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Adab Al-Rafidayn Journal

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Editor-in-chief

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***Impact of War in Yasmina Khadra's The Sirens of Baghdad and Kevin Powers' The Yellow Birds*¹**

Mahmood faez Gaddawi *

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Abstract

This paper deals with Iraq war novels, which emerged after the invasion of Iraq in 2003 by the coalition forces led by the United States. It tackles the negative effects of war in *The Sirens of Baghdad* by Yasmina Khadra and Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds*.

The two novels discuss the effect of war through different points of view. The first novel *The Sirens of Baghdad* was written by Yasmina Khadar, an Arab Algerian writer which is narrated by a young Iraqi, whereas the second one was written by Kevin Powers, an Iraq war veteran and is narrated by the character of Bartle, an American soldier who had served in Iraq.

The paper focuses on the consequences of war such as death, violence, loss of innocence, mental disorders of American soldiers and difficulty of readjustment after returning home.

Keywords: War Literature ؛ Iraq War Novel ؛ Terrorism ؛ War Trauma.

Introduction

After the invasion of Iraq or The Second Gulf War in 2003, many literary works appeared in different languages and in all literary genres specifically poetry, drama and fiction. In fact, the literary works that deal with the issue of Iraq war go back many years

¹This paper is based on my M.A. Thesis, which is entitled “Images of War in Iraq War Fiction: A study of *The Sirens of Baghdad* and *The Yellow Birds*”

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before the invasion, like those works that discuss the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), the First Gulf War (1991), and the consequences of the war like the period of the Sanction against Iraq which lasted till the Fall of Baghdad in 2003.

In general, Iraq War novels can be classified according to the language or fiction genre. Most of the novels about Iraq War or Iraq Invasion are written in two basic languages: English and Arabic - because these two languages represent the two sides of struggle- besides many novels written in other languages like French, German, Kurdish and Turkish. Whereas according to the genre, these novels can also be classified into action thrillers and literary fiction.²

The Sirens of Baghdad

It is one of the famous novels that tackles the Iraq-war. It was written by Yasmina Khadra, the female pen name of the retired Algerian army officer Mohammed Moulessehoul. It was written in French and published in France in 2005 under the title *Les Sirenes de Baghdad*. Then it has been translated into English by John Cullen. *The Sirens of Baghdad* is the third and final novel of Khadra's famous trilogy about Islamic fundamentalism along with *The Attack*, which is set in Palestine and *The Swallows of Kabul* which is set in Afghanistan.

The novel tells the story of an unnamed Iraqi young student in University of Baghdad who is forced to go back to his desert village after the occupation of Iraq in 2003. Where, he witnessed three unspeakable brutal events committed by American troops. The first one is killing the village idiot boy Sulayman. The second event is the bombing of the wedding party. While the last incident is raiding his house by the American troops at midnight and insulting his family members and his father while he was naked. Full of revenge and hatred towards Americans, he decides to join the Iraqi

2 Gupta, Suman. *Imagining Iraq: Literature in English and the Iraq Invasion*. Chippenham and Eastbourne: Palgrave MacMillian 2011. Print. Chapter 5.

Resistance, but unfortunately, he joins a terrorist group and is prepared to be sent to London as a suicide bomber to perform a major terrorist operation there. Senoussi describes this novel:

In *The Sirens of Baghdad*, Yasmina Khadra takes us further into the realm of human destructiveness. It is indeed a chilling tale that describes the descent of a young Iraqi student into the abyss of horror and terror.³

The Yellow Birds

On the other hand, Kevin Powers' *The yellow Birds* is one of the famous Iraq war novels, it was published in 2012. Powers was born and raised in Richmond, Virginia and holds an MFA from the University of Texas at Austin, where he was a Michener Fellow in Poetry⁴. The writer is a veteran in the U. S. Army during Iraq-war, who served In Iraq particularly in Mosul and Tal Afar in 2004 and 2005 as a machine gunner. *The Yellow Birds* is his first novel.

Since its publication, *The Yellow Birds* has received a lot of reviews, readings and appreciation in the United States in particular, and in other parts of the world in general.

As Kevin Powers is a veteran of Iraq War, he truthfully and masterly depicts the ugliness and horror of war. He shows its impact on the psychological state of the soldiers and the influence of war on their behaviour.

The novel is basically about Private John Bartle, twenty one years old, and Private Daniel Murphy, an eighteen years old. They served in the U.S. Army in Iraq and linked in a strong friendship. Bartle's problem began when he promised Murphy's mother that he will bring him home alive. To keep his promise to Murphy's mother, Bartle will be the caretaker of Murphy's life, who is younger,

3 Senoussi, Muhammed. "The Terrorist Mindset in Yasmina Khadra's *The Sirens of Baghdad*." *Ishkalat in Language and Literature*. Ser. 17. Vol. 8, No. 2 (2019): 502. Print.

