Jordan Journal of Modern Languages and Literatures Vol.14, No. 4, 2022, pp 915-929

JJMLL

Vulnerable Lives and Culpability in American War Narrative: A Comparative Approach

M Ikbal M Alosman*
Department of English Language and Literature, Dhofar University, Oman

Received on: 4-3-2021 **Accepted on: 9-8-2021**

Abstract

This paper analyses Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds* (2012), Phil Klay's *Redeployment* (2015), and Roy Scranton's *War Porn* (2016) in terms of vulnerability of Iraqis' lives in the context of the 2003 War on Iraq. It aims at uncovering the differential methods implemented by Americans to approach the lives of locals in Iraq and culpability for war atrocities. It draws on Judith Butler's contention that Western societies address the lives/deaths of non-Western people in a differential method; the lives of Western people are prioritized at the expense of the safety and wellness of non-Western peoples. The argument is made through comparative analysis of the selected works in two constructs: 'vulnerable lives,' and 'accountability and culpability in war'. This paper argues that Powers and Klay's works are more centred on soldiers' victimized status, whilst Scranton's is keen on accentuationg Iraqis' vulnerable position and soldiers' accountability for their anguishes.

Keywords: Iraq War; Roy Scranton; Kevin Powers; Phil Klay; Ungrievable; War Novel.

Introduction

In 2003, America led the second post-9/11 war on Iraq in the so-called War on Terror to make the world a safer place, liberate Iraq from Saddam's rule, and to bring democracy to the Middle East (Gregory 2004). American politicians tried to romanticize the invasion by claiming that American soldiers would be greeted with flowers by Iraqis as the liberators of their country. However, the situation on the ground was far from being ideal for both Americans and Iraqis. War slogans suffocated under the rubbles of the devastated cities in Iraq; the 'liberated' country was turned into a mega landscape of destruction and chaos. Bereavement and anguish were inflicted on both sides, yet, in differentiated degrees and numbers.

Iraq was the news for several years with countless images and videos that conveyed, to some degree, the wide range of devastation imposed on land and people. It took more years for the world to delve into some of the private stories of those involved and have insight into the big events they watched on news outlets. Both wars on Iraq and Afghanistan gave birth to many American war authors who were invoked to pen numerous narratives that introduced the personal facets of war to the world, to name some, *Fobbit*

* Doi: https://doi.org/ 10.47012/jjmll.14.410
* Corresponding Author: **meqbal1980@yahoo.com**

(2012) by David Abrams, *The Yellow Birds* (2012) by Kevin Powers, *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (2012) by Ben Fountain, *Redeployment* (2015) by Phil Klay and *War Porn* (2016) by Roy Scranton.

The authors of the three selected works, *The Yellow Birds* (2012), *Redeployment* (2015), and *War Porn* (2016), are American veterans who served in Iraq for different periods of time and received critical acclaim from a wide spectrum of critics and reviewers. Kevin Powers is a novelist, poet and war veteran who served in the US Army in Iraq as a machine gunner in 2004. Phil Klay is a fiction author who was deployed in Iraq as a Marine officer from 2005 to 2009. Roy Scranton, an associate professor of English literature in the University of Notre Dame who writes fiction, non-fiction, and poetry, served for fourteen months in Iraq.

The narratives in question provide diverse perspectives and engrossing insights into the 2003 war in Iraq and its repercussions on the lives of American soldiers and local people in Iraq. *The Yellow Birds* is narrated by Private John Bartle who recounts his experience while serving in the US Army between 2004 and 2005 in Al-Tafar, Iraq. He witnesses the appalling atrocities of war where death and destruction are the eventual and certain outcomes. In *Redeployment*, twelve stories explore America's recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan with twelve narrators who are militants, civilians, and chaplains, among others. *War Porn* integrates both the outsider and insider's angles: the stories of American soldiers and Iraqis are narrated in parallel. The three works addressed war in a rather realistic attitude and were successful in providing an insight into a war largely unfathomed internally for the majority of non-Iraqis around the world.

Powers' *The Yellow Birds*, shortlisted for the National Book Award, was labelled as a superlative and shot through with greatness (Mitchell 2012), a remarkable and extraordinary first novel (Kakutani 2012), "a masterpiece of war literature" (Mantel 2012), and "the first American literary masterpiece" on the Iraq War (Tobar 2012). Scott Beauchamp (2017) praised the lyrical strength of Powers' work and considered it a testament to humanist values and traditions. Walter (2016) argued that Powers' work helped readers to access the realities of war by concentrating on Bartle's recollections. Bartle got estranged from the American culture while internalising the awful actuality of war in Iraq (Hawkins 2014). He was the victim of war, the American public, and political deception (2016 Mann). He was also the victim of repetitive scenes of bereavement that shattered any possible awareness of a shared humanity (O'Gorman 2015). Bartle's guilt complex was incorporated into the novel's representation of war (Nester 2013); his felt guilt which pervaded the narrative was derived from the consciousness of 'the disintegration of any trace of humanity' (Precup 2017, 188). Still, the status of Iraqis' lives and accountability in the war were not problematized or given due examination.

