American soldiers are acquitted in the American narrative, whereas the Iraqi account of war depicts the harrowing landscape in which everyday life in Iraq is dramatized. Similarly, our research reveals a related pattern: in *The Book of Collateral Damage*, Antoon portrays the haunting collective trauma experienced by the Iraqi protagonist, in contrast to the existential crisis of the individual American soldier, who tends to downplay the role of American foreign policy in shaping his trauma.

Although the studies on these two novels often examine common themes in war literature, trauma, memory, the struggle to survive, and the attempt to narrate the uncommunicable, we maintain that reading them side by side offers something more. Together, they reveal the different forms of trauma experienced by Iraqis and Americans, as well as the varied ways memory is mobilized as a survival strategy. The comparative outlook also reveals a frequent pattern of acquittal and complicity with foreign policies in American narratives, while rhetoric of blame and an inability to return to "normal life," abound in the Iraqi accounts of war. Thus, a comparative study of the two novels can expose the subtleties in how individuals from opposing sides of the same battleground recount their experiences.

4. Thematic overview of *The Book of Collateral Damage* and *The Yellow Birds*

Antoon's *The Book of Collateral Damage* was published about sixteen years after the American attack on Iraq. As a post-2003 literary work, this novel displays generational trauma, destruction, and the lasting impacts of the war on Iraqi society. The narrative of this novel follows Nameer, a researcher and writer, who realizes that the catastrophe the Iraqi people endured during the war has been reduced to

nothing, no more than a news headline. The immense damage to Iraqi identity and cultural memory is dismissed as mere "collateral damage." The book highlights the necessity of thinking and writing about a war that has erased not only lives but also the memory and history of a nation. Yasmeen Hanoosh states that what distinguishes the viewpoints of *The Book of Collateral Damage* is that they are highlighted by sorrow or troubled by war hallucinations; per se, they inspire the readers to reconsider their realisation of the present Iraq. The experience of cultural estrangement Nameer feels echoes the idea that immigrants often struggle to assimilate into a new culture, clinging, as Saad and Khalil explain, to their indigenous norms and practices while being caught between the homeland and the adoptive culture, a conflict that can lead to an identity crisis (2025: 281).

The Yellow Birds is Powers' first novel. As a war trouper himself, Powers' chief concern in the novel is to depict the never-ending war and its most ignored victim: the soldier. The novel follows Private John Bartle, the protagonist and the storyteller, from 2003 to 2009, as he takes part in the Iraq war and returns home to the United States. Bartle, as the protagonist of the novel, more or less understands he had been a victim of the American war propaganda machine but there is hardly any denunciation of American foreign policy on his part. His experience in Iraq additionally congeals his conviction that there were no weapons of mass destruction and that the war against Iraq was conducted for no other motive than strengthening American hegemony in the region (Majeed and Abdullah 2020: 936). This novel criticizes the war by showing how its psychological consequences outlast the calendrical history of the conflict.

4.Narrative Resistance in *The Book of Collateral Damage*

The Book of Collateral Damage by Antoon, in multiple ways, presents the project of Iraq's occupation as an example of neocoloniality. He illustrates American dominance over media, the rewriting of history, the obliteration of collective memory, and the silencing of victims. Iraqis can be heard only when their narratives are adjusted to fit the discursive structures of the West. Antoon frequently comments on the imposed invisibility of Iraqis who nevertheless make painful efforts to assert their existence:

> I was saddened that some amazing and extraordinary interviews had disappeared from the edited version. I wasn't the director or the producer and

> I didn't know to what extent they would accept a critical opinion, though Roy had said in his letter that he was interested in my opinion as an Iraqi. Most of the material that had been cut had been about the cruelty of Saddam and the violence of the regime. It was the same old problem we faced with many of the leftists who were opposed to the war in America. They devoted all their efforts to criticizing the policy and actions of their own government, which was their right and their duty. But they turned a blind eye to the crimes of tyrants. (2019:51)

