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Clashing Dialectics of Victimhood in Iraq War Narratives: A Comparative Approach

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the dialectics of victimhood and the associated liability for war atrocities in David Abrams's Fobbit and Sinan Antoon's The Corpse Washer. It contrasts the perspectives of Abrams, an American veteran of the 2003 war in Iraq, with Antoon, an Iraqi civilian, shedding light on their differing portrayals of the American-led invasion. Victimhood serves as a central theme in war narratives, providing both justification for violence and a means to absolve aggressors of accountability for subsequent atrocities. This study explores the intricate interplay between self-perceived victimhood and narrative construction in the context of the Iraq War. The methodology focuses on concepts of victimhood, the psychological impact of war, and the assertion of narrative ownership. The findings illustrate that while Abrams's narrative adopts an outsider perspective and portrays Americans as the most visible victims—often absolving them of complicity—Antoon's work presents an insider perspective that emphasizes the profound humiliation intertwined with death in Iraq. In The Corpse Washer, death transcends mere grief, becoming a symbolic representation of the enduring suffering and degradation faced by the Iraqi people, thereby framing American presence as a source of relentless destruction and moral conflict. This perspective challenges readers to confront the complexities of war, emphasizing the moral implications of foreign intervention and the profound costs borne by the Iraqi people.

Keywords: collective trauma; Iraq war; narrative perspective; victimhood; war novel

INTRODUCTION

The patterns of victimhood that emerge from studies of victimization during and after conflict illuminate the intersection of history, psychology, politics, and generational trauma. In the field of humanities, past research has revealed the multifaceted nature of victimhood within war narratives. This includes the potential for inclusive narratives, challenges to national identity (Bukh, 2007), competition for victimhood status (Demirel, 2023), the empowering effects of storytelling (Scianna, 2019; Wieskamp, 2018), and the complexities of post-war reconciliation (Basic, 2015). This paper explores two war narratives set against the backdrop of the 2003 Iraq War, namely David Abrams's *Fobbit* and Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*. We query the degree to which reconciliation and/or compromise is feasible in a war context, as evidenced by the two novelists.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It took several years for American authors to publish their literary works about the 2003 war, most of whom have a military background, including David Abrams' *Fobbit* (2012), Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds* (2012), Phil Klay's *Redeployment* (2015), and Roy Scranton's *War Porn* (2016). David Abrams, an American war veteran who served in Iraq in 2005 as a Fobbit—a United States Army employee stationed at a forward operating base during Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003-2011)—invested his tenure in Iraq in writing his debut novel, *Fobbit*. The novel, which was named a *New York Times* Notable Book in 2012, has been described as "an impressive Iraq war satire" (Basbanes, 2012) and "funny, disturbing, heartbreaking" (Bauman, 2012). It unfolds from the perspectives of four characters from different ranks and social backgrounds: Chance Gooding Jr., an Army officer at the Forward Operating Base; Eustace Harkleroad, Gooding's superior officer; Vic Duret, a battalion commander; and Abe Shrinkle, a commander under Vic Duret.

Similarly, many Iraqi authors have published works on the Iraq War, receiving considerable acclaim, such as Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* (2013), Hassan Blasim's *The Corpse Exhibition* (2014), and Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2018). *The Corpse Washer*, self-translated by Antoon, was first published in Arabic in 2010 as *Wahdaha Shajarat al-Rumman* (The Pomegranate Alone) and won the Best Arab American Book Award in 2014. It has been hailed as a compact masterpiece and an extraordinary achievement (Forbes, 2013) and is regarded as a must-read for its poignant literary elegy to the thousands of unacknowledged Iraqis who perished in the war, as well as their grieving loved ones (Scranton, 2014). The narrative is conveyed through the character of Jawad, whose profession as a corpse washer provides a vivid representation of the war's impact and its repercussions on the lives of Iraqis.

David Abrams's *Fobbit* exposes how the U.S. Army manipulates the narrative of war to present it as more benign and appealing to American audiences (Kunsa, 2017). While Susan Kollin (2015) describes the novel as an anti-war narrative that parodies the experiences of American soldiers in the Iraq War, Paul Ady (2014) argues that it is critical only of higher-ranking soldiers and fobbits—those behind desks which are not directly involved in combat—while refraining from criticizing lower-ranking soldiers. Notably, the lowest-ranked main character, Sergeant Brock Lumley, is portrayed positively, devoid of the condescending descriptions often attributed to those in higher ranks. He compensates for the failures of incompetent higher-ups like Shrinkle and Duret, all while witnessing fobbits like Gooding ascend the ranks without any tangible struggle (Ady, 2014).