4 Straus, Peter. "Kevin Powers". *rcwlitagency*. RCW literary Agency, n. d. Web. 1 Sep. 2019.

sensitive and innocent. However, along the whole novel, Bartle is very worry since he cannot keep his promise, as Murphy is going to be killed. The novel takes place in different places in the United States, Iraq and Germany from 2003 to 2009 by using a nonlinear narrative structure.

1. Crimes and Loss of Innocence:

The loss of innocence as a result of violence and war is one of the most important themes in both novels. To begin with Yasmina Khadra's *The Sirens of Baghdad*, this theme is repeated many times as a result of violence, crimes, disorder and frustration. The protagonist, the young Iraqi man, was originally innocent, shy, peaceful and emotional, but because of the war, he transforms into a violent being who wants to destroy the whole world. He describes his innocent childhood:

I was an emotional person; I found other people's sorrows devastating. Whenever I passed a misfortune, I bore it away with me.... At school, my classmates considered me a weakling. ... In fact, I wasn't a weakling; I simply hated violence.⁵

Then the protagonist describes his transformation and decline into violence:

I was stunned by how easy it was to pass from one world to another... The weakling who had vomited at the sight of blood and lost his head when shots rang out was far, I was born again as a someone else, someone hard , cold, implacable...⁶

5 Khadra, Yasmina. *The Sirens of Baghdad*. Trans. John Cullen. London: Vintage Books, 2007. Print. P. 96-97.

6 *ibid.*,194-195.

On another occasion, he expresses his hatred and instinct to revenge: "I had only one desire: I wanted the whole planet from North Pole to the South Pole, to go up in smoke"⁷

The same thing happens with some other young men from the village of Kafr Karam like Yaseen and his band who descended into violence and terrorism as they joined a terrorist group instead of joining the national resistance, like some lads of the village. Hence, they commit horrible and unspeakable crimes. For them, killing and shooting become a piece of cake, they become blood thirsty especially Yaseen who exceeds the other members in his crimes. Loss of innocence leads Yaseen to kill Omar, instead of being from the same village, just because he suspected him.

In *The Yellow Birds*, the writer focuses on crime and bloodshed. Crime and war are two sides of the same coin; simply war means crimes and bloodshed. Hence, this theme is a recurring one in most of war novels. Some American troops in Iraq committed brutal crimes against civilians, sometimes in the name of duty as happens in *The yellow Birds* through the character of Sterling who is the embodiment of crime and bloodshed. He commits many crimes along the novel like killing an old man and a woman, burning the minaret of a mosque and some other crimes. Bartle, on his turn, takes part in some crimes in the name of duty as long as to save his life as he thinks.

One of the horrible crimes is killing an old man and an elderly woman in their car by Sterling. Bartle comments on this accident:

.... I looked through my scope and saw an old man behind the wheel and an elderly woman in the back passenger seat. Sterling laughed. "come on, motherfuckers." He couldn't see them. I'll yell, I thought. I'll tell him they are old, let them pass. But bullets bit at the crumbling road around the car. They punched into the sheet metal... but Sterling didn't stop

7 *ibid.*, 8.

the shooting , the bullets ripped through the car and out the other side..⁸

Another crime is burning the minaret of a mosque by Sterling:

He [Sterling] lit the Zippo and left it burning and dropped it into the dry brush at the base of the tower" then Bartle describes the scene: " The tower lit up like a flicking candle... I was briefly ashamed, but quickly forget why."⁹

Even the Americans themselves are hurt by the crimes like the incident of hiding Murph's corpse by Sterling and Bartle and throwing it in the Tigris. At the same time, they commit one more crime by killing coolly the Iraqi man who helped them shifting Murph's corpse by his cart to the edge of the river, after throwing the corpse in the river: "Sterling shot the Cartwright once, in the face, and he crumpled to the ground. No time to even be surprised by it."¹⁰

As a result of these crimes, and as a kind of poetic justice, Sterling will commit suicide later, whereas Bartle will face imprisonment for three years for hiding Murph's corpse and sending a false letter to Murph's mother under the name of her son. In addition to that, he faces readjustment problems to the new civil life after going back home as he suffers from trauma and psychological effects of war. He is haunted by the bitter memories and experiences of war, he feels guilty as he didn't achieve his promise to Murph's mother, especially as he took part in hiding his corpse.