In this section, the narrator refers to the cutting of the parts related to Saddam's tyranny from Roy's documentary about the American occupation of Iraq. Although the American director tries to criticize the occupation, he reduces the narrator to a source and a translator rather than giving him the chance to be the owner of the narrative of what his country has undergone. In this example, we see hegemonic control over discourse. Although it seems that the documentary is sympathetic to the Iraqi people, the process of editing, framing, and prioritizing the content to put on display is still determined by the American filmmaker. The occupation of Iraq must be rendered palatable for the Western audience, and even leftist intellectuals with a critical point of view fail to give voice to the reality of the war. Brutality of war, in this context, becomes reportable only when focused on the wrongness of American policies—not on the savagery of the Baathist regime. Here, the epistemology of war is dictated by the hegemon's language and editing framework, echoing the asymmetry at the heart of The American leftist media.

Nameer's obsession with archives is a motif throughout the novel. Archives that bridge the gap between the past and future are of key importance in war-stricken Iraq. At one point, the narrator describes an album of stamps belonging to one of his acquaintances, followed by the striking of a missile that burns the entire apartment, the album, and everything else in the house:

> The fire began with the old carpet and then reached the lower shelves of the bookcase. The flames consumed the newspapers, including news stories, editorials, fiery poems about the coming victory, and pictures of Saddam Hussein meeting military leaders. Then the flames climbed to the other shelves

> and consumed plans for hypothetical buildings in graduation projects, housing complexes that ran on solar energy, and architectural dreams. Then it took hold of the album with its green cover that had faded through more than two decades of exposure to sunlight and dust. The tongues of flame soon tinged it, turning it from golden to dark brown and then settling on black. All the kings and presidents who still looked out of the windows of the stamps were burned up. The buildings and birds were also burned. (60)

Here, we witness the tragedy of memory erasure: the missile and modern warfare destroy not only lives, but also cultural archives, collective dreams, and historical memory. The world under hegemonic control is populated by nameless and burned-out remnants, yet Antoon's novel attempts to restore their names, their presence, and their voices. This erasure of archives, albums, and future reminds us that colonialism does not only target the physical body, but also the mind, memory, and meaning itself. Within the framework of HST, such losses are often relegated to the category of "collateral damage." However, in the lived experience of those subjected to bombings in Iraq, these losses are the authentic core of suffering—proof that neocoloniality persists not through bullets alone, but through forgetting, obliteration, and de-naming.

Since the loss of collective memory is traumatizing, the narrator devotes his life in academia to recollecting photos, Iraq war news, and relevant newspaper clippings in order to write a novel about the trauma. His American partner, Rebecca, dismisses such efforts as useless. She is too pragmatic to care about what Nameer obsessively does. Nameer wishes to write a novel about Iraq's occupation, but she insists that he finish his dissertation instead:

> "I want to write a novel about Iraq," I said.
>
> "You can write plenty of novels, but after you finish your dissertation and settle down in your job," she said.
>
> I was going to tell her that she didn't understand me, but I didn't say anything. I was tired of the constant arguments, which drained me psychologically. Her reaction saddened me, regardless of her intentions, and I didn't like her tone. I realized that we had really started to part ways and that the geographical distance between us had started to translate into emotional distance too. She

> was more practical and rational than me. She would finish everything on time—ahead of time, in fact—unlike me. I would put things off and break my own and other people's deadlines. She's going to make a successful and prominent academic. She knew how to play the game too.
>
> After that conversation I decided that the relationship had to end officially and that it was I who would have to deliver the coup de grâce. She expected me to visit her in Bolivia, where she was doing fieldwork on the effects of globalization on the indigenous population and on the strategies they adopted to resist it. At first, I was enthusiastic about the visit, since I had never been to South America. But that was before my visit to Baghdad and before our relationship deteriorated. (62)

After Nameer tells his American partner about collecting photos and articles related to the Iraq war, Rebecca, exasperated, questions the point of surrounding himself with "pictures of war carnage and dead people." She insists that unless he is writing "a research paper on the war," these actions are pointless and even psychologically harmful. "Feeling guilty or sad won't change anything," she tells him, suggesting that he should seek therapy for PTSD instead of pursuing what she views as obsessive behavior. In contrast, Nameer calmly responds: "It doesn't have anything to do with changing anything. I want to write a novel about Iraq." Her pragmatism is rooted in a career-oriented mindset: Nameer should "finish [his] dissertation and settle down in [his] job" (62). Although she is researching indigenous resistance to globalization in Bolivia, she is unable—or unwilling—to see Nameer's emotional and narrative resistance as valid. This tension exposes an irony: she values "resistance" when it is objectified as fieldwork, but devalues it when it emerges as personal grief and memory outside the academic-industrial framework.