Conversely, Roy Scranton (2014) contends that *The Corpse Washer* offers a significant and necessary counter-narrative to American Iraq War novels, which primarily focus on the sufferings of American soldiers. The novel details protagonist Jawad's desperate attempts to escape death through art (Restuccia, 2018) and reflects on the certainty of mortality faced by Iraqis during the conflict, particularly through the meticulous washing of corpses (Restuccia, 2018). Jawad's profession as a corpse washer serves as a poignant counterpoint to the experiences of Americans, as he pays due respect to the dead by performing cleansing rituals (Alosman & Raihanah, 2022). Antoon challenges the dominant American narrative on war by emphasizing the significance of Iraqi lives and reclaiming the grievability of their deaths (Alosman, 2024). Antoon memorializes the dead, exposing their wounds and leaving them open, emphasizing that recovery is unattainable (Deer, 2017). Death permeates the novel, creating a grim atmosphere that dominates the lives of Iraqis and foreshadows their demise.

However, previous studies do not adequately problematize victimhood or compare the portrayals of war victims in the two novels within the context of the 2003 Iraq War, despite victimhood being essential to the narratives and to the question of culpability for war crimes. This paper examines the dialectics of victimhood and the consequent responsibilities for wartime atrocities in David Abrams's *Fobbit* (2012) in comparison to Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* (2013). It contrasts the authorial perspectives of an American veteran of the 2003 war, David Abrams, and an Iraqi civilian, Sinan Antoon, on the 2003 conflict.

METHODOLOGY: WHAT MAKES A VICTIM?

One important approach to investigating the psychological aspects of collective trauma and its effects is to examine the conflicting victimization within war narratives. Building on the works of prominent scholars in the field of psychology (Basic, 2015), this study delves into the intricate interplay between victimhood and the narrative construction of war. The methodology of this study is grounded in psychology, particularly focusing on the concept of victimhood, the psychological impact of war, and the assertion of narrative ownership.

To begin, it is essential to define who is entitled to be considered a victim, as victimization is central to any conflict or dispute due to its implications. According to the United Nations Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power (United Nations General Assembly, 1985, p. 116), victims are categorized as individuals who have been subjected to "physical or mental injury, emotional suffering, economic loss, or substantial impairment of their fundamental rights…".

However, the United Nations' definition does not clarify the relationship between victims and politics, as the lines between victims and aggressors in wars are often blurred and not easily identifiable (Jacoby, 2015). Each side of a dispute, in order to further its own interests, frequently assigns responsibility for civilian deaths to the opposing side and plays the victim card whenever possible. Thus, defining victims in conflict zones is a complex endeavour.

Studies on the Bosnian War have identified a more pronounced demarcation between the types of victims and perpetrators (Basic, 2015). There are two primary types of victims in war: those who were killed and those who survived but were displaced or sexually assaulted. Ex-military and police officers who committed atrocities and assisted in forced relocation represent one side of the perpetrator's portrait, while businessmen who prospered during the conflict represent the other. Consequently, victimhood is tied to attempts at recognition (Jacoby, 2015).

Furthermore, victims evoke strong emotions, ranging from blame to sympathy, across the entire political spectrum because they are crucial to the success or failure of larger political campaigns. Nevertheless, the narrative of victimhood nationalism, as studies indicate, is often used as a political tool to garner support both domestically and internationally (Young & Sullivan, 2016). While victims should be empathized with and assisted regardless of their background or nationality, they are less visible in countries that reject victimhood as an identity compared to those that assert their commitment to human rights. It is important to note that unknown victims are just as deserving of recognition as known victims, perhaps even more so, as their invisibility on the international stage constitutes a form of second victimization.

Additionally, conflicts are characterized by victim contentions, wherein all sides claim victim status and, therefore, assert that only they deserve compensation (Jacoby, 2015). However, in prolonged conflicts, there are victims among all parties. Jacoby (2015) asserts that "[p]owerful

interests and/or the state typically shape victim categories in any given society. As a result, victims at least partly cast their narratives according to already established criteria, and in so doing, perform social and political functions" (529). In this way, victims become passive recipients of aid, demanding that others act on their behalf. As victims conform to the desires of larger political entities, they become dependent agents specifically aligned with the political interests of the authorities involved.

