

Cultural Violence in Saki's "The Toys of Peace" and Ahmed Al-Malik's "The Tank"

Maha Qahtan Sulaiman*

University of Baghdad / College of Education for Women

Article Info	Abstract
<p>Date of Article</p> <p>Received : 2023/9/17</p> <p>Received in revised form: 2023/10/11</p> <p>Accepted: 2023/10/16</p> <p>Available online: 2023/12/30</p> <p>Keywords:</p> <p>Culture, History, Politics, Primitivism, Violence</p>	<p>Violence cannot be separated from human culture, civilization, and ideology. Ironically, it is society that creates the borders of legal and illegal violence. Therefore, violence is culturally relevant. This paper examines the culture of violence in Saki's "The Toys of Peace" and Ahmed Al-Malik's "The Tank". The two short stories are set in entirely different backgrounds and address violence in relation to children's and adult's lives, respectively. The study aims to examine violence in relation to culture and man's primitive instincts. It also addresses controlling violence through education, promoting peace, and encouraging refined codes of conduct. The paper juxtaposes violence to social conflict and culture of politics. It examines the distance between the savage and civilized man and the source of all human violence.</p>

© All rights reserved to Muthanna University 2023

Introduction

There are many denotations of violence, yet this study is concerned with violence in relation to history and politics, and consequently forming the culture of the community. In this regard, violence is defined as "an act of physical force that causes or is intended to cause harm. The damage inflicted by violence may be physical, psychological, or both. Violence may be distinguished from aggression, a more general type of hostile behaviour that may be physical, verbal, or passive in nature" (Jacquin, 2023). W. Schinkel (2010) also writes that, it is relevant to consider a continental equivalent of the English word 'violence'.

Since the French 'violence' can obviously be assumed to be of similar stem, the German 'Gewalt' (also in Dutch: 'geweld') will be better suited as a comparison. The *Duden* dictionary reads on *Gewalt*: 'Power, authority, right and means to exercise control over somebody or someone'. (p. 18)

Thus, violence in this article is addressed in the sense of physical and psychological harm and absolute threatening power. It is addressed in the context of culture and society. J. Galtung (1990) mentions that by cultural violence "we mean those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence – exemplified by religion and ideology, language and art,

E-mail : mehaqahtan@yahoo.com : الناشر الرئيسي*

empirical science and formal science (logic, mathematics) – that can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence” (p. 292). Violence characterizes man's beginning on this earth when Cain killed his brother Abel. Henceforth, violence is associated with religion, politics, and the establishment of nations.

Saki, the pseudonym of H. H. Munro, demonstrates in his short story “The Toys of Peace” that human beings have mentally inherited their tendency for violence, i.e.; they are innately violent. The toys of peace in the story are meant to be opposite to ‘war toys’. The latter are defined as “toys with which one can fight” (Jukes, 1991, p. 8). Boys have always been drawn to violent plays or war toys. K. E. Goff (1995) writes that “prior to the Industrial Revolution, children of the nobility were given war toys to help them prepare for their future roles in adulthood. Since that time, mass-produced war toys have been made available to children of all social classes” (p. 10). Yet Saki's short story shows that violence in children's plays is not oriented by just war toys. It is rather related to and triggered by other more complicated cultural factors and sometimes uncontrollable instincts.

The story opens with Eleanor Bope handling her brother, Harvey, a newspaper cutting about children's toys. She asks him to read it because it is about some of their own ideas on raising and educating children. The extract presents an announcement made by the National Peace Council. The announcement argues that there is serious disapproval to toys representing armed forces. Boys instinctively enjoy fighting and like toys in the form of heavily armed soldiers. However, we should not nourish

those destructive tendencies that boys naturally cherish. Therefore, at the Welfare Exhibition for Children, the National Peace Council will persuade parents to present another kind of toys to their boy, i.e., ‘Peace Toys’ in the form of different group-kinds of civilians.