Klay's story collection, which received the 2014 National Book Award, was described as "the best thing written so far on what the war did to people's souls" (Filkins 2014), and "a must-read for anyone with the slightest interest in the actuality of the wars that have been fought in our names" (Docx 2014). *Redeployment* was regarded, by some reviewers, as an anti-war work that exposed the despicability of war; it drew Americans' attention to the appalling stories of soldiers and asked them to reassess their involvement in the Middle Eastern wars (Kunsa 2017). In agreement with Kunsa's point, Paul Petrovic

(2018) claimed that *Redeployment* correctly condemned war and soldiers' unquestionable misbehaviors. It elevated readers' consciousness of what it was like to experience combat without dictating specific attributes about soldiers' actions and behaviors (Booth 2019). It did not seek to persuade readers to pity American soldiers or disregard the sufferings of their victims. Klay's work chronicled soldiers' experience of being entirely at the mercy of broader political machinations and compellingly recounted the ways in which various forms of large-scale political manipulation had metastasized throughout the broader culture (Thompson 2019).

Scranton's debut novel, *War Porn* (2016), was pronounced as one of the best and most disturbing war novels in years as it diverged fundamentally from other recent works on the 2003 Iraq War (Colla 2016). Unlike other war works, Scranton's appropriated the intersections of the lives of both American and Iraqi characters and elaborated on the influence of war on their existence (Peter 2016). It forced American people to reconsider how they think about the Iraq War and their treatment of those who served there (Peter 2016). Even though it was characteristic of contemporary war fiction to address issues of trauma, the difficulty of the return from war, the gap between those who witnessed and those who did not, and the unspeakable war experience, *War Porn* departed from these works as it declined to redeem soldiers who misbehaved or to depict them sympathetically; it took America to move beyond the hero cult that surrounded the US Military (Molin 2017). It courageously presented war as a corrosive force that corrupted everyone it touched (Peter 2016). Barbara Kowalczuk (2019) elaborated on how veteran Aaron Stojanowski's involvement in torture and sexual practices against detainees in Iraq invoked his sadistic behaviour with Dahlia. Kowalczuk rightly praised Scranton's emphasis on the fact that torture cannot be morally justified. Scranton created a space loaded with historical references that elicit reflection on reiterated acts of human violation (Kowalczuk 2019). Yet, the overall sufferings of Iraqis out of jail and the influence of war on their daily lives were not addressed in the least, though essential to the whole issue of vulnerability.

This study examines the three novels in question with respect to American service members' attitudes towards Iraqis and how their actions influence the lives of local people. It problematizes the status of life/death of local people in Iraq within the context of the 2003 War on Iraq and culpability for atrocities committed in that war. It aims at uncovering the differential methods implemented by Americans to approach the lives and deaths of non-citizens in Iraq and the overlooked accountability of soldiers for war atrocities.

Conceptual Framework and Methodology

In the last days of his presidency, Donald Trump pardoned four security guards who worked for the private military company, Blackwater, and were convicted for killing 14 civilians including two children in Baghdad after international turmoil over the massacre in 2007 (Safi 2020). One may wonder whether those killers ever contemplated the consequences of killing that number of non-combatant people, including children, who did not pose any threat to their lives? What makes the lives of those Iraqis too

precarious? Another valid question is whether the lives of these victims have any value for those who pardoned their murderers? What message does such an act convey to those soldiers in the battlefields?

Judith Butler (2004, 2009) addresses such questions in her seminal works, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004) and *Frames of War: When is life grievable?* (2009). She asks, "Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? [...] What *makes for a grievable life*? [Butler's Emphasis] (Butler 2004, 20), and "whose lives are considered valuable, whose lives are mourned, and whose lives are considered ungrievable[?]" (Butler 2009, 38). She contends that people are defined politically through the social vulnerability of their "bodies-as a site of desire and physical vulnerability, as a site of a publicity at once assertive and exposed" (Butler 2004, 20). Loss and vulnerability are related to people's social affiliations and attachment to others; belonging to one country makes one more/less vulnerable depending on the country in question. In Western societies, the lives of non-Western people are not considered lives whatsoever; they are not humanized as they do not fit as humans (Butler 2004). After being dehumanized, physical violence is inflicted on them, reiterating the message of dehumanization that is already at work in the culture (Butler 2004). Such discourse is also operative when the violence perpetrated against the dehumanized is omitted (Butler 2004). People in the West do not have images of any of the thousands of Iraqi children killed during the 2003 war on Iraq. They do not recall any stories of specific people with proper names or facial expressions because they have not encountered any in the media.

The victims of the United States' wars have no obituaries and there cannot be because "if there is an obituary, there would have had to have been a life, a life worth noting, a life worth valuing and preserving" (Butler 2004, 34). When a life is not grievable, it is not a life; it does not qualify as one and does not deserve a note. Butler (2009) argues that war divides populations into two categories, grievable and ungrievable lives.

> An ungrievable life is one that cannot be mourned because it has never lived, that is, it has never counted as a life at all. We can see the division of the globe into grievable and ungrievable lives from the perspective of those who wage war in order to defend the lives of certain communities, and to defend them against the lives of others--even if it means taking those latter lives. (Butler 2009, 38)

Hence, the victims of the 9/11 attacks are presented with their names, pictures, families, friends, and stories. They receive public grieving and their images become iconic for the nation, while there is considerably less public grieving for non-Americans and none for illegal workers (Butler 2009). What makes the difference is being included in and identified with a certain national group.