Additionally, research emphasizes the passive attitudes that some victims adopt, believing that their circumstances are beyond their control and unrelated to their actions (Zur, 1995). The consistency of the perception of non-controllability in a victim's feelings, as opposed to luck or random events, is related to stability (Rotter, 1971). Victims often experience feelings of powerlessness, feeling unable to influence their surroundings or their destiny. They tend to attribute the consequences of their actions to external or circumstantial factors rather than to their own dispositions. Key components of their psychology include low self-esteem, guilt, embarrassment, powerlessness, uselessness, and an inner sense of evil. While it is evident that they experience suffering, the benefits of victimhood are often more subtle and usually unconscious. These advantages can include the right to compassion and sympathy, a lack of responsibility and accountability, a sense of justice, or sometimes even redemption through the punishment of the perpetrator. Being a victim allows individuals to blame others, gain moral superiority, and simultaneously deny responsibility for or consequences of their own actions (Zur, 1995). When victims resort to violence, it is typically as a last resort, undertaken in self-defence. Their stance is forceful because they see themselves as morally justified, bearing no responsibility for their behaviour and feeling entitled to perpetual compassion.

During the Vietnam War, American soldiers expressed that the difficulty of distinguishing between friends and enemies diluted critiques of the war's immorality and positioned Americans as victims of the conflict (Musiał, 2020). Similarly, contemporary American films humanize soldiers by illustrating the agonies they endure (Žižek, 2010). Groups of American soldiers are portrayed as humanitarian forces confronting terror, attempting to dismantle weapons of terror to protect civilians. They are depicted as being compelled to go to war for the benefit of civilians back home, and their actions are often overlooked in the audience's appreciation of their sacrifices and struggles in war (Enns, 2012). Žižek (2010) argues that such films reveal the vulnerability of soldiers while obscuring the moral verdict of viewers regarding those whose circumstances warrant overwhelming compassion. He adds, “[i]n its very invisibility, ideology is here, more than ever: We are there, with our boys, identifying with their fears and anguishes instead of questioning what they are doing at war in the first place" (Žižek, 2010, p. 32). Relating soldiers to the civilians they are fighting against neutralizes the reality of soldiers' actions in conflict and absolves them of accountability (Žižek, 2010).

However, some in U.S. military circles have objected to the concept of military victimization, citing concerns about undermining narratives of ‘war heroes’ and its impact on military morale and recruitment (Michaels, 2014). Despite this, the soldier-victim narrative appears to persist (Breen-Smyth, 2018), serving as a veneer to obscure any culpability for wartime atrocities. The notion of veterans as victims gained prominence during the George W. Bush administration (Breen-Smyth, 2018). At a time when the United States and its allies faced intense criticism for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the focus shifted to the suffering and sacrifice of "our troops" (Breen-Smyth, 2018, p. 226). As the mistakes and costs of the post-September 11 wars became evident in 2007, support for those wars waned, but support for the troops—based on concern for the families of the dead and injured—persisted. Veterans possess a political advantage

over many other victim groups due to their status as war victims, and there is a prevailing perception that American governments have failed to fulfil their responsibilities to veterans (Adler, 2017).

Given the competing claims of victimhood in the context of war (Young & Sullivan, 2016), the following section extends the discussion by examining the dialectic of victimhood and the consequent responsibilities for war atrocities, contrasting the perspectives of an American veteran of the 2003 war, David Abrams, and an Iraqi civilian, Sinan Antoon.

AMERICAN VICTIMHOOD IN IRAQ: THE OUTSIDER PERSPECTIVE

A sense of vulnerability and hypervigilance often emerges from an individual's self-identification as a victim. This preoccupation with their own state can severely undermine their ability to consider the consequences of their actions on others (Breen-Smyth, 2018). In Abrams' *Fobbit* (2012), the officers find themselves enmeshed in a web of powerlessness amid grave circumstances, as they are tasked with the daunting responsibility of bringing their soldiers safely back to base from the chaos of an unpredictable war. This sense of helplessness permeates the narrative, particularly through the character of Lieutenant Colonel Vic Duret, a senior officer who grapples with his inability to maintain control in a tumultuous environment.