Harvey regards the idea of ‘peace toys’ as interesting; however, he is not sure that it would succeed. Yet his sister insists that they should try. She reminds him of his annual visits at Easter, when he would come and bring toys for her boys. This Easter, he can bring some toys that teach them about civil life. She tells him that he should present the new toys to her boys and try to make them enthusiastic about the peaceful aspects of life. Eleanor regrets that while playing “‘the Siege of Adrianople’ toy ... [her boys] didn't need any explanation; they knew all the uniforms and flags, and even the names of the respective commanders” (Munro, 1976, “The Toys of Peace”, para. 3). Even when she objects to their using of swear words; they reply that the dirty expressions are the Bulgaria words used to give orders to soldiers.

This clearly demonstrates that violence is “a language, a form of social action and communication” (Carroll, 2007, p.7). Eleanor wants Harvey to help change her young boys' interests and the pattern of their minds that are formulated by their culture. She also believes that toys of war would teach her boys aggressive and violent behavior.

Yet, according to Harvey, it is not just culture that produces toys of war or peace. He mentions that human's violent tendencies are also related to his primitive instincts and hereditary. He reminds her that one of the boys' “great-uncles fought in the most

intolerant fashion at Inkerman—he was specially mentioned in dispatches, I believe—and their great-grandfather smashed all his Whig neighbours' hothouses when the great Reform Bill was passed" (Munro, 1976, "The Toys of Peace", para. 4). Next Easter, however, Harvey Bope unpacks a large cardboard box, full of toys, under the eager eyes of his nephews. The boys try to guess what is in the box; they mention "Albanian soldiery", "a Somali camel-corps", and "Arabs on horseback". Eric further remarkably comments: "the Albanians have got jolly uniforms, and they fight all day long, and all night too, when there's a moon, but the country's rocky, so they've got no cavalry" (Munro, 1976, "The Toys of Peace", para. 5). This shows how much he is engaged in playing, familiar with the stories behind his toys, and enthusiastic about war and violence. Children learn through play, and the foundation of children's perception of life and self-concept begin through playing. The reference to Albanian soldiers, Arab fighters, and the corps of a Somali camel reveals what the boys have learned at a very early stage from their toys. They learned about the political domination of the Ottoman and British Empires that used systematic violence to control the invaded lands.

Harvey draws the first toy, a featureless square building. Bertie thinks it is a fort. His brother Eric disagrees with him, saying that it is the palace of the king of Albania, where the royal family dwelled. He further mentions, proud of his information, that the building has no windows so no one can fire the royal family. Their uncle soon corrects them, saying it is a municipal trash barrel, where all the

litter and refuse of the city are gathered, and thus protecting the citizens' health. The boys remain silent, so he draws another toy, a miniature of a man wearing black clothes. He tells them it is for a prominent figure in political economy, John Stuart Mill. Yet Bertie gave a grunt of dissatisfaction. The next toy is a model of a building with windows and a chimney. It is the branch of Manchester of the Young Women's Christian Association. Eric gets excited and asks whether there are any lions. He has been reading Roman history and noticed that where there are Christians there are lions. His uncle replies that there are no lions.

Harvey draws the other toys: prominent figures, government officials, buildings, and tools. All related to civil life. Erik wonders if they are to pay with the toys of peace, and Harvey affirms that they are for boys to play with. "“You might make two of them contest a seat in Parliament,” said Harvey, ‘and have an election—’" (Munro, 1976, "The Toys of Peace", para. 6). Surprisingly the boys manage to make this plot more interesting to them: "With rotten eggs, and free fights, and ever so many broken heads!" exclaimed Eric. 'And noses all bleeding and everybody drunk as can be,' echoed Bertie" (Munro, 1976, "The Toys of Peace", para. 6). Harvey immediately suggests a different story, saying that voters put their ballots into the ballot-box, and the process is supervised by the mayor. After announcing the winner, the candidates accept the results and express their mutual respect. Of course, the boys are not engaged with the plot. Eric even suggests that they delay playing with the toys and do their holiday task instead. He mentions that they should study the

