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Iraq Wars: From A literary text to Social Context

A B S T R A C T

This article investigates Iraq wars presentation in literature and media. The first section investigates the case of the returnees from the war and their experience, their trauma and final presentation of that experience. The article also investigates how trauma and fear is depicted to create an optimized image and state of fear that could in turn show Iraqi society as a traumatized society. Critics such as Suzie Grogan believes that the concept of trauma could expand to influence societies rather than one individual after exposure to trauma of being involved in wars and different major conflicts. This is reflected in Iraq as a country that was subjected to six comprehensive conflicts in its recent history, i.e. less than half a century; these are the Iraq-Iran war, the first Gulf war, the economic sanctions, the second Gulf war 2003, the civil war, and the wars of liberation against ISIS.

The second section investigates Franco Moretti's theory of the Dialectic of Fear and the implication of this hypothesis of stereotyping on the Iraq war and its transformation from an anomaly expressed issue in the media and creative texts to a social reality that is measured by presenting what is not acceptable as an acceptable pattern in the case of war and shock between Iraq and the wars that took place in the west, and the extent of its impact on the protraction of the state of social trauma suffered by Iraqis, who are still suffering under the effects of prolonged political conflicts even after the end of military field conflicts.

The research sheds the light on studies such as the Dialectic of Fear by Franco Moretti, Risk Society by Ulrich Beck and Oh My God: Diaries of American Soldiers in Mesopotamia edited and translated by Buthaina Al-Nasiri.

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Introduction

Fear passes from man to man
Unknowing,
As one leaf passes its shudder
To another.
All at once the whole tree is trembling,
And there is no sign of the wind.
(Charles Simic, 2013)

Fear is defined according to contemporary dictionaries as 'an unpleasant emotion caused by the threat of danger, pain or harm.' And the verb is 'to be afraid of (someone or something) as likely to be dangerous, painful, or harmful.' It is according to Mariam Webster 'a natural, powerful, and primitive human emotion. It involves a universal biochemical response as well as a high individual emotional response. Fear alerts us to the presence of danger or the threat of harm, whether that danger is physical or psychological.' This unpleasant emotion intensify states of anxious concern, whereas Terror is 'a violence or the threat of violence used as a weapon of intimidation or coercion.' It represents 'violent or destructive acts (such as bombing) committed by groups in order to intimidate a population or government into granting their demands.' Ulrich Beck in his book *The Risk Society: Towards a New modernity* points out that global dangers such as wars are represented as "collective, catastrophic and chaotic" a matter which makes them beyond the possibilities of individual reaction. In the state of war these dangers could be sometimes beyond the soldiers ability to respond and articulate themselves in a state of trauma mainly because as Beck express it 'to put this brutally, there is nothing one can do when a catastrophe is coming (Beck, 2006).

In a book review of Beck's theory the writer believes that Beck is suggesting "a shift of this magnitude is feasible in accordance with the increasing materiality and empowerment of productive forces." According to this review and Beck's understanding these threat are created and are made as 'products of economic development.' This fact reflects its influence not only on the individual but on the society collectively "The implication of this is that sooner or later the magnitude of these threats outstrips a society's ability to respond, resulting in the system's collapse." This is unlike any other society such as the bourgeois society "which maintained the line between poverty and richness, modern societies face a new configuration of social order. The fact is that this transformation has given birth to a new kind of society known as "The Society of Risk" where fears and risk are indiscriminately distributed to all strata of the structure." (Beck, 2006).

Risks are therefore conceived as well-known, and experienced individually or internally. Nowadays, however, threats are external to the jurisdiction of people. According to journalists and authorities in the field of biology, risks not only appear to have everywhere multiplied in recent years but also seem to have eroded the cognitive sovereignty of citizens. In order to alleviate the burden caused by the perception of dangers, the market puts forward multiple solutions in the form of new products for security purposes (Beck, 2006)

What Beck expresses here could be traces in several testimonies published by returnees from the Iraqi conflicts. These testimonies show traces of 'horrible' 'unforgettable' experiences that required hospitalization and long –term treatment to heal the state of PTSD those returnees suffers from. Some of these were definitely beyond an individual response and represented communities and small groups and gathering of veterans who wanted to express these atrocities and try to make their voices heard first by their own country and by the world. Buthaina al Nasiri in her book *Oh My God: Dairies of the American*