Another important point highlighted in this passage is the different conception of time in the minds of Rebecca and Nameer, revealed in their dialogue. For Rebecca, time is a forward-moving route, rational and manageable. She believes that writing a dissertation and settling down in one's job can smoothly move an academic into the future. For her, archives are bygones and must remain bygones—unless needed for historical research or academic publication. She subscribes to the modern Western

temporality that privileges development, progress, and rational bureaucracy. For Nameer, however, time is knotted in the past of his country, and he feels the need to dive back into an erased history to prevent the total obliteration of memory. Reviving and reclaiming memory defines his very existence. Thus, for him, revisiting the past is an existential concern rather than a liberal dream of progress, occupational success, or productivity. In this perspective, diving back in time becomes a space of resistance. The past is not finished—he must listen to the suffocated murmurs of his country. Through archiving and writing a novel, he seeks to confront the neo-colonial conception of time that insists on dragging a country toward a bright future of development by obliterating its collective past. Archiving and writing become a battle against imposed oblivion.

Another instance of being framed by the Western discourse of hegemony can be witnessed in the part of the novel when one of Nameer's students proposes holding a protest against the Iraq war on campus. Nameer, who has to attend a departmental meeting, fails to participate, but later asks his student about the outcome of the protest. The student explains that only seven people out of six thousand showed up, although they hoped the number would increase in the future. Nameer notices 37 white roses at the site and inquires about their meaning:

> I went up to her and asked her about the number of roses.
>
> "They represent the number of American soldiers killed in Iraq so far: three hundred and seventy, one rose for every ten."
>
> Before I could ask her about the Iraqis, she added spontaneously,
>
> "Unfortunately, we don't know exactly how many Iraqis have died. And in the group, we decided it would be better politically to focus at first on our own troop casualties and bring up the civilians later." (70)

At this point, we come across the concept of the hierarchy of grief in the context of the American war in Iraq. The question here is: who deserves mourning and which deaths are worthy of mention? These numbers — seven participants out of 6,000 students — first highlight apathy at best, or at worst, quiet complicity with American war policy. The 37 roses symbolize the prioritization of the deaths of American soldiers over the countless, yet uncounted, Iraqi civilian deaths. One is reminded

of the leftist filmmaker, Roy, who directed a critical documentary against American policies but preferred to remain silent about the atrocities committed by the Baathist regime in Iraq. In the anti-war meeting, the number of American soldiers mattered more than the number of Iraqis. The death of the Other (non-Western Iraqis) becomes dismissible unless it serves a Western narrative.

Nameer shares with the reader his experience of being interviewed about elections in Iraq and having to answer naïve questions. This interview is a key dialogue that reveals the paradox at the heart of the American democratizing mission. When Nameer says that he will not take part in what he views as a symbolic and useless election, even though there are polling stations in New York and Washington, the interviewer is surprised that he refuses to "enjoy" his democratic right to vote, a right allegedly earned through the bloodshed of war. He explains:

> "I don't believe in the legitimacy of elections held under military occupation. I also can't take part in elections when I'm living on another continent and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis are denied the right to vote," I said.
> "Who are the people denied the right to vote?" she asked.
> "The people in Falluja, for example," I replied. (71)