During a life-threatening battle in Baghdad, Duret's disorientation becomes palpable; he is paralyzed by the weight of his responsibilities while his men look to him for guidance. The war, which spirals beyond anyone's control, strips him of agency, rendering him a passive participant in a situation that demands decisive action. His haunting memories of home intensify his sense of loss and longing, exemplified in his yearning for his dog, Ginger, and his wife. He expresses a desire to be comforted, wishing to "put his face and nurse from her chest like a baby" and hopes that if he's lucky, "she wouldn't catch him crying over all the bad shit he'd brought home from Baghdad" (Abrams, 2012, p. 17).

This poignant imagery encapsulates Duret's fragility and vulnerability, revealing his deep-seated emotional scars. The act of wanting to be nursed like a baby underscores his regression into a state of helplessness, highlighting a desperate need for comfort and protection in the face of trauma. While the tone of the narrative may be satirical, it underscores a profound truth about the psychological toll of war: Duret is transformed into a passive victim, yearning for the normalcy of domestic life, complete with the companionship of a wife and dog. This desire for a return to innocence starkly contrasts with the harsh realities of his experiences in war, illustrating the dissonance between his aspirations and the trauma that continues to shape his identity.

By portraying Duret as a victim of circumstances he cannot control, *Fobbit* critiques the broader military narrative that often glorifies heroism while neglecting the profound psychological consequences of warfare. This analysis of Duret's character serves to reveal the complexities of victimhood in a war context, where the traditional notions of power and agency are subverted, leaving individuals grappling with their vulnerabilities amidst chaos.

In *Fobbit*, the narrative prioritizes the lives of Iraqi people, often at the expense of American soldiers, positioning the latter as vulnerable objects within the broader context of war. Lieutenant Colonel Duret grapples with the moral complexities of warfare as he strives to navigate a battlefield situation with minimal loss of life, stating his hope to achieve this with the least amount of "death to innocent Iraqi citizens or his own men (in that order, as per the rules of engagement)" (Abrams, 2012, p. 21). This statement not only reveals the ethical dilemma facing

military personnel but also underscores the stark reality of their rules of engagement, which prioritize the lives of civilians over the soldiers themselves. Duret's concern reflects an acute awareness of the precariousness of their position as he warns Captain Abe Shrinkle about the dangers posed to soldiers trapped in a tank beneath a car loaded with explosives.

The narrative illustrates the pervasive threat of unwarranted terrorism as American soldiers find themselves in a position of vulnerability, attempting to defuse explosives and ensure the safety of both their comrades and curious Iraqi bystanders. This portrayal challenges the conventional narrative of American military dominance, revealing how the soldiers are often receiving violence rather than initiating it. Their efforts to protect lives, both American and Iraqi, complicate the simplistic dichotomy of heroes and villains in wartime.

Interestingly, while American soldiers express genuine concern for the safety of Iraqi civilians, the locals often sympathize with those who target them. This complex dynamic is poignantly illustrated when a young Iraqi boy manages to slip past the cordon set up by American soldiers to safeguard the explosives-laden car. He approaches the critically injured driver, later identified as a "Swiss" (Abrams, 2012, p. 58), offering a bottle of water to the man who had previously been described as "scowling." The transformation of the man's demeanour from hostility to a smile as he receives the boy's assistance highlights a critical moment of human connection amid the chaos of war.

The boy's act of compassion—holding the bottle to the man's lips and cupping "his hand beneath the blood-clotted bread to catch drips" (Abrams, 2012, p. 29)—serves as a powerful reminder of the complexities of victimhood in wartime. This scene encapsulates the tragic irony of the situation: American soldiers, who perceive themselves as defenders, are caught in a web of violence that includes not only foreign militants but also the very civilians they aim to protect. The boy's altruism juxtaposed with the man's status as a foreigner—identified later as a "terrorist" (16)—reinforces the notion that American soldiers are victims of both foreign militants and the ambivalence of Iraqi civilians.

Through these interactions, *Fobbit* critiques the narrative of the American military as unequivocal heroes, instead revealing the intricate layers of victimhood that permeate the experience of war. The soldiers' vulnerabilities and the complexities of civilian sympathies challenge readers to reconsider the simplistic binaries often associated with conflict. Abrams' portrayal of these dynamics serves as a poignant commentary on the moral ambiguities of war, where human connections can arise even in the most dire circumstances, ultimately complicating the roles of perpetrator and victim.