Soldiers in Mesopotamia: Confessions, Poems, Letters and Blogs presents a collection of several dairies, poems, letters and blog written by American veteran from Iraqi conflict in different periods of times and places in 2003. Al Nasiri argues in her introduction, quoting Robert Fisk, that the collective fear those returnees expresses has its origin in the doctrine of presenting the American Soldier's oath which is has changed during the rule of President George W. Bush evidently to show more fierce and violent image of the American soldiers other than the previous one which show them as protectors of the nation who are shown now in a ore savage, violent image. They are not soldiers or protectors anymore but 'warriors', they will not 'use all means at my disposal, even off duty, to discourage comrades in the army from doing disgraceful things to them and to the uniform.' But will 'always put the task above everyone else and will never accept defeat.' (Robert Fisk, 2006)

Paul Fussell in his book *The Great War and Modern Memory* in 1975 suggests that:

Every war is ironic because every war is worse than expected. Every war constitutes an irony of situation because its means are so melodramatically disproportionate to its presumed ends. In the Great War eight million people were destroyed because two persons, the Archduke Francis Ferdinand and his Consort, had been shot. The Second World War offers even more preposterous ironies. Ostensibly begun to guarantee the sovereignty of Poland, that war managed to bring about Poland's bondage and humiliation. Air bombardment, was supposed to shorten the war, prolonged it by inviting those who were its targets to cast themselves in the role of victim-heroes and thus stiffen their resolve (Fussel, 1975, pp. 7-8)

Wars could not follow an expected pattern and is worse than expected as Fussell points out. They could never be designed to end in a specific period of time. WWI was expected to end in Christmas 1914 but lasted for four years. The Iraq-Iran War was no different, it was expected to end in two years but lasted for eight years. The 2003 invasion was expected to end by time of the fall of Saddam Hussein. This one, however, lasted and turned to be worse than ever, worst of all it led to other deadly conflicts:

Most of the soldier thought their service will end with the fall of Saddam Hussein but they found themselves managing traffic in Baghdad. After four years they are still practicing politics and perform social work they never expected Adding to this being bombed, shot at, which make it difficult to perform your service with a smile (Hoffman, 2004, p. 59).

The prolonged conflict in Iraq resulted in many drastic cases of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a study published by the National Library of Medicine states that "There was large variability in PTSD prevalence between studies, but, regardless of heterogeneity, prevalence rates of PTSD were higher among studies of Iraq-deployed personnel (12.9%; 95% CI 11.3% to 14.4%), compared with personnel deployed to Afghanistan (7.1%; 95% CI 4.6% to 9.6%),". And other conflict in the Middle East. (Hines et al., 2014, pp. 468-479)

Mike Hoffman, a veteran in Iraq and the founder of Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW), an organization through which him and other veterans are trying to "get our message out however we can." In an interview with the Mother Jones webpage in October 11, 2004 untitled "Breaking Ranks: An interview with Mike Hoffman", Hoffman asks: "Was the war on Iraq unavoidable?", was it "necessary"?. For Hoffman "there are avoidable and unavoidable wars", and "the idea that Saddam had ties to alQaeda was a laughable to anyone who had really taken any time to understand the Middle East." War, for him, is "something no one should go through especially not for a lie". Hoffman added that their aim was to "just get to Baghdad- and then we'd go home." Other evidences show how the prolonged conditions for the soldiers and the people started to cause serious problems. The inquiry commissioned in 2009 by British

Prime Minister Gordon Brown confirmed to Sir John Chilcot "the intervention in Iraq was "unnecessary," the legal bases for military action were "far from being satisfactory," and the main justification for the attack (the possession of weapons of mass destruction) was based on false claims and data." (Kamel, 2022). Other returnees from Iraq expressed their suffering from "bad" hospital condition with most of the benefits being cut and looking "worse and worse by the day." Such information is not usually something accepted to be declared or complain about publicly with no consequences. Mike Hoffman gives example from Hollywood "Abdul Henderson, who was in the film "Fahrenheit 9/11" [made a statement] – the military was considering pressing charges against him for that." (Hoffman, 2004).

Others veterans used the literary platform to express their emotions and release their confusion. In a collection of poems entitled Modern War Poetry: Poems from Iraq and Afghanistan Peter Hall articulated his experience in Iraq by questioning their existence there in the first place, the question of why the war was launched is visibly present in his poems "The American Contractor":

Why would you come here?