After the article is published, Nameer explains that there was only one positive comment, while the rest accused him of being ungrateful. One veteran wrote: "It may be a sign of the moral degeneracy in our country that Mr. al-Baghdadi is allowed to teach in our universities, to systematically brainwash young people, and to receive a salary nonetheless" (71). One is reminded of Spivak's famous question: "Can the subaltern speak?" And even if the subaltern does speak, will they be heard without consequence? As we see in this section, Nameer's delegitimization of the election and his reference to the impossibility of democratic practice under military occupation angers American audiences, who then proceed to delegitimize his very presence in American universities. This passage also indicates the role of media in invisibilizing the subaltern. Nameer's concern for his society not only jeopardizes his private relationship with his American partner but also exposes him to public anger through media narratives. A point to remember is that Nameer's views are not only dismissed

> by Americans but also by an Iraqi student who has won a Fulbright scholarship to study at Dartmouth—through a recommendation letter written by the officer in charge of the U.S. Army, for whom he had worked as a translator. Nameer tells us about a professor of political science who had invited him to a session on American foreign policy and the war in Iraq. During the meeting, Nameer states that he believes the occupation must end immediately and that the United Nations should take over. But then, the student with Fulbright scholarship responds:
>
> He had come from Iraq two months earlier and he was surprised by what I had said, but he understood it because I had been far away from Iraq. He said that Iraqis had been dreaming of freedom for thirty years, that America had helped them obtain it, and that he appreciated the sacrifices of the American troops and thanked the American people. The students applauded him warmly. He looked at me and smiled, elated by his triumph. (74)

According to many postcolonial theorists such as Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak, Western universities are not only spaces for acquiring knowledge, but institutions that reproduce the discourses of power. Seemingly, the classroom is a space for free discussion, but Rahim's narrative is applauded because his version of Iraq aligns fully with the hegemon. In this setting, scholarship becomes a neo-colonial tool, highly desired by people from the Global South. Faithful minorities are rewarded with scholarships, and in return, may become spokespersons of dominant discourse. The subaltern can indeed speak here—but only in the language of the colonizer. Western universities seem to function in alignment with hegemonic policies and rarely position themselves in confrontation with them.

Another instance showing how the university setting reinforces American policies is manifested in Nameer's Arabic class. A white student insists on learning certain imperative phrases early. When Nameer inquires about the reason behind this persistence, the American student shocks him with his response:

> "There are some imperatives I want to learn how to say in Arabic."
>
> "For example?"

> "Kneel down. Stop. Put your hands up. Move back."
> I was amazed at his request, and Cindy raised her eyebrows.
> "Why do you need them?" I asked.
> "After I graduate this spring, I'm going to join the army and go to Iraq or Afghanistan, and these phrases will be essential. I have a scholarship from the DOD."
> I didn't know what to say.
> "We're not in the Pentagon here," I finally said. "The book we use is for civilians and to introduce students to Arab culture."
> "Okay, sir. Could you write those phrases for me on a piece of paper?"
> "No."
> "Okay, thanks." (75–76)

At this stage, the dysfunctionality of language in a colonial context is revealed. While the premise of language learning is to foster communication and cross-cultural understanding, in the colonial contact zone, language is often repurposed as a tool for domination and humiliation. The confrontation is so bitter that Nameer decides to find another job where he can teach literature instead of Arabic, as he realizes that his students are not seeking familiarity with the Arab culture but rather practical tools for military control over the people of Iraq and Afghanistan. Another irony lies in the fact that people in Afghanistan do not speak Arabic, but in the mind of the American student, this distinction is irrelevant. The Middle East is homogenized and reduced to a region where a handful of military commands are assumed to suffice. This encapsulates the broader neo-colonial impulse to flatten cultural complexity in favour of control, simplification, and obedience.

5.The American Soldier's Existential Crisis in *The Yellow Birds*

In *The Yellow Birds* by Kevin Powers, we witness a young soldier recounting the agony of the U.S.-Iraq war. However, he never goes beyond an individual existential crisis, nor does he achieve any critical insight into the geopolitical, neo-colonial, or imperial motives that propel the war. What is the use of such an individualizing of war experience when war is undeniably a collective act of devastation? At times, the

young narrator reflects on his and his comrades' existential crises as if such a sense of futility were a privilege uniquely reserved for white American soldiers and sergeants. As far as Iraqis are concerned, time passes routinely. The muezzin's voice is often heard regularly, followed by people gathering to bury the dead, after which nothing further is said about them. This ritualistic repetition of the muezzin's call sweeps Iraqis, within the narrative, back into a premodern temporality, one that cannot comprehend or access the existential agony that the displaced American soldiers are portrayed as enduring.