People believe that their existence is reliant on those who share their national affinity, who are recognizable to them, and "who conform to certain culturally specific notions about what the culturally recognizable human is" (Butler 2009, 42). Through such a framework, differentiation is created tacitly between those populations on whom our existence depends, and those populations who represent a threat to our life and existence (Butler 2009). Therefore, when a certain group of people seems to be posing a direct threat to Western lives, they do not appear as lives, but rather a threat to their lives (Butler 2009).

Those killed are to be considered as not quite human and not quite alive which clarifies why their death does not produce the same degree of outrage when compared to the effect produced by the loss of those with similar national or/and religious identity.

Talal Asad (2007) wonders why people feel horrified and morally repulsed regarding suicide bombing while they do not have the same reaction towards state-sponsored violence. He argues that people are more horrified and repulsed when lives are lost within certain circumstances than under others. Though Western countries do not always abide by Geneva Conventions, they believe that they are morally advanced and different from other nations (Asad 2007). They start violence without being held culpable for their acts and without providing substantial justifications for such wars; "they have always constituted an integral part of the right to defend oneself and one's way of life" (Asad 2007, 60). Asad argues that in a modern state, life is guaranteed for "the citizen-soldier who is prepared to kill and die for it, yet whose health, longevity, and general physical well-being are objects of the democratic state's solicitude" (Asad 2007, 61-61). In the post-9/11 public discourse, certain norms define who is human, entitled to human rights, and who is not which implies the notion of grievability: "whose life, if extinguished, would be publicly grievable and whose life would leave either no public trace to grieve, or only a partial, mangled, and enigmatic trace?" (Butler 2009, 75). These norms create "the nearly impossible paradox of a human who is no human, or of the human who effaces the human as it is otherwise known" (Butler 2009, 76). Therefore, Iraqis and Afghans are killed and their countries are devastated because they pose a threat to the human westerners, "who are worth valuing, whose lives are worth safeguarding, whose lives are precarious, and, when lost, are worth public grieving" (Butler 2009, 125). Western citizens are thus defended and protected at the expense of non-citizens who become more vulnerable to aggression and violence.

This article investigates Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds* (2012), selected stories from Phil Klay's *Redeployment* (2015) that integrate the lives of Iraqis, and Roy Scranton's *War Porn* (2016) regarding their delineation of the value of life and grieve(ability) of Iraqi people in the context of the 2003 Iraq War and the authors' disposition concerning Americans' culpability for death and destruction in Iraq. We investigate the narratives in question and compare their approaches to the lives of Iraqis in two constructs; in 'vulnerable lives,' we analyse the narratives' delineations of local people in terms of their vulnerability, whereas in 'accountability and culpability in war' we elaborate on how these works handle the issue of accountability for war transgressions.

Vulnerable Lives

When the US. government released photographs of the Guantanamo Bay detention camp, human rights organisations condemned the measures taken against detainees as they were degraded and rendered faceless (Butler 2004). American Secretary of Defence, Donald Rumsfeld, appears to substantiate the idea that "the detainees are not like other humans who enter into war, and that they are, in this respect, not "punishable" by law, but deserving of immediate and sustained forcible incarceration" (Butler 2004, 73). They are less than human, however, in a human form; they represent "an equivocation of the human,

which forms the basis for some of the skepticism about the applicability of legal entitlements and protections" (Butler 2004, 74). Their basic rights are disfranchised, and their lives are made vulnerable because they are considered less human, and hence cannot be treated like ones.

The voice of Iraqis is almost lost in *The Yellow Birds* and *Redeployment*, though we can hear their wails in many parts of Powers' novel. Their presence appears to be secondary and complementary to the stories of American soldiers. Scranton's novel, however, integrates an essential part of the novel to present the war from an insider perspective(s). Othman, an Iraqi citizen, imagines how American pilots would bombard Baghdad with their advanced and destructive B-52s; they would "call their wives and girlfriends before the mission [...] They'd walk out to their planes and high-five each other, saying "Got one fer Saddam!" and "Kiss my grits!" (Scranton 2016, 205-206). They would,

> push buttons on their control panels and hundreds of bombs would fall from their machines onto *his* city. The earth would shake, buildings crumble, men die engulfed in storms of white-hot metal, children and women screaming, blood bubbling on blistering lips, and the pilots would high-five, saying, "How you like them apples?" Relaxing now, they'd turn their big silver planes and fly [...] all the way back to their wives and girlfriends, who'd kiss them on the runway and say, "Bet you showed them what for!" Then they'd drive to fancy restaurants in sports cars, wearing tuxedos, and eat steak and drink Johnny Walker Black. [Emphasis added] (206)

Othman envisions his city bombed by pilots who do not heed the many lives affected by their raids. Americans return home to resume their comfortable life after exacting destruction, death and suffering on Iraqis, whose lives are valueless, and their sufferings are disregarded.