If you didn't have to.

Money? Faith? Lost?

(Hall, 2014)

In "Water" another poem Hall expresses how he sees the results the war left behind:

On brown, dusty faces, spat out on the floor.

Half empty promises, brought with our war.

(Hall 2014)

Brian Turner another veteran and a returnee from Iraq published his poetry collection Here, Bullet in 2005 about his experience as a soldier in Iraq after 2003. Expressed the same confusion about the results by symbolising war by a 'Bullet' asking it to take what it needs to end:

If a body is what you want,
then here is bone and gristle and flesh.

Here is the clavicle-snapped wish,
the aorta's opened valves, the leap
thought makes at synaptic gap.

.....

Here is where I complete the word you bring
Hissing through the air, here is where I moan

.....

.....because here, Bullet,
Here is where the world ends, every time.

(Turner, 2005, p. 23)

Al Nasiri argues that the signs of bad condition is very evident and this is supported by returnees' blogs: "Signs of infatuation and self-absorption are unmistakable, including harsh comments, revelations on the Internet, and the results of surveys conducted on soldiers' morale and suicide rates. Sometimes you find the signs in the latrines in camps like Camp Liberty, where some of them registered a list of help to identify nine signs of suicide, and on one list were marked seven answers." A soldier in Diyala province, north of Baghdad, wrote on his blog on August 7: "This occupation, this money pit, this unjustified aggression, descends to the bottom of despair every second." (ALNasiri, 2008. P. 55).

Those soldiers were shocked by the fact that their celebrated duty in Iraq is turned into street fight and the casualties were bigger than expected. Al Nasiri added "Most of them thought that his duty ended when

Saddam Hussein was declared, but after that they found themselves organizing traffic in the streets of Baghdad. Four years later, they are still engaged in politics and doing social work they did not expect." (AlNasiri, 2008, p.59).

This meant more case of PTSD and made the suicide rate among returnees at its highest level in 23 years "It is 17.3 per 100 thousand soldiers, compared to 12.4 per 100 thousand in 2003, and of 99 cases that occurred last year, of them occurred in Iraq." (AlNasiri, 2008, p.59).

And the last mental health survey conducted on soldiers in Iraq and the results of which were published in May, says: 45% of the 1,320 soldiers who were asked consider that the morale of the soldiers is low, and only 7% think that morale is very high.... Mental health indicators have worsened in the past two years, says Cindy William, an individual expert at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Repeated, short-range deployments are causing severe mental stress (AlNasiri, 2008, p. 56).

An American officer announced in his blog in September 22, 2004 that there are five reasons why America could not announce victory in this war, referring to the 2003 invasion: The Lorentz September 22, 2004

First: We refuse to deal with reality. We are waging a guerrilla war, but because of politics we are not allowed to declare 'to you', but we must call the forces of the popular war against us (terrorists, criminals and suicide bombers). Second: Our assessment of what motivates the average Iraqi depends once again on (experts) who are politically motivated and who took the assessment. And so we came here bearing the fictitious notion that all the inhabitants were illiterate, dwelling in camel-riding houses, and would line the palm-lined streets and throw flowers at us, eternally grateful to us. Third: The resistance fighters compensate for their losses faster than we publicize their creation. Fourth: Their supply and supply lines are much shorter than ours and less vulnerable to targeting. Fifth: We constantly underestimate the enemy and its capabilities. While our preparations were not for this war, it is the war of betrayal. And because the current US administration is more concerned with its image than with the truth, it prefers symbols over reality: Soldiers die, are disabled and crippled for life (AlNasiri, 2008, pp.61-64).

Those soldiers were not traumatized by the experience they faced but also by the experience they witnessed the Iraqis were facing. "I really have no idea what my mission was!" commented Private Randall Clonin: "Yes, the Iraqis were terrified. Imagine that 9 heavily armed American soldiers enter your house, screaming as they put their weapons in your face. Yes, they were sick. We would raid them when they slept, break into the house and wake them, and they didn't have time to get dressed." (AlNasiri, 2008, p. 210).