2. Violence as a Result of Violence

The central theme in Yasmina Khadra's *The Sirens of Baghdad* is terrorism or violence as a reaction of violence. Amazon successfully

8 Powers, Kevin. *The Yellow Birds*. London: Sceptre, 2012. Print. P. 21-22.

9 *ibid.*, 209-210.

10 *ibid.*, 211.

describes the novel: "*The Sirens of Baghdad* is a powerful look at the effects of violence on ordinary people, showing what can turn a decent human being into a weapon and how the good in human nature can resist."¹¹

The hero turns to violence as a result of the three crimes which are committed by the American troops. However, after the first two crimes which are the killing of the idiot boy Sulayman and the bombing of the wedding party, the young man did not react violently. However, when the American troops raided his house at midnight and insulted his family members and his father while he was naked, he cannot be silent and immediately decided to revenge and wash the shame even by blood.

And I saw, while family's honor lay stricken on the floor, I saw what it was forbidden to see". He adds: "A Western cannot understand , cannot suspect the dimension of the disaster. For me, to see my father's sex was to reduce my entire existence, my values and my scruples, my pride..."¹²

Then he refers to the same incident when the American troops hurt his twin sister Bahia and hurt her by their weapons: "I heard Bahia grumble before falling silent all at once, struck by a fist or a rifle butt. Pallid and half-dressed, ..." ¹³

The American soldiers here insult his sisters, especially his twin sister Bahia. They do not respect the customs, religion and dignity of Iraqi people, especially women. Women are respected in Muslim and Arab society and have privacy and special dignity. Therefore, insulting one's mother, wife, sister or daughter by a stranger, will push him to react violently and may lead him to pay his life to revenge and wash the shame. For example, when the young man left his village to Baghdad, the smart car driver noticed his anger and

11 "Book description." Amazon.com. Amazon Company, 6 May 2008. Web.

12 Khadra, Yasmina. *The Sirens of Baghdad*. Trans. John Cullen. London: Vintage Books, 2007. Print. P. 101-102.

13 *ibid.*, 100.

yearning to revenge: "Take a look at yourself, my boy. You look like a bomb that's about to go off."¹⁴

In relation to this subject, Richard Marcus comments on the Bedouin society: "In the Bedouin tradition a son must never see his father in a state of undress, and to be exposed to his genitals is the gravest of dishonor."¹⁵

In fact, such crimes were very common in Iraq. The American troops used to raid the Iraqi's houses, where they frightened the innocent people like children, woman and old people as they blow up the doors of the houses during raiding especially at midnight, insult the members of the family, arrest the men, and sometimes steal money and jewelry. Senoussi quotes: "terrorists are often individuals who feel frustrated by their life circumstances or about the political climate in which they live or those who feel deeply humiliated and confused about their future path."¹⁶

Hence, the young man who is now full of revenge and hatred- decides to join the Iraqi Resistance, but he joins a fanatic group instead. Hence, he sinks in a sea of crimes and blood, till the final lines of the novel when he awakes and realizes that what he is going to do is a fatal crime towards humanity and the whole world, since the virus may kill millions of innocent people. Therefore, he decides to ignore his flight, where the novel ends.

3. Impact of War on Soldiers

This subject is basically related to the American novels, as the main characters in such novels are usually American soldiers who face difficulties during war in Iraq and readjustment problems after going back home.

14 *ibid.*, 123

15 Marcus, Richard. "Book Review: *The Sirens of Baghdad* by Yasmina Khadra." *Blogcritics*. Jon Sobel, Barbara Barnett, 27 Apr. 2007. Web.

16 Quoted in: Senoussi, Muhammed. "The Terrorist Mindset in Yasmina Khadra's *The Sirens of Baghdad*." *Ishkalat in Language and Literature*. Ser. 17. Vol. 8, No. 2 (2019): 500. Print.

In Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds*, he focuses on the disastrous consequences of war upon the soldiers. Even when the American soldiers go back home, they find difficulty in readjustment, as they could not readjust to the civil life. They could not forget the terrible memories of war, the crimes that are committed by some soldiers against the civilians –sometimes in the name of duty- Kevin Powers comments on this matter:

I wanted to show the whole picture. It's not just: you get off the plane, you're back home, everything's fine. Maybe the physical danger ends, but soldiers are still deeply at risk of being injured in a different way. I thought it was important to acknowledge that.¹⁷

In this novel, this theme is applied to the character of Bartle who suffers a lot even when he goes back home, as he finds difficulty in readjustment to the new civil life as he is haunted by war memories and the death of his close friend, Murph. "The post-discharge episodes insist on Bartle's inability to readjust to civilian life, on his callous indifference to human interaction."¹⁸

When he goes back to his country and meets his mother at airport, he does not feel peace and safety: "Oh, John, you're home" I did not believe her"¹⁹. Since "every little thing a trapdoor sending him into the dark place where the alligators wait with widening jaws."²⁰ In addition to that, rarely you find a soldier who did not lose a friend in the war. Finally, many soldiers are wounded during the war, some had lost their limbs, and others are deformed. While those who did not injure in the battles are injured psychologically.