While Baghdad is bombarded day and night by American jets, Iraqis appear to be exposed to stress, fear, and conceivably, death. They watch these killing machines on TV, hear them on radio, from the roofs of their houses, and while in the streets (Scranton 2016). Iraqis,

> soldiers and civilians, arms and legs roasting, broken by falling stone, intestines spilling onto concrete; homes and barracks, walls ripped open [...] all scurrying to hide in dim burrows, where they would wait to die, as many died, some slowly from disease and infection, others quick in bursts of light, thickets of tumbling steel, halos of dust, crushed by the world's greatest army. [...] As the bombing grew worse, the terror of it stained every living moment. Sleep was a fractured nightmare of the day before, cut short by another raid. Stillness and quiet didn't mean peace, only more hours of anxious waiting—or death. Even the comfort of family rubbed raw. (214).

Unlike Powers and Klay who are principally concerned with the experiences of American soldiers, Scranton is largely interested in conveying the consequences of war on Iraqis and how it affects their livelihood on the individual level. He presents their personal experiences and tries to make their faces, voices, and actions memorable for the readership. Scranton also features the mass degree of horror and anguish undergone by Iraqis of all backgrounds and ages by the indifferent killing machines. American

killing machines do not differentiate between militants and civilians or between Saddam's loyalists and antagonists; the lives of Iraqis are of no value.

Unspeakable stories of death and the smell of burning bodies seem to prevail over the scenes of battles in Iraq. Images of charred corpses are prevalent in Power's *The Yellow Birds* and Klay's *Redeployment*; however, Iraqis' sufferings are by far the most visible in Scranton's *War Porn*. "Armored ruins lined the road in squads, charred corpses scattered in among the blasted metal. A dead Iraqi grinned where fire had burned away his face, leaving yellowed teeth in a black ring, eye sockets smears of shadowed flesh" (Scranton 2016, 48). The Iraqi in this context is the ultimate victim of war; his identity is reiterated within the scene of death and destruction to remind readers that Iraqis pay by far the highest cost in war.

As the war continues, the lives of Iraqis appear to be overwhelmed by the prolonged and horrible reality of war. *War Porn* recounts the psychological fallout of war on Iraqis where death hovers over their life day and night. Warda, the Iraqi mother, keeps herself busy doing house chores to escape brooding over the fate of her children and husband; she cannot imagine "her little Siraj lifeless and torn, or Abdul-Majid, who cried and fussed so much, falling quiet forever—it was an emptiness the depths of which Warda refused to peer into. To lose her beloved Ratib [...] would be losing the world" (215-216). Scranton approaches the struggle of Iraqis to cope with the reality of war at a personal level; we can remember the names and faces of these Iraqi characters and recall their detailed anguishes. Though the wails of Iraqis are sometimes heard in Powers' novel, "[a] chorus of grim wails began" (2012, 169), the reader is not aware of the personal dimension; we can hear the collective sound of the suffering without any individual experience attached to it. Klay's stories are even less slanted toward such individual stories of local people.

War Porn also reiterates the influence of war on the lives of local people in Iraq. It presents their views on the war as they watch American tanks move freely in their lands and Iraqi soldiers "surrender [and] die" (Scranton 2016, 217). They see "their brothers and husbands and sons forced to their knees and thrown like trash into the backs of trucks, blindfolded and hog-tied. On Al Jazeera, they [see] children in rubble, ruptured bodies leaking like cracked pomegranates" (217). They see on CNN "generals pointing at big maps full of arrows. Allahu akbar, cried the muezzin, la ilaha illallah. And more bombs fell' (217). American channels, like CNN, present the war on Iraq as a fight against abstract targets, not human beings. As Scranton discredits American news outlets, he enables the voices of Iraqi people to reach American readers and shows them how the US media ignores the anguishes and misfortunes of Iraqi people and disfranchises their humanity.

A good portion of the last part of *War Porn* is assigned to torture acts committed by American soldiers in Iraq. The prelude to the section celebrates ironically the values of American soldiers,

> i am an american soldier
> i am a warrior and a member of a team
> i serve the people of the united states
> and live the army values (Scranton 2016, 279)

Scranton mocks these values as he reminds readers of atrocities committed against Iraqi detainees; "[p]ictures come out of hadjis [Iraqis] getting fucked with at one of the prisons. Hadjis getting punched, hadjis standing on boxes, hadjis with panties on their heads, naked hadjis getting laughed at by skanky Nasty Girl bitches" (279-280). As American soldiers celebrate the values of their Army, Scranton reminds the readership of some of the leaked pictures from American-controlled prisons in Iraq.

The safety of American soldiers is prioritised at the cost of Iraqis' lives, even when they are children. As American Humvees are patrolling near an Iraqi village, a group of Iraqi kids run to them to sell some knives and other refreshments (Scranton 2016). They behave innocently and spontaneously, unconscious of the danger they are exposed to because of their proximity to the American soldiers. In the meanwhile, Americans receive orders via radio that they must not stop or buy anything from Iraqis. Sergeant Chandler inquires back through the radio, "Can I shoot one, sir?" (46). As the kids get closer, Captain Yarrow orders the driver, "If they get in front of us, honk. And if they don't get out of the way, run him over. *I mean it.* Run him over" [Emphasis added] (47). To add more effect to the pitiless order, the soldier instantly imagines the boy's "body dragged beneath the humvee's tires, three tons of steel rolling over his chest, squirting intestines onto the road" (47). The lives of the Iraqi kids are threatened just because of their closeness to American soldiers; Iraqis' lives have no value when compared to the soldiers' security. The novel accentuates the children's innocence within the self-centred mindset that controls the behaviour of American soldiers.