Those soldiers were not able to function properly in their lives and suffered sleepless days which they survived as much as they survived the war days and the combatant duties they had to finish, but not without a physical, mental or psychological damage. "I do not sleep!" said Lt. Jordan Johnson "I suffered a lot even from being here. They told me last month that I have a symptom of a chronic mental disorder, and that is why I meet weekly with a psychiatrist. I don't need a medal or a reward that says who I am because I know who I am. I am not a suit, but a survivor" (AlNasiri, 2008, p. 214).

Most of the sample returnees whose witness were recording by Al Nasiri or other online webpages were questioning their present in Iraq and the prolonged experience enhanced the feeling that it is not fair for them to suffer that much with no hope of knowing why and for what purpose " We deserve to know why we went there!" commented Private Robert Acosta.

Those soldiers survived the war but found themselves unable to communicate their suffering afterwards because people in their country expected certain patriotic reaction from them which added to their

suffering. In California a returnee explains that he was unable to respond to other people's concern because he believe they don't understand what he is going through physically and mentally especially with their physical injuries this is because the media draws specific unrealistic image about them: "no one knows the truth about what the soldiers are going through. They see on TV that two soldiers were injured today, and they think: Well, they will be fine. But what they don't know is that this soldier has been handicapped for life, both physically and mentally. But they do not understand. They see a wounded soldier and after a while they change the channel and forget." (AlNasiri, 2008, p. 218). He added: They don't know what's really going on. They ask their stupid questions like: Was the war strong? Did you kill anyone? They want me to glorify the war and say it was great and that I did this and did that. They are ignorant, I mean you watch action movies and they glorify everything that happens in them as if war is something you want to be in. When I was a kid I used to watch TV shows and I thought how cool it would be to be involved in a war. But the truth is something else. Everything I saw hits my head and I can't sleep. But they do not understand (AlNasiri, 2008, p. 218).

The question of a fair war and a justification still lingers from these statements and most of the soldiers end their blogs and interviews asking why they had to go to Iraq a matter which clarify the amount of suffering they brought back home with them from their experience in Iraq, "I mean, like all the justifications for the war we've been in...seems illegitimate enough that people would lose their lives for it. Because of me, I lose my arm and the ability to use my legs, and my teammates lose their limbs. I was talking with a colleague of mine a few days ago and we want to know, I feel that we deserve to know why we went to Iraq." (AlNasiri, 2008, p. 219).

Stereotyping Iraq Wars:

"Those who tell the stories also rule"

(Plato quoted in Gardels & Medavoy, 2009)

Media is the soft power the US used to support its operations in Iraq during and after the war, "power is the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants, and soft power is the ability to do so through attraction rather than coercion or payments." (Gardels & Medavoy, 2009). The confessions discussed above put to the forefront the case of media and in what way people expect certain reaction and stories from the returnees because of the unrealistic image drawn on media about the war not only for the soldiers but also for the Iraqis who are now suffering from another concept that revealed itself after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This research investigates this stereotyping (or normalizing) of the war on Iraq. In the Ukrainian conflict against Russia, something else other than analysing the war or condemning it appeared to be the reaction the reporters proposed in their news coverage which depicted the European conflict as something that should be condemned as other than the one related to the conflicts that took place overseas or in countries like Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, and specially Iraq.

This is ironic as Fussel quoted above because Ukraine itself was part of the conflict that took place in Iraq despite the lack of justification for this war. According to official data provided by the US Armed Forces, "more than 5,000 Ukrainian troops ... served in Iraq during Ukraine's five years of service in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom." (Kamel, 2022), their mission which was ended at the end of 2008 was the third largest of the coalition (Kamel, 2022). The support the Ukrainian received is justified to back the suffering of innocent civilians in a time of war a matter that Kamel believes is partly understandable and "indeed necessary to show unequivocal support and solidarity with an attacked and brutalized people (the Ukrainians), that is, precisely what did not happen in Iraq." (Kamel, 2022).

This is because Al Nasiri argues the media has created and normalized the war on Iraq as another act of heroism the US is taking not only to keep its people safe but to liberate Iraqi people and present the best image of the American soldier that could show them as "messengers of goodness and love among

mankind. Just as the name Coca-Cola is confused with freshness, and Volvo cars are safe, they are looking for ways to make the image of the American soldier tremble with protection and tenderness....The best example is the Destroyer in Schwarzenegger's films, who was so admired by the American people that he elected governor to represent them in California, the land of Hollywood and fantasy. (AlNasiri, 2008, p.5).