The emphasis on existential futility without reference to the political or material conditions that occasioned the war results in a decontextualization of war—an erasure that is, of course, beneficial to those who initiated the conflict in the first place without being politically or morally interrogated. At the beginning of the novel, two quotations reflect the book's overall approach:

> The yellow bird
> With a yellow bill
> Was perched upon
> My windowsill
> I lured him in
> With a piece of bread
> And then I smashed
> His fucking head…
> —Traditional U.S. Army Marching Cadence

> To be ignorant of evils to come, and forgetful of evils past, is a merciful provision in nature, whereby we digest the mixture of our few and evil days, and our delivered senses not relapsing into cutting remembrances, our sorrows are not kept raw by the edge of repetitions.
> —Sir Thomas Browne

The first quote (used in the physical training of American soldiers) demonstrates an intense normalization of cold violence. The bird, which may symbolize innocence

is lured and then brutally killed. This cadence reflects the formation of a military mentality that not only accepts bloody violence as normal but infantilizes or neutralizes it by setting it to the rhythm of a nursery rhyme. If the bird symbolizes the soldier himself, he is transformed into a killing machine, devoid of questioning or hesitation. The second quote by Sir Thomas Browne speaks of oblivion as a form of mercy. But in this context, the invocation of oblivion becomes a device that propagates suffering and prevents witnessing, critical engagement, or resistance. In both quotes, violence is acknowledged but never confronted; it is either aestheticized, normalized, or forgotten. From the outset, the novel initiates the reader into a world where violence is mundane, melodic, and erasable. Perhaps this is how U.S. hegemony continues to operate: through individuals who never resist it.

A key moment that highlights the novel's misplaced focus appears when a sergeant delivers a motivational speech to the soldiers. He connects the situation in Iraq to a biblical episode in which Jonah begged God for justice, framing the U.S. military presence as a continuation of biblical justice. This reference to a sacred past dehistoricizes the present and frames the occupation as prophecy fulfilled. The symbolic anchoring of the American mission in biblical terms not only decontextualizes current violence but justifies the massacre of civilians by cloaking it in religious righteousness. The irony, however, lies in the narrator's reaction: while he feels ethical discomfort, it is directed not toward the Iraqi civilians whose land has been invaded, but toward the sergeant's indifference to the individual pain of American soldiers:

> The sergeant with the flashlight paced beside him. "I know I don't have to tell you what kind of enemy you'll be up against." His voice became a blunt staccato as he gained confidence in his capacity to motivate us, a bludgeon that smoothed the weary creases in my brain. "This is the land where Jonah is buried, where he begged for God's justice to come." He continued, "We are that justice. Now, I wish I could tell you that all of us are coming back, but I can't. Some of you will not come back with us." I was moved then, but what I now recall most vividly about that speech was the colonel's pride, his satisfaction with his own directness, his disregard for us as individuals. "If you

> die, know this: we'll put you on the first bird to Dover. Your families will have a distinction beyond all others. If these bastards want a fight, we're going to give them one". (2012:59)

At the beginning of the speech, the sergeant emphasizes the monstrosity of the enemy (implicitly the Iraqi people), and gains rhetorical power by framing the American campaign as the fulfilment of divine justice. However, the mythological scaffolding of the American mission ultimately fails to include or safeguard the lives of its own soldiers. Yet, the only injustice the narrator notices is this: that not all soldiers will come home alive.