In the time of war, Iraqis are maltreated by the same people who claimed to liberate them from Saddam's tyranny and to bring them freedom and prosperity. They are made less human and more object-like beings. As American soldiers search Iraqis' cars for arms and explosives, they abuse them; "[w]e made fun of them, scowling, shouting, laughing. We pointed at a fat one, mimed his belly, and asked, "Baby? You have baby?" His friends laughed and he blushed, frowning" (Scranton 2016, 109-110). They are treated like objects of suspicion; "Burnett grabbed the man *by the back of the neck and pushed his head toward the ground*. "Watch the dirt."" [Emphasis Added] (115). Moreover, they are "*processed*—screamed at, kicked, manhandled, handcuffed, then led away to get their very own orange jumpsuits. Burnett and some of the others clapped" [Emphasis Added] (115). They are processed like objects of suspicion, rather than human beings, to safeguard Americans' lives; they are disenfranchised from their basic human rights to guarantee Americans' security.

Since the lives of Iraqis are insignificant for American soldiers, the notion of soldiers' enthusiasm for killing Iraqis is prevalent in many war novels (Powers 2012; Klay 2015; Scranton 2016). Soldiers would look forward to having their first kill at war and when any of them achieves that goal, he would celebrate the occasion with his colleagues. A soldier puts a round in the chamber of his firearm and "prepare[s] to kill" (Scranton 2016, 78). The difficult weather and living conditions in Iraq would make him "both want and fear needing a reason to pull [his] trigger, to feel [his] grip buck in [his] hands, to tear jagged red holes in men's flesh" (78). Despite his fear, the soldier expresses the urge to kill and envisions the outcome of his shooting. Soldiers are willing to kill because they fear no consequences. The lives of Iraqi people seem insignificant when it comes to safeguarding the lives of Americans, "*to make America*

safe, and to make the world safe for America" [Scranton's Emphasis] (57), as Lieutenant Colonel Braddock puts it in a speech delivered to American soldiers.

Iraq is rather an ancient curse for many American soldiers who feel puzzled by its unfathomed culture and insecure terrain. American soldiers suggest that it would "be better off if we [Americans] just nuked it [Iraq] until the desert turned into a flat plane of glass" (Klay 2015, 131). A bartender tells an American soldier who just came back from Iraq that Americans ought to "nuke those sand niggers back to the Stone Age [...] Turn the whole place into glass [...] Whole place is full of savages, is what I hear" (Powers 2012, 106), and the soldier answers, "Yeah, man. Something like that" (106). A soldier also wonders why they "don't just nuke [...] [t]he stupid fucking place" (86). "We shoulda just fucking nuked this fucking fucked-up fuckhole from the fucking start. And then we come back and take the oil whenever we want" (Scranton 2016, 87). The lives of Iraqi people seem to be on the margins of Americans' interest, what interests them most is oil. Scranton is rather more explicit about Americans' disregard for Iraqis' lives for the sake of their own interests in the region.

Under American occupation, Iraqis are insulted and humiliated in their own houses and in front of their household (Scranton 2016). American soldiers break into a house of an Iraqi citizen and force the door open. A soldier kicks the door open to see an Iraqi man standing "in the corner in his underpants, shielding his face. "On your knees, motherfucker!"" (282). While the man moves slowly, he is slammed by the butt of a rifle in his gut and jack-knifed at the waist by another soldier. After he is tied, they drag him to the other room and dump him on the floor. They drag another man, a middle-aged man in boxers while a "woman wails somewhere" and one soldier shouts, "Shut that bitch up" (283). One of the two Iraqi men keeps "weeping on the floor, begging for his life" while the other sits "muttering, his bottom lip swollen and bleeding. A woman in a scarf is howling after Staff Sergeant Smith and Burnett as they come down the stairs. Two kids watch from the second floor" (248). After all the mess soldiers have made, they realise that this is the "[w]rong house" (248). The privacy, dignity and safety of Iraqis appear to be disregarded in their homeland when it comes to Americans' security.

American service members in Klay's "Frago" are keen on the lives of Iraqi people even when they are exposed to danger and even if they belong to a terrorist group. Dyer, the American Private, regrets shooting an al-Qaeda member in the face as he turns up suddenly while Americans are checking an al-Qaeda hideout (Klay 2015). Dyer provides first aid assistance to the injured man, although he is not allowed to do so with his own kit. When he is told that the man has died, he is distraught and preoccupied with the occurrence for a long time. Such stories induce sympathy with soldiers who appear more like victims of war who are overwhelmed by its burdens.