This is, Al Nasiri argues could be directly related to the new American military doctrine that was modified during the rule of President G. W. Bush from the doctrine that bestows the image of civilization and humanity on the American soldier, to the image of the fierce and savage fighter 'warrior' represented by this new oath that the American military performs before being plunged into other wars around the world (AlNasiri, 2008, p.6.). AlNasiri believes that the confessions, letters, interviews, poems, dairies, thoughts and memories collected in her book break the myth of the superhero presented in the media and show the true experience those soldiers suffered from in Iraq(AlNasiri, 2008, p. 7). Those pieces of writings show that confusion is common among those soldiers. This is particularly clear in their understanding of the difference between the war in the media and the real conflict they are facing a matter which is also evident in their dairies. One soldier declares in August 29, 2006 that "We are fighting a war other than what Mr. Bush is talking about". Other soldiers refer "that two wars are being waged here: the war that the soldiers themselves see, and the other that the great leaders and politicians would like the world to see." (AlNasiri, 2008, p. 54). This confusion and terror could be transferred from one individual to another and move in waves to a collective level. Conflict occurs with what is the premises, customs and traditions. The shocking atmosphere carried by the confused terrorized individual moves to different levels in the society surrounding him. The crisis turns from individual to collective later. The conflict intensifies when these individuals confront the society with its values, traditions and customs. Franco Moretti in his article the Dialectic of Fear theoretically proposes that fear could be created and can be the result of a divided, and confused society and in the process of healing:

The literature of terror is born precisely out of the terror of a split society and out of the desire to heal it. It is for just this reason that Dracula and Frankenstein, with rare exceptions, do not appear together. The threat would be too great, and this literature, having produced terror, must also erase it and restore peace. It must restore the broken equilibrium -- giving the illusion of being able to stop history -- because the monster expresses the anxiety that the future will be monstrous. His antagonist -- the enemy of the monster -- will always be, by contrast, a representative of the present, a distillation of complacent nineteenth-century mediocrity: nationalistic, stupid, superstitious, philistine, impotent, self-satisfied. But this does not show through. Fascinated by the horror of the monster, the public accepts the vices of its destroyer without a murmur, just as it accepts his literary depiction, the jaded and repetitive typology which regains its strength and its virginity on contact with the unknown. The monster, then, serves to displace the antagonisms and horrors evidenced within society to outside society itself (Morretti, 1982).

The examples used in Moretti's article are the two terror creations of Frankenstein and Dracula. His proposal could be applied to the image the American politics wanted to depict on media. The fear created in the new military oath that is designed to make the American soldiers feel like the representative of power, control and world order. For this to be interpreted in literature "In Frankenstein the struggle will be between a 'race of devils' and the 'species of man'. Whoever dares to fight the monster automatically becomes the representative of the species, of the whole of society. The monster, the utterly unknown, serves to reconstruct a universality, a social cohesion which in itself would no longer carry conviction." (Morretti 1982). The nameless monster created in literature belongs to its creator not necessarily able to comprehend their aims "Like the proletariat, the monster is denied a name and an individuality. He is the Frankenstein monster; he belongs wholly to his creator Like the proletariat, he is a collective and artificial creature. He is not found in nature, but built." (Morretti, 1982).

The vampire on the other hands reflect the horizontal transformation of fear throughout the society and the created terror in which the vampire "destroys the hope that one's independence can one day be bought back. He threatens the idea of individual liberty." This terror is described as a nineteenth-century bourgeois imagination that "is able to imagine monopoly only in the guise of Count Dracula, the aristocrat, the figure of the past, the relic of distant lands and dark ages." (Morretti, 1982). This forms a direct example of how a government could create or produce fear whether through media of literature to monopolize the right of coercion and guarantee a collective comprehension of this fear. This could be done by a whole race to another not only countries to others Rigby in the Journal of Disaster Risk Studies on a comment about The Risk society notion pointed out that throughout history European interventions in Africa and the creation notions such as "slavery, and not African cultural habits, that lie behind the current state of the continent" Rigby emphasizes that what he calls 'Social inventions' such as "race, modernity or development have allowed European societies to avoid taking responsibility for the consequences of their colonial activities in Africa and beyond (Beck, 2009).

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