This complexity is further underscored during a moment when the boy is interrogated by American soldiers through a translator. His explanation reveals not only the boy's understanding of the situation but also the pervasive Iraqi sympathy for anti-American militants. The boy conveys that the man in the car wanted the Americans to know, "his terrorist group has planned to launch many vehicle bomb attacks today, and also other attacks will follow. He says he is here to kill Americans, and it is his supreme pleasure to follow Allah's will as he sends us to the flames of hell" (Abrams, 2012, p. 30).

This statement starkly illustrates the ideological divide and the chilling reality faced by American soldiers. The man's declaration of intent to kill Americans reflects the deep-seated animosity that has developed in the wake of the conflict, casting a shadow over the soldiers' attempts to protect lives. Duret's reaction further complicates the narrative as he stares at the boy, who maintains a stoic expression "without cracking a smile." Duret's internal monologue—"This was the problem with Iraqis, he thought. They believed everything they heard"—reveals his

frustration and prejudgment, highlighting the disconnect between American soldiers and the Iraqi populace.

This moment serves as a microcosm of the broader conflict, where Duret's disdain for the boy's perspective underscores the challenges of understanding and communication in an environment shaped by violence and mistrust. His subsequent thought that the boy perceives the man as a hero, believing he has earned a place "at Allah's right hand" simply for offering a sip of water, further illustrates the tragic irony of war. It reflects the complexity of heroism in a context where acts of kindness can be co-opted by extremist ideologies, complicating the moral landscape for both soldiers and civilians.

Abrams' narrative thus compels readers to confront the uncomfortable truths of war, where the lines between good and evil, hero and villain, are blurred. The boy's interactions with the militants, alongside Duret's reaction, encapsulate the deep-seated animosities that fuel the conflict and the emotional toll it exacts on all involved. In this way, *Fobbit* challenges the traditional military narrative, forcing a reconsideration of the roles of victims and perpetrators in a landscape rife with moral ambiguity.

After illustrating how anti-American attacks in Iraq are executed by foreigners, Abrams depicts the bomber as part of a "group" engaged in large-scale assaults against American forces (30). The man's possession of a "dog-eared copy of the Koran" (26) and his association of the killing of Americans with "Allah's will"—making it his ultimate goal (30)—highlight the profound influence of religion on his motivations. This characterization suggests that the root of the man's animosity toward American soldiers stems from a deeply ingrained, religiously motivated hatred. The narrative implies that such antagonism is not merely personal but rather part of a larger ideological framework that fuels violence against Americans.

The behaviour of the Iraqi boy further complicates this portrayal; his refusal to smile at the American officer signifies a cautious hostility rather than an innocent naiveté. This reaction reinforces the notion that the boy, influenced by the prevailing sentiments in his environment, has adopted a wary attitude toward the American presence. Duret reflects on this dynamic, arguing that the simplicity of the Iraqi people makes them particularly susceptible to religious-based ideologies, which can easily be transmitted to future generations and perpetuate a cycle of blind antagonism.

Chance Gooding, an Army officer stationed at the Forward Operating Base, echoes Duret's observations in his diaries. He writes, "this nanosecond before the next bomb is detonated, before the ne't grubby thumb presses th' remote-controlled cell phone trigger or the next zealous Muslim chanting 'Allahu Akbar!' steers his car bomb towards a U.S. convoy" (Abrams, 2012, p. 323). This vivid imagery captures the immediacy of the threat faced by American soldiers and underscores the perception of their attackers as religiously motivated, uncivilized fanatics. Gooding's description frames the militants as relentless agents of destruction whose sole purpose is to inflict harm on Americans, reinforcing the notion that the war is as much about ideological conflict as it is about military engagement.

Together, these elements paint a grim picture of the conflict, where religious extremism drives individuals to commit acts of violence against American forces. The portrayal of the Iraqi boy, alongside the bomber's motivations, suggests a troubling cycle of indoctrination that perpetuates hostility. Abrams' narrative compels readers to confront the complexities of this dynamic, illuminating how deeply rooted beliefs can shape perceptions and actions on both sides of the conflict. In doing so, *Fobbit* challenges the reader to recognize the multifaceted nature of

war, where the interplay of religion, ideology, and personal experiences creates a landscape fraught with animosity and misunderstanding.