At the core of *War Porn* is the story of Qasim, the Iraqi professor who is obsessed with pursuing his Ph.D. in mathematics despite the dire situation in Iraq. Although the stories of the Iraqi family and American soldiers are recounted in separate sections for the most part of the novel, they are joined when Aaron shares his war porn, i.e., images, videos and stories containing graphic violence, often taken from combat zones, files he brought from his service in Iraq with Matt. One picture shows Qasim, "hanging against the cell door, naked now, blood across his chest and thighs, his face cut, bruised, swollen, and

bleeding" (Scranton 2016, 320). Another picture taken some days later shows Aaron "pulling Qasim's head back by his hair and holding his other hand flat in a karate chop against Qasim's neck" (321). In the next one, Qasim's face is "pressed into the cell bars. Aaron grinned, standing behind him forcing his skull into the metal, one hand pulling the crossbar for leverage" (321). Aaron confesses that such treatment of detainees is mainly made to "take the pictures. I mean, it wasn't a real interrogation. Just fucking around [...] having that much physical control over somebody, knowing what you're doing" (321-322). Scranton shows how Qasim, a Saddam hater, who believes that Americans should stay in Iraq to help build democracy, law-ruled institutions and improve life in general, is ironically tortured and killed by these very Americans despite his recurrent attempts to tell them that he works as a translator for the US. Army. He is detained and killed by mistake which emphasizes the precarity and vulnerability of local lives under American occupation.

Americans, not Iraqis, are the most visible subjects of suffering in *The Yellow Birds*; readers sympathise with their stories, feel their pain, and see their tears and wounds. After serving in the US. Army for months in Iraq, Murph, who is eighteen, surrenders "fully to the war" (Powers 2012, 80). He walks "naked [...] as a ghost, his feet and legs bleeding from his walk through the wire and detritus" (195). After yielding to psychosis, he wanders aimlessly and unconsciously until he is kidnapped by Iraqis.

> He was broken and bruised and cut and still pale except for his face and hands, and now his eyes had been gouged out, the two hollow sockets looking like red angry passages to his mind. His throat had been cut nearly through, his head hung limply and lolled from side to side, attached only by the barely intact vertebrae. We dragged him like a shot deer out of a wood line, trying but failing to keep his naked body from banging against the hard ground and bouncing in a way that would be forever burned into our memories. His ears were cut off. His nose cut off, too. [...] He had been imprecisely castrated. He'd been with us for ten months. He was eighteen years old. Now he was anonymous. (205-206).

The horrible scene of Murph's death would definitely induce readers' sympathy, especially as they are already aware of his mental illness; he is the innocent victim of war. The case of Murph's total innocence is contrasted with his aggressors' absolute brutality and evilness. American soldiers become war's most vulnerable victims, whereas Iraqis become its absolute villains.

All lives appear to be vulnerable in war regardless to their age, gender or nationality (Powers 2012; Klay 2015; Scranton 2016). Both Powers and Klay's works are more focused on Americans' victimized status, whilst Scranton's is keen on showcasing Iraqis' vulnerable position by giving them far more narrative space to highlight their suffering.

Accountability and Culpability in War

In a survey conducted in 2011 by the Pew Research Center, albeit most Americans do not approve the war on Iraq and Afghanistan, 90 percent of them are proud of service members in the US (Peter

2016). In all wars waged by the United States of America, blame is shouldered on geopolitics and the war, but definitely not on those soldiers who participate in those wars (Peter 2016). Although it is acceptable to question the very motives and repercussions of these wars, it is almost unacceptable to criticise those who fought them.

Most narratives written by American veterans depict American soldiers sympathetically; they basically convey the miseries of American service members even when they are inflicting pain and death on local people (Scranton 2015). American soldiers and Iraqis are alike, they are both the victims of war in *The Yellow Birds*. They are the sufferers of an abstraction called war; "THE WAR TRIED to kill us in the spring [...] Then, in summer, the war tried to kill us [...] It tried to kill us every day [...] We were not destined to survive" (Powers 2012, 3-4). While culpability for atrocities committed in the Iraq War is abstruse, American soldiers are its most innocent victims.

Though the chaplain in Klay's "Prayer in The Furnace" is concerned about atrocities committed by some American soldiers, excuses are made to lessen the degree of responsibility and highlight the bright side of soldiers' behaviour. Major Eklund explains to the chaplain that,

> [s]ometimes, by accident, there's civilian casualties. It's not our fault [...] you have no idea what these guys [soldiers] are dealing with. On my last deployment I saw a couple insurgents literally hiding *behind a group of Iraqi children* and shooting at us. Do you know how hard it is to get shot at and not respond? And that's what my Marines did. They let themselves get shot at because they didn't want to risk hurting children. [...] *Most Marines are good kids*. Really good kids. But it's like they say, this is *a morally bruising battlefield*. My first deployment, some of those same Marines fired on a vehicle coming too fast at a TCP. They killed a family, but they followed EOF perfectly. The driver was drunk or crazy or whatever and kept coming, even after the warning shots. *They fired on the car to save the lives of their fellow Marines*. Which is *noble*, even if you then find out you didn't kill al-Qaeda—you killed a nine-year-old girl and her parents instead [Emphasis Added] (Klay 2015, 145).

While most American soldiers try to avoid causing harm to local people, especially children, Iraqis are shown to be in charge of their own deaths. Iraqis are blamed for taking advantage of Americans' humane measures to avoid harming children and for their carelessness to precautions (Alosman 2021). The "morally bruising battlefield" is also held accountable (Klay 2015, 145), but not American soldiers.