Comradeship on the battlefield also fails to provide any ethical framework of care. The only "care" permitted is one that desensitizes both self and others—a coping mechanism rooted in denial, not solidarity:

> A few hours later we linked up with the rest of the company. The reserve platoon secured a perimeter. We were supposed to sleep. The day was not over for us. Murph and I found a hole and tried to nod off but couldn't.
> "You know what, Bart?" Murph said
> "What?"
> "I cut in front of that kid in line at the DFAC."
> I looked around. "What kid?"
> "The dead kid."
> "Oh," I said. "It's cool, man. Don't sweat it."
> "I feel like a dick."
> "It's all right."
> "I feel fucking crazy right now." He had his head in his hands. He kept rubbing his eyes with the base of his palms. "I was really happy it wasn't me. That's crazy, right?"
> "Naw. You know what's crazy? Not thinking that shit."

This moment reveals how psychological trauma is normalized through peer reassurance. Bartle offers no comfort beyond emotional numbing. The soldiers are

caught in a loop of mutual desensitization, where any glimmer of ethical or emotional awareness is dismissed as madness. The narrator, Bartle, has been asked by Murph's mother to take care of him. But Bartle's reaction is strongly reminiscent of the quote at the beginning of the novel by Sir Thomas Browne, who celebrated oblivion as one of the blessings of human beings. Here, Bartle is, at best, desensitizing Murph's perception and, at worst, dismissive of it: "It's cool, man. Don't sweat it." The trauma haunts the narrator each time he remembers the fact that he failed to care for Murph, who was later mutilated ruthlessly by "the enemy." The tension between the traumatizing reality of war and the poeticizing of oblivion as a divine blessing at the beginning of the novel creates an irreconcilable irony within the traumatized psyches of the characters who find nothing poetic in their own denial which translates into oblivion.

A recurring motif in the book is the frequency with which mutilated bodies are described in cold, detached language. These bodies are described in the passive voice, and the agent of violence remains anonymous. Even at moments when the presence of Americans in Iraq could be politicized, the soldier-narrator insists on the anonymity of the "ruthless terrorists" who terrorize the people of Iraq; but to him, the terrorist and the terrorized are equally dismissible. Violence, therefore, is represented not as the result of human choice or ideological structure, but as an inevitable, ambient phenomenon:

> We regrouped. A head count revealed no casualties except for a few broken eardrums from the blast. We returned to the spot where we had been previously and waited for the QRF. There was a wet spot where the body had been and its remnants were scattered in pieces, some small and some large, others appearing infinite like the pieces we found near our feet: a piece of skin and muscle, entrails. Others were larger, an arm and bits of legs closer to where he'd been. No one said a word but in the silence we re-created the last few moments of his life in our minds. We saw him struggling and begging and asking Allah to free him, then realizing he would not be saved as they cut his throat and his neck bled and he choked and died. (82)

Bartle describes the exploding body of the Muslim man with a chillingly cold tone.

He even imagines that the man begs Allah to free him, only to realize that he is already doomed. There is an ironic futility in how the American soldier stages the death of the man, whose body was turned into a container of bombs by other Muslims who cut his throat. The incongruity of prayer in the midst of mechanical violence is highlighted by the narrator. However, the references to religious faith is telling: when the biblical past is evoked to motivate American soldiers against their Iraqi enemies, the narrator is moved. But when the Muslim man's faith is mentioned, it is framed as useless, ineffective, and absurd. This double standard points to a radical silence in the novel around the structural violence of war, the neo-colonial logic of U.S. hegemony, and the ideological machinery that fuels such blind devastation.

When Murph's mutilated body is discovered, Sterling and Bartle choose to dispose of it in the river rather than report his death:

> "Like it never happened, Bartle. That's the only way," Sterling said.
> "Yeah, I know." I looked at the ground. The dust blowing in fine swirls around my boots. I knew what was coming.
> Sterling shot the cartwright once, in the face, and he crumpled to the ground. No time to even be surprised by it. The mule began to pull the cart, unbidden, as if by habit. The two dogs followed it into the coming night. We looked back toward the river. Murph was gone. (131)

Here, Sterling's voice becomes the voice of ideology: forget in order to survive. The words are plain, the sentences short and drained of emotion or grief. This is organized oblivion, one of the key mechanisms of colonial domination, delete memory, and you erase the possibility of resistance. The soldier is not only asked to commit violence but is also required to forget it. Immediately after this, Sterling kills the cartwright, an Iraqi civilian, without the least accountability. The man is murdered simply because he has witnessed what Bartle and Sterling have done to Murph's body. At no point do Bartle, or perhaps the American readers of the novel, ask: Who was the cartwright? Why was he killed? What structure of power made this murder so easy, so routine? Instead, the narrator returns to a poetic description of the dust swirling in the landscape. Murph's body is gone, as if erased.