Although Captain Abe Shrinkle's behaviour and significant blunders are satirically mocked throughout *Fobbit,* particularly regarding his culpability for the accidental killing of an innocent Iraqi hiding under an American truck, his end is marked by a brutal irony: he becomes a victim of a mortar fired by insurgents, resulting in a gruesome death where his only remaining body part, his arm, is burned to "nubs" (336). This fate serves as a stark reminder of the chaotic and indiscriminate nature of violence in wartime. While many soldiers may not mourn the loss of the "doofus who made a lot of bad decisions" (322), Sergeant Lumley's reaction highlights a deeper moral complexity. He finds it appalling that "[n]o one deserved to be 'obliterated.' Not even the worst officer in the United States Army" (322), emphasizing a fundamental belief in the value of human life, regardless of one's failures or mistakes.

This juxtaposition of Shrinkle's actions and their consequences raises important questions about culpability and innocence. While the novel denounces Shrinkle's act of killing "an innocent man" (313), it is crucial to recognize that this act was unintended; he had no prior knowledge of the man's presence beneath the truck. This lack of intention complicates the narrative of guilt, suggesting that Shrinkle, despite his flaws, is not a malicious figure but rather a product of the chaotic environment of war.

Conversely, the assault that leads to his death appears to be intentional, executed by insurgents targeting him while he is relaxed in a pool, enjoying a beverage—far removed from the front lines or any offensive operation. This scenario reinforces the notion of his innocence in the broader context of war, as he is caught in the crossfire of a conflict that often disregards individual lives. Instead of being portrayed solely as a culprit, Shrinkle emerges as another victim of terrorism in Iraq, highlighting the tragic irony of war where individuals, regardless of their actions, can become casualties of larger, uncontrollable violence.

Abrams' portrayal of Shrinkle serves to critique not only the military hierarchy and the consequences of poor decision-making but also to challenge the reader's perceptions of guilt and victimhood. The complexity of Shrinkle's character invites reflection on the moral ambiguities of war, where the lines between perpetrator and victim are often blurred. Ultimately, *Fobbit* compels readers to reconsider the narratives surrounding those involved in the conflict, revealing the intricate layers of humanity that persist even amidst the chaos of battle.

IRAQI VICTIMHOOD: THE INSIDER PERSPECTIVE

Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*, by contrast, takes a completely opposite view of the Iraqis' situation and the source of their ongoing suffering. The American occupation of Iraq is the root cause of most of the Iraqis' woes. They are exposed to different forms of violence from different sources, but the main culprit is the American presence in Iraq. In Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*, the presence of the Americans is solely related to the fact that they control everything in Iraq and pose a perpetual threat to the lives of the Iraqis. There are no main American characters, but the destructive result of their presence in Iraq is omnipresent. They are always there with their armoured Humvees, tanks, vehicles, helicopters, and fire jets to cause death and destruction, to undermine every part of life, and to "humiliate" Iraqis (Antoon, 2013, p. 68). The Americans in Antoon's work are the aggressors who are responsible for the large number of Iraqi deaths. They are invaders trying to occupy the country regardless of the human cost. Therefore, there are no

American deaths in the narrative. There is a huge gap between Abrams' and Antoon's portrayal of American soldiers because of their radically different approaches to the Iraq war and the soldiers' culpability for the war's atrocities. For Antoon, Americans are responsible for all war atrocities in Iraq during the war, while in Abrams' novel, they are the powerless victims of war.

Jawad, the main character in Antoon's novel, reluctantly joins his father in his job as a corpse washer, eventually inheriting his father's profession and being forced to abandon his academic ambitions in order to feed his family. Antoon's choice of such a profession functions as a commemoration of the vast number of Iraqis who have died under American auspices. The novel emphasizes the unprecedented frequency of death before the war, which was then timid and more measured than it is now (Antoon, 2013). Death after the 2003 war "*is more generous, thanks to the Americans*" [Antoon's emphasis], as "more and more [people are] killed by the Americans" (104). Not only the number of deaths but also the condition of the corpses has changed for the worse because of the American invasion.

Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* presents a starkly contrasting view of the plight of Iraqis, positioning the American occupation as the root cause of their ongoing suffering. The narrative suggests that Iraqis endure various forms of violence from multiple sources, yet the primary aggressor remains the American presence in Iraq. Throughout the novel, Americans are depicted not through direct characters but rather through their omnipresent, destructive influence—symbolized by armoured Humvees, tanks, helicopters, and fighter jets—each representing a constant threat to Iraqi lives and dignity. The destructive nature of their presence is encapsulated in the assertion that they "humiliate" Iraqis (Antoon, 2013, p. 68), reinforcing the notion that the American military is responsible for the widespread death and devastation inflicted upon the Iraqi population.