Scranton raises the issue of soldiers' accountability for their misdeeds in war all through *War Porn*. They are not merely the passive executors of orders; they are in charge of those atrocities and are to be held accountable. Matt and Rachel investigate Aaron regarding his service in Iraq. When Aaron declares that "it doesn't really fucking matter what we [American soldiers] do" (Scranton 2016, 28), Rachel retorts, "[t]here are serious problems in the world, but people do things to make change happen. We can hold governments accountable" (29). Aaron claims that Iraq is a "disaster [...] And it doesn't matter what the fuck we think about it, because the guys who run shit don't give a rat's ass what people like you and

me think" (29). The moment Aaron tries to play the role of the victim, "I'm all traumatized" (29), Matt and Rachel reiterate individuals' responsibility for their choices in life, especially those which affect the lives of others such as choosing to join the military and "kill people" (30). The Narrative takes the argument to the next level by unswervingly addressing the illegal status of the war on Iraq when Mel joins Matt and Rachel to interrogate Aaron. Mel objects to Aaron's argument, "[y]ou know it's [war on Iraq] *illegal*, but you do it anyway. People die and you don't even fucking care. You could've not gone. You could've been a conscientious *objector*" [Emphasis Added] (Scranton 2016, 30). Mel corners Aaron by reminding him of the many alternatives he could have chosen from instead of taking part in an unjust war; one of the options Mel suggests is to be an objector to the war. Soldiers are held accountable for the war and its grim ramifications on the lives of locals in Iraq.

Scranton (2015) contends that the vast majority of war writers, like Wilfred Owen, Leo Tolstoy, Ernest Hemingway, Tim O'Brien, Kevin Powers and Phil Klay ensure soldiers' vindication in their works. Men are answerable for their deeds in *War Porn*; "I just can't understand how you can take part in an illegal war that kills thousands of innocent people [...] *Like you didn't choose*. That's what seems completely fucked to me" [Emphasis Added] (Scranton 2016, 31). Then, the argument reaches a climax as Mel declares, "[i]t's like the Nazis [...] Like some people do it just because other people tell them to [...] Loads of German people were just doing what they were told [...] Evil is evil" (31). *War Porn* unequivocally exposes the war on Iraq as an immoral project and presents all those involved as culpable for its atrocities; it explicitly disavows the impunity enjoyed by the US. soldiers. *Redeployment* and *The Yellow Birds*, on the other hand, decline to hold soldiers accountable for their deeds at war, instead, they make them the very victims of wars.

Conclusion

Only pictures of children burning and dying from napalm could shock, enrage and grieve American people in the US war on Vietnam (Butler 2004). Americans were not supposed to see such pictures which uncovered a reality that disturbed the hegemonic field of representation itself and helped to develop a vital consensus against the war (Butler 2004). Without these pictures, the public would not have moved to challenge the war. Literature can also help expose the atrocities of war and make them more visible; it can also convey the voices of those who experience the despicable and tell their silenced stories.

The three narratives in question, Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds*, Phil Klay's *Redeployment* and Roy Scranton's *War Porn*, address brilliantly the despicability of war and demonstrate the stories of the vulnerable. However, the voices of Iraqis are lost in *The Yellow Birds* and *Redeployment*, though we can hear their unidentified wails in Powers' novel. Locals' presence is secondary and/or complementary to the stories of American soldiers. Scranton's novel, on the other hand, allocates an essential part of the narrative to illustrate the war from an insider perspective(s). It gives a significant space for local people and makes their anguishes, voices, and faces more recognizable and memorable as the most vulnerable and real victims of war. Readers can recollect some of these Iraqi characters and have empathy for all that they went through because of the war. Scranton also could persistently hold American soldiers

accountable for war atrocities while Powers and Klay tried to present soldiers sympathetically while disregarding their liability for the suffering of Iraqis.

Making the atrocities of war visible to the inattentive majority of people creates awareness and helps reduce the chances for future conflicts. Studies on these literary works also help provide more insight into the muzzled stories of war and make them more visible; hence, wars become more exposed, challenged, and hopefully, thwarted.

الحياة الهشة والملومية في رواية *(الحرب الأميريكية)*: دراسة مقارنة

محمد إقبال محمد العثمان
قسم اللغة الإنجليزيّة وآدابها، جامعة ظفار، سلطنة عُمان

الملخص

تركز هذة الدراسة على تحليل رواية كيفِن بورز *(الطيور الصفراء)*، مجموعة فِل كلى القصصية *(إعادة إنتشار)* ورواية روي سكرانتن *(فجور الحرب)* من حيث هشاشة حياة العراقيين في سياق حرب 2003 على العراق. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى كشف الطريقة التمايزية التي اتبعها الامريكان في التعامل مع حياة العراقيين والملومية فيما يتعلق بفظاعات تلك الحرب. تستند هذة الورقة على أطروحة جودِث بتلر والتي تؤكد فيها أن المجتمعات الغربية تتعامل مع حياة/موت غير الغربيين بطريقة تمايزية حيث تعطى الأولوية لحياة الغربيين على حساب سلامة و أمان غير الغربيين. يتم إجراء البحث عن طريق التحليل المقارن للأعمال المختارة في بابين: "حياة هشة" و"المسؤولية والملومية في الحرب". يدعي هذا البحث أن أعمال بورز وكلى تتركز بشكل رئيسٍ على ملومية الجنود الأمريكيين بينما يحرص سكرانتن على إظهار الحالة الهشة لحياة العراقيين ومسؤولية الجنود الأمريكيين عن مآسي هذة الحرب.