Bourbon dynasty that governed France. Erik further elaborates that they got to know about Louis XIV, and that he has already learned about the major wars. Harvey is surprised that students in elementary schools are required to study the Bourbon period. This shows the contribution of culture and governmental institutions in shaping children's notion of life, that violence becomes a natural part of human evolution. Harvey tries to divert his nephew's attention to some good and peaceful aspects of that period:

But I fancy the accounts of them were exaggerated; news was very unreliable in those days, and there were practically no war correspondents, so generals and commanders could magnify every little skirmish they engaged in till they reached the proportions of decisive battles. Louis was really famous, now, as a landscape gardener; the way he laid out Versailles was so much admired that it was copied all over Europe. (Munro, 1976, "The Toys of Peace", para. 9)

Eric, intrigued by the history of Bourbon dynasty, asks his uncle about Madame Du Barry, whose head was chopped. Again, Harvey tries to change the topic of violence and tells him that Madame Du Barry also loved gardening and there is a rose named after her. Harvey advises the boys to play, and do their lessons later. Parents have to be cautious in presenting toys to their children in the same manner that they are careful in choosing their children's schools because "both constitute environments which vitally affect the child's development" (Kawin, 1938, p.1). Harvey, however, retreats to the library and considers a book of history for elementary schools that

does not address wars, executions, and massacres—but it was impossible.

After around forty minutes, Harvey returns to the boys' room to check their playing. Before reaching the room, he could hear their loud voices. Eric is suggesting that the toy that represents the man who established Sunday schools would be Louis XIV, though not quite like him. Bertie considers using his paintbox to give the toy a purple coat. Harvey takes a glance at the room and notices that "the municipal dust-bin had been pierced with holes to accommodate the muzzles of imaginary cannon, and now represented the principal fortified position in Manchester" (Munro, 1976, "The Toys of Peace", para. 12). The toy that stands for John Stuart Mill has been dipped in red painting to stand for Maurice de Saxe, the Marshal General of France, bleeding to death. This shows that boys are naturally attracted to violence, and that war toys make the boys clamorous, challenging death, and experiencing total destructive power. This fulfills their basic needs for adventure and heroism. Harvey retreats back, goes to his sister and informs her that their experiment has failed—that it is too late. Significantly, S. Harrell (1990) writes about violence in human culture:

First, there are situations where the conscious, internalized cultural value prohibiting violence is too weak to overcome emotions of anger and hatred, and violence breaks forth through the individuals culturally based inhibitions.

Second For certain people and in certain situations, ... countercultures were more compelling than the antiviolence of the orthodox culture (pp. 8-9).

The story, however, reveals that violence is western equivalence to history, triumph or defeat, and dominance. Studying history in elementary schools ingrains violence in the upbringing of young boys and girls. Thus, violence becomes a natural part of people's culture. It also becomes part of the community's collective memory.

Violence is also addressed in "The Tank", a short story by the Sudanese novelist Ahmed Al-Malik. The events of "The Tank" take place in Khartoum, a city which birth happened through a brutal force that stamped its destiny. "The city was founded in 1821 by invading Turco-Egyptian forces. From the Mahdist rebellion that began in 1881, to the independence of Sudan in 1956, to the succession of South Sudan in 2011, Khartoum has served as centre stage for the struggle over the identity of a fragmented nation and a volatile state" (Cormack & Shmookler, 2016, p. 14). "The Tank" presents the life in the city of Khartoum at some point after the 1960s. The dark humour of the story provides a comment on the culture of the city.