The absence of American deaths in Antoon's narrative underscores the imbalance of suffering, sharply contrasting with Abrams' portrayal of American soldiers as victims of war. While Abrams depicts American characters as powerless, Antoon places the blame for war's atrocities squarely on the shoulders of the occupiers, presenting them as invaders indifferent to the human cost of their actions. This dichotomy highlights the radically different approaches to the Iraq War and the soldiers' culpability, with Antoon asserting that Americans are the architects of chaos and destruction.

Jawad, the protagonist in *The Corpse Washer*, embodies the tragic consequences of this occupation. Reluctantly following in his father's footsteps as a corpse washer, Jawad is forced to abandon his academic aspirations to support his family, reflecting the harsh realities faced by many Iraqis. Antoon's choice of this profession as a focal point serves as a poignant commemoration of the countless Iraqis who have perished due to American military actions. The novel underscores the unprecedented frequency of death in post-2003 Iraq, where the toll is described as "more generous, thanks to the Americans," indicating a grim shift in the nature of violence (Antoon, 2013, p. 104). The conditions of the corpses Jawad handles further illustrate the degradation of life in Iraq, exacerbated by the American invasion.

A significant element of Jawad's internal struggle is his recurring dream about his fiancée, Reem. In this haunting vision, a Humvee approaches, and masked militants emerge to sever his head while abducting Reem (Antoon, 2013). The dream's imagery connects the Humvee to American troops, emphasizing their culpability in the deaths of innocent Iraqis. It also symbolizes the devaluation of Iraqi lives, suggesting that Americans can kill indiscriminately without fear of accountability, reinforcing a narrative of impunity.

Reem's subsequent diagnosis of cancer further highlights the insidious consequences of the American military presence in Iraq. The mention of increased cancer rates—"quadrupled in recent years" due to the use of radiological weapons—serves as a stark reminder of the long-term effects of conflict on civilian health (Antoon, 2013, p. 114). Reem represents a singular victim among many, illustrating the widespread impact of various weapons used during the 2003 invasion, regardless of the potential harm they inflicted on Iraqi lives (Gregory, 2004).

Through the lens of Jawad and Reem, Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* powerfully conveys the theme of Iraqi victimhood, portraying the profound and lasting scars of war on individuals and society. The narrative compels readers to confront the realities of occupation, violence, and the moral implications of foreign intervention, ultimately challenging perceptions of heroism and villainy in the context of the Iraq War. Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* starkly underscores that the suffering of Iraqis predates the 2003 war, attributing significant civilian casualties to the no-fly zones imposed in southern and northern Iraq. These zones, intended to prevent the Iraqi regime from oppressing its citizens, inadvertently led to the deaths of innocent civilians, including herders, as American fighter jets targeted them indiscriminately. The narrator reflects on this tragedy, questioning whether the actions of the American military stemmed from "sheer idiocy" or a perverse game of using Iraqis for target practice (Antoon, 2013, p. 59). Antoon (2016) emphasizes that understanding the situation in Iraq requires acknowledging the violence that existed before the invasion. He recalls a widely publicized incident in which a thirteen-year-old shepherd was killed by a rocket while tending to his family's cattle, illustrating the pervasive targeting of civilians during this earlier period (Gregory, 2004).

As the narrative progresses into the chaos of the 2003 war, the devaluation of civilian life becomes evident. When Jawad transports his father's body to be buried in Najaf, he expresses the fear that "only a mad person would want to be inside a moving car while bombers and fighter jets were hovering overhead" (Antoon, 2013, p. 65). This sentiment encapsulates the precariousness of life in wartime Iraq, where all Iraqis become potential targets for American military operations, blurring the line between combatants and civilians.

The presence and actions of the Americans in Iraq are largely responsible for the anguish of the Iraqi people (Abdelfattah, 2021). A harrowing scene illustrates this connection when a Humvee, described as a "mythical animal intent on devouring us" (Antoon, 2013, p. 66), stops Jawad and his friends as they mournfully transport his father's body. The soldiers, armed and commanding, create an atmosphere of terror, illustrating the constant threat faced by Iraqis. The moment they inspect the coffin with a machine gun raises the tension to a life-and-death scenario, where even a slight misstep could result in a hail of bullets. Hammoudy's comment that the "liberators want to humiliate us" (Antoon, 2013, pp. 67-68) captures the sentiment of degradation and powerlessness that pervades the experience of Iraqis under American occupation.