There is a disconcerting dissonance between the horrifying murder and the poetic description of the dust that rises in "fine swirls." The incompatibility between the cinematic landscape and the terrible murder (of which the writer has foreknowledge) might be a psychological strategy to avoid confronting the traumatizing aspects of the events, as well as a way to put into words the otherwise unutterable act of cold-blooded murder. This might also be understood as a hegemonic adherence to the righteous mission of the U.S. in Iraq. The violence is aesthetized and hence depoliticized, and accountability for what was brought about in Iraq is brushed aside.It is at this intersection of memory, narration, and power that a broader comparative reflection becomes necessary, one that situates these literary choices within a postcolonial framework.

6.Conclusion

War literature is the descendant of epic literature (Brosman 1992:86), but modern war fiction differs in that it dismisses the Horatian motto "*dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*." Most modern war fiction demystifies war, focusing instead on what it feels like to live through armed conflict and therefore the unheroic side of war is often exposed. Kevin Powers's *The Yellow Birds*, when placed within the body of American war literature, reveals the undercurrents of doubt and psychological breakdown during wartime. Yet American war literature itself is a genre whose definition must be expanded. If we include the voices of Iraqi Americans and their experiences of wars initiated or fought by the United States, we gain a more comprehensive image of the genre. The perspective of an Iraqi-American writer living in the U.S. but attempting to catalogue the devastation of war in Iraq offers a unique vantage point through which to view conflict. The war is experienced very differently by American soldiers—whose policymakers initiated it, and by Iraqi-Americans, who, while residing in the U.S., witness their homeland bombed by the U.S. This paper, through a contrapuntal reading, demonstrates how multiple voices, both those sustaining hegemony and those complicating it, must be heard.

The Book of Collateral Damage, written by an Iraqi-American novelist, presents a protagonist named Nameer, who is a scholar and a PhD candidate in an American university. In his everyday life as a scholar, he reveals his political awareness and

persistently tries to recollect, remember, and catalogue the past, criticizing the anti-war gestures in American academia that mourn American soldiers but rarely acknowledge Iraqi lives lost in an unjust war. Cataloguing and recollecting become a survival strategy to keep the past and present of war-stricken Iraq together. The book moves beyond individual trauma to collective suffering and highlights the significance of keeping collective memory alive to confront the horrifying devastation of war. On the other side, John Bartle, the young protagonist of Powers' novel *The Yellow Birds*, is plagued with the memory of war, of his lost friend Murphy, and of the atrocities he witnessed in the battlefield. But his crisis remains existential and detached from the political causes that sent him to Iraq. The bereavement and mourning in this novel are preserved for the American soldiers who are considered the only victims of war.

Comparative literature is vital here because it can reveal how the idea of pain and suffering—which sounds universal, can be used in favour of ideologies or in resistance to them. The positionality of the two narrators in these novels determines their varied stances on war: Nameer is always aware of the unequal power relations and the colonial mentality in American foreign policy as well as in everyday academic life. But the young soldier in *The Yellow Birds* speaks about the sufferings of war as if the resistant forces in Iraq were the sole aggressors. Although Powers's novel was acclaimed and awarded, its comparison with Antoon's work exposes its complicity in U.S. hegemony, while Antoon's novel resists the invisibility imposed by war. The genre of war literature, therefore, becomes a contested site where different voices struggle to narrate history.

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This article has been extracted from the PhD dissertation of the international student, Zeinab Ebrahim Alwan Alkaabi. The article has not been submitted to any other journal for review.

AI Use Declaration:

The free version of Chat GPT has been used for grammatical improvement throughout the paper.

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