The speaker of "The Tank" mentions that his wife always quarrels with him over financial-problems. She accuses him of being spendthrift and lazy. Every time he replies that he is waiting for an opportunity. In this regard, he mentions that his wife is never impressed by the economic jargon that he has picked up from the radio:

(inflation, currency collapse relative to the dollar, delayed annual harvest, electricity shortfall due to the low level of the Blue Nile), or by my references to health concerns (working in this heat with constant electricity cuts wears out one's heart, economic inflation

can lead to an inflated spleen, the sudden currency collapse could precipitate a nervous collapse). (Al-Malik, 2016, pp. 39-40)

This is significant since recession, poverty, social injustice, and deficient infrastructure are root causes of resentment, anger, and consequently violence among members of a community. The opportunity that the speaker is waiting for appears when a middleman asks him if he would like to buy a used tank in a good condition. The speaker agrees after examining the tank and checking its registration papers. He drives the tank himself and discovers that driving it is very easy. He also notices that people in the street are paying attention to him. Some people think that it is a military coup. So, the street sellers start running away in different directions, leaving their clients behind them. This happens because the tank stands for a higher and violent authority. In other words: "the rise of the nation-state in history, in which a culture of vengeance is characteristic of a society with weak political authority that, as centralization and civilization progress, is replaced by the mechanism of state-directed punishment" (Carroll, 2007, p.4). So, the tank becomes a symbol of a threatening authority. The speaker, however, is stopped by the traffic cop who demands his papers. The policeman examines the tank's registration papers and asks the speaker to test the horn and turning signals. Also, the speaker mentions, the cop "made sure my driving license was valid, stuck his nose in my mouth to check if I were drunk, and shouted in my ear to see if I were crazy" (Al-Malik, 2016, p. 16). The policeman is bewildered, skeptical, but could not figure out what exactly is unnatural. He finally surrenders

and salutes the speaker, permitting him to move on. "Very strong respect for authority and a tendency to obey it, inequality and the experience of injustice, monolithic political organization and values, and unhealed wounds all contribute to violence between groups and among individuals in a society" (Staub, 2003, p. 16). The violence in the story is related to a great and irresistible power and the possibility of destruction by that power, and which the tank represents. This form of power, that implies violence against any kind of obstacles, is rooted in the culture of Sudan and the Middle East.

The speaker parks the tank under the neem tree in front of his house. He notices that since then his friends and his daughter's English tutor have stopped coming. When the milkman sees him—together with his eldest son—washing and greasing the tank, the milkman confesses watering down the milk that he has been selling them. As the milkman is making his confession, the speaker decides to take advantage of him:

The speaker asks him to fill up the bucket with water and then use a cloth to help in cleaning the tank. The speaker's wife, after knowing about watering down the milk, starts screaming at the man, and angrily demanding that he should help her in the house chores. The horrified milkman obeys and gives a hand to both.

By the time the milkman finishes cleaning the entire house; the tank is perfectly clean and appears as if it were new. The milkman leaves with tears of helplessness in his eyes. This shows that violence is part of the community's structure; consequently, people address their difficulties through violent solutions. As E.

Staub (2003) points out "cultural and societal conditions that frustrate basic psychological needs make violence more likely, whereas conditions that help fulfill these needs in constructive ways contribute to the development of peaceful relations and fully human lives" (p. 1). The tank as a symbol of power is also a symbol of violent solutions.

The speaker also mentions that other services have improved after he has bought the tank and parked it under their tree. The butcher gives them the best cuts of meat, the electricity never goes out, the water never shuts off, and they don't have to queue in front of the bakery. The speaker further mentions that his father's debtors, who disappeared after his death, have visited them and made their payment. The tank becomes a symbol of violence, "violence that is not physical, or even overt, but subconscious and even invisible. This indirect violence is ideological in that it seeks to perpetuate social order, a means for the bureaucratic ordering of society" (Carroll, 2007, p.7). The story reveals that the phenomenon of individuals solving problems through power, dominance, and violence is endemic in the community's social relationships.