This scene exemplifies the daily realities of Iraqis navigating a war-torn landscape, where the smallest mistake could lead to tragedy. In the eyes of the dominant American power, Iraqis are reduced to mere "objects," lacking any claim to rights or protection (Gregory, 2004, p. 62). The narrative emphasizes that the lives of local civilians are expendable and sacrificed to safeguard the lives of American soldiers, thereby reinforcing the notion that Americans bear primary responsibility for the suffering inflicted upon the Iraqi population.

Another incident further illustrates the randomness of violence in Iraq. A taxi driver, who momentarily leaves his car to urinate, returns to find his vehicle engulfed in flames after an explosion caused by an "American Apache" helicopter (Antoon, 2013, p. 145). The driver's futile attempts to save the burning victim highlight the negligence and lack of accountability exhibited

by American forces, as no explanation is provided for the attack, and claims for damages yield no results. This episode starkly reveals that Iraqis are often treated as collateral damage, with no discernible effort to ascertain whether they pose a threat.

Antoon's portrayal of Iraqis extends beyond mere statistics; they are depicted as beings whose lives hold little value. The American military operations are likened to hunting, where Iraqis are seen as insects or animals, with any moving object becoming a legitimate target. The narrative captures this dehumanization through vivid language, as the narrator states that Americans "were firing at any vehicle" and the Iraqis "ran like mad dogs for more than two hours" (Antoon, 2013, p. 117). A journalist's remark that "Iraqis were driven ahead of us like animals" (Gregory, 2004, p. 165) reinforces this theme of degradation, where civilians are likened to "sitting ducks" or "cockroaches," illustrating their status as targets rather than human beings.

Death in Antoon's narrative is not merely a source of grief; it is also a profound source of humiliation. The aftermath of violence reveals the grotesque treatment of the dead, with bodies discarded on the outskirts of Baghdad, rotting in the morgue, or thrown into rivers (Antoon, 2013, p. 131). The fortunate few may die "without losing an eye or their entire head" (108), emphasizing the brutal reality that even death is marked by indignity in postwar Iraq. Jawad, as a corpse washer, serves as a grim historian, documenting the causes of death that reflect the violence of war, such as "a bullet in the forehead, strangulation marks around the neck, knife stabs in the back" (131). His profession immortalizes the otherwise forgotten victims of conflict.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper has examined the complex theme of victimhood within the contrasting narratives of Abrams's *Fobbit* and Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*, both set against the backdrop of the 2003 Iraq War. While both authors portray the war as a disastrous event that has wrought immense suffering upon Iraq, their narratives diverge sharply in terms of perspective. Abrams's portrayal, aligned with an outsider viewpoint, tends to foreground the experiences of American soldiers, often absolving them of their complicity in the suffering of Iraqis. This perspective echoes the sentiment found in Kevin Powers's *The Yellow Birds*, where the visible victims are primarily American, despite their roles in perpetuating the misery of the Iraqi people.

Conversely, Antoon adopts an insider perspective that highlights the relentless suffering endured by Iraqis as a direct consequence of American military actions. In his narrative, the Americans are depicted as the architects of despair, transforming everyday existence into a harrowing landscape filled with death and destruction. This fundamental shift in perspective underscores the idea that victimhood is not merely a matter of individual suffering but is deeply intertwined with power dynamics and historical context, as articulated by Jacoby (2015).

The analysis further suggests that the competition for the status of victimhood plays a crucial role in both narratives. In contrast to Abrams' *Fobbit*, where American soldiers are depicted as victims of war, Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* portrays Iraqis as the unequivocal victims of the conflict. The narrative positions Americans as the ultimate aggressors responsible for the widespread suffering and chaos in Iraq, even as sectarian violence escalates. This perspective challenges readers to confront the complexities of war, emphasizing the moral implications of foreign intervention and the profound costs borne by the Iraqi people.

By employing their distinctive storytelling techniques, Abrams and Antoon elucidate the political and social implications of their narratives, thereby compelling readers to reconsider the intricacies of war and the moral responsibilities of those involved. The interplay between insider and outsider perspectives not only enhances our comprehension of the implications of the discourse on victimhood but also necessitates a more profound grasp of the lived experiences of those embroiled in the crossfire of conflict. Consequently, these narratives serve as indispensable contributions to the broader discourse on war, identity, and responsibility, compelling us to confront the multifaceted nature of suffering in the wake of violence.

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