الكلمات المفتاحية: حرب العراق، كيفِن بورز، فِل كلى، روي سكرانتن، غير جدير بالحزن، رواية الحرب.

References

Alosman, M Ikbal M. 2021. Grievable and un-Grievable Lives: Phil Klay's Redeployment. *Humanitas - International Journal of Social Sciences* 9 (17): 30-44.

Booth, Allyson. 2019. Thank You for Your Service: Negotiating the civilian-military divide in Phil Klay's Redeployment. *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 61(2): 168-192.

Asad, Talal. 2007. *On Suicide Bombing.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Beauchamp, Scott. 2017. The Detached Literature of Remote Wars. *American Affairs* 1 (3): 184–96.

Butler, Judith. 2004. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso.

Butler, Judith. 2009. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* London: Verso.

Colla, Elliott. 2016. A veteran novel that finds no redemption in war. *The Intercept*. https://theintercept.com/2016/08/07/a-veteran-novel-that-finds-no-redemption-in-war/

Docx, Edward. 2014. Redeployment by Phil Klay review-'Incendiary stories of war'. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/mar/26/redeployment-phil-klay-review-incendiary-stories-of-war

Filkins, D. 2014. The long road home. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com

Gregory, Derek. 2004. *The Colonial Present*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Hawkins, Ty. 2014. The Great War, the Iraq War, and postmodern America: Kevin Powers' The Yellow Birds and the radical isolation of today's US veterans. In *The Great War in Post Memory Literature and Film*, edited by Martin Löschnigg and Marzena Sokolowska-Paryz, 95-108. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter.

Klay, Phil. 2015. *Redeployment*. New York: Penguin,

Kowalczuk, Barbara. 2019. "Some Real War Shit.… I Fucking Held the Camera": Re-implacing Iraq in Roy Scranton's War Porn (2016). *Sillages Critiques* (27). https://journals.openedition .org/sillagescritiques/8897

Kunsa, A. 2017. Reconstructing the war in Iraq: Post-9/11 American war fiction in dialogue with official-media discourse. PhD diss. Duquesne University.

Mann, J. 2016. Mapping Memory: Moving between Trauma and Terror in the Yellow Birds. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 58 (4): 340-350.

Mantel, Hilary. 2012. Writers (and rockers) on their books of the year. *The Times.* https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/writers-and-rockers-on-their-books-of-the-year-vcww2536pds

Mitchell, David. 2012. David Mitchell: By the book. *New York Times*. https://www.nytimes .com/2012/10/21 /books/review/david-mitchell-by-the-book.html

Molin, Peter. 2017. Frederick Busch and Annie Proulx Forebears of Contemporary War Fiction. *WLA; War, Literature and the Arts* 29: 1-10.

Nester, Thomas. 2013. Book review: The Price of War. *Bridgewater Review* 32 (1): 39-40.

O'Gorman, Daniel. 2015. Refiguring Difference: Imaginative Geographies and "Connective Dissonance" in Three Novels of the Iraq War. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 56 (5): 545-559.

Peter, Tom A. 2016. Finally, a realistic Iraq War novel. *The New Republic*. https://newrepublic.com/article/135730/finally-realistic-iraq-war-novel

Petrovic, Paul. 2018. Beyond Appropriation: Arab, Coptic American, and Persian subjectivities in BrianTurner's Here, Bullet, Phil Klay's Redeployment, and Elliot Ackerman's Green on Blue. *War, Literature & the Arts: an international journal of the humanities* 30 :1–24.

Powers, Kevin. 2012. *The Yellow Birds*. New York: Little, Brown and Company,

Precup, Amelia. 2017. Reversing Absence. The Explorations of Memory in the Yellow Birds by Kevin Powers. *Studia Ubb Philologia* 62 (1): 173-190.

Safi, Michael. 2020. Trump pardons Blackwater contractors jailed for massacre of Iraq civilians. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/23/trump-pardons-blackwater-contractors-jailed-for-massacre-of-iraq-civilians

Scranton, Roy. 2016. *War Porn*. New York: Soho Press.

Scranton, Roy. 2015. The trauma hero: From Wilfred Owen to Redeployment and American Sniper. *Los Angeles Review of Books*. https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/trauma-hero-wilfred-owen-redeployment-american-sniper/

Thompson, Lucas. 2019. "PsyOps Works Best When You Mean It": Literary Manipulation in Phil Klay's Redeployment. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 60 (2): 191-204.

Tobar, Hector. 2012. Kevin Powers' haunting Iraq war novel. *Los Angeles Times*. http://articles.latimes.com/2012/nov/10/entertainment/la-ca-jc-kevin-powers-20121111

Walter, Anke. 2016. "What it felt like": Memory and the Sensations of War in Vergil's *Aeneid* and *Kevin* Powers' *The Yellow Birds. Thersites* 4: 275-312.