Both Saki and Ahmed Al-Malik link violence to historical and cultural influences. In "The Toys of Peace", violence is an end; it is a magnet. This is not the case in "The Tank", where violence is a means to an end. In "The Toys of Peace", the attempt is made to control human's primitive violent instincts by culture, and this is destined to fail. Eleanor Bope and her brother Harvey Bope try to address the boys' primitive violent instincts through education, but they do not succeed. What fails them is the counter education on Europe's

bloody history that is taught in schools. Schools' curriculum legitimizes violence. This highlights the important role of the government in promoting societal peace and harmony through providing proper education at schools. The story also implies that war toy may influence children's development, causing them to behave violently in the context of their community. The role of the government in initiating violence is also addressed in "The Tank". The speaker of this short story solves his social problems by displaying power through the tank that he owns. Therefore, violence in "The Tank" represents supreme power. The speaker resorts to implied violence because his fundamental needs are not fulfilled by the government. Violence, hence, becomes a natural component of culture. Both short stories reveal that human violent conduct is partly shaped, legitimized, and made acceptable by history, politics, and society.

References

- Al-Malik, A. (2016). The tank (A. Talib, Trans.). In R. Cormack & M. Shmookler (Eds.), *The book of Khartoum: A city in short fiction* (pp. 33-49). Comma Press.
- Carroll, S. (2007). Introduction. In S. Carroll (Ed.), *Cultures of Violence: Interpersonal violence in historical perspective* (pp. 1-43). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Cormack, R. & Shmookler, M. (Eds.). (2016). Introduction. In R. Cormack & M. Shmookler (Eds.), *The book of Khartoum: A city in short fiction* (pp. 13-32). Comma Press.
- Galtung, J. (1990). Cultural violence. *Journal of Peace Research*, 27 (3), 291-305.
- Goff, K. E. (1995). *The relation of violent and nonviolent toys to play behavior in*

preschoolers (Publication No. 540895) [Doctoral dissertation, Iowa State University]. Open access by the Iowa State University. <https://dr.lib.iastate.edu/>

Harrell, S. (1990). Introduction. In J. N. Lipman & S. Harrell (Eds.), *Violence in China: Essays in culture and counterculture* (pp. 1-25). State University of New York Press.

Jacquin, K. M. (2023, August 14). *Violence*. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/violence>

Jukes, J. A. (1991). *Children and aggressive toys: Empirical studies of toys preference* (Publication No. 10608921) [Doctoral dissertation, University College London]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

Kawin, E. (1938). *The wise choice of toys*. The University of Chicago Press.

Munro, H. H. (1976). *The complete short stories*. Penguin. <https://zlibrary-africa.se/book/3755717/b5dbd4>

Schinkel, W. (2010). *Aspects of violence: A critical Theory*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Staub, E. (2003). Notes on cultures of violence, cultures of caring and peace, and the fulfillment of basic human needs. *Political Psychology*, 24 (1), 1-21.

العنف الثقافي في «ألعاب السلام» لساكي و«الدبابة»

لأحمد المالك

مها قحطان سليمان

جامعة بغداد/ كلية التربية للبنات

المستخلص :

لا يمكن فصل العنف عن الثقافة والحضارة والأيدولوجية الإنسانية. ومن المفارقات أن المجتمع هو الذي يخلق حدود

العنف القانوني وغير القانوني. ولذلك فإن العنف له أهمية ثقافية. تتناول هذه الورقة ثقافة العنف في "ألعاب السلام" لساكي، و"الدبابة" لأحمد المالك. تدور أحداث القصتين القصيرتين في خلفيات مختلفة تمامًا وتتناولان العنف فيما يتعلق بحياة الأطفال والكبار، على التوالي. يهدف البحث إلى دراسة العنف وعلاقته بالثقافة وغرائز الإنسان البدائية. ويتناول البحث السيطرة على العنف من خلال التعليم وتعزيز السلام وتشجيع قواعد السلوك السليم. ويقارن البحث بين العنف والصراع الاجتماعي وثقافة السياسة. و يقدم البحث دراسة لمصدر العنف البشري الكامن في الإنسان البدائي و الإنسان المتحضر.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ثقافة، تاريخ، سياسة، بدائية، عنف.