17 Powers, Kevin. Interviewed by Sarah Crown. "Kevin Powers on *The Yellow Birds*: 'I felt those things, and asked the same questions'". *The Guardian* 13 Nov. 2012. Web.

18 Precup, Amella. "Reversing Absence. The Exploration of memory in *The Yellow Birds* by Kevin Powers." *Studia Ubb Philologia*. Lxii, 1, 2017, p. 180. Web. 11 Mar. 2020.

19 Powers, Kevin. *The Yellow Birds*. London: Sceptre, 2012. P. 109. Print.

20 Percy, Benjamin. "On the Ground 'The Yellow Birds' by Kevin Powers." *New York Times* 4 Oct. 2012. Web.

When Bartle was in Germany where he was waiting for his flight to the United States, his mind is occupied in war as he always tries to catch his rifle, which is not there. "my fingers closed around a rifle that was not there. I told them the rifle was not supposed to be there, but my fingers would not listen, .."²¹ This incident is repeated with him and other soldiers. During his home flight, he says: "my hands went close around the stock of the rifle that was not there. An NCO from third platoon sitting across the aisle saw it and smiled. "happened to me twice today He said," I didn't feel better"²². When he is in his native town, he still recalls the war and the sounds of falling mortars: "... the caws might strike in perfect harmony with the memory of the sound of falling mortars, and I, at home now,..."²³

Many soldiers after their return to the United States from Iraq commit suicide. In this novel, we know that sergeant Sterling for example is going to commit suicide. Bartle comments on this incident when he says:

I closed my eyes. When I closed them I saw sergeant sterling on the side of a mountain. Saw the rifle barrel in his mouth. Saw the way he went limp, so limp, so limp in that impossible moment when the small bullet emerged from his head.²⁴

4. Physical and Psychological Destruction

Another consequence of war is destruction, on both sides: physical and psychological. In *The Sirens of Baghdad*, Khadra depicts the occupied Baghdad as a destroyed and prehistory city. It was deformed by bombing cars, explosions, bullets, troops and terrorists. Iraq is described as: "all marking places where a vehicle had been surprised by an explosion or a barrage of a small-arms fire. Shards of broken glass, burst tires, and metal fragments lined the highway

21 Powers, Kevin. *The Yellow Birds*. London: Sceptre, 2012. P. 54. Print.

22 *ibid.*, 101.

23 *ibid.*, 134.

24 *Ibid.*, 188.

on both sides."²⁵ In chapter 13 he refers to the crimes and bloodshed scenes as a result of occupation: "I watched ambulance driver picking pieces of flesh from sidewalks, firemen evacuating blasted buildings, ..." ²⁶ On another occasion, he adds: "Murderous attacks were the order of the day."²⁷ The narrator is shocked when he departs to Baghdad for the first time after invasion, when he notices that everything is different:

This part of town hadn't been like this when I was in Baghdad before the invasion. The neighborhood wasn't fashionable then, but it was tranquil and tidy, with well-lit shops and innocuous pedestrian. Now, it was infested with famished orphans, tatterdemalion young werewolves covered with sores, who would stop at nothing.²⁸

Psychological trauma is another result of war, the young man in *The Sirens of Baghdad* suffers from psychological collapse and destruction. As any Iraqi person, he is affected negatively by the occupation and destruction of Iraq by a foreign country. But his mental state deteriorated after the three fatal events which he witnessed in his village. He is shocked along the whole novel. He becomes hopeless and views the world negatively, while he is still a young man and has to be hopeful, active and thinks positively!

After raiding his house by the American troops, insulting his father and family members, his spirits were so low. He describes the effect of that fatal incident and his trauma:

Suddenly, all our tribal myths, all the world 's legends, all the stars in the sky lost their gleam. The sun could keep on rising, but I would never be able to distinguish day from

25 Khadra, Yasmina. *The Sirens of Baghdad*. Trans. John Cullen. London: Vintage Books, 2007. P. 125. Print.

26 Ibid., 179

27 Ibid., 148

28 Ibid., 142

night anymore... The gates of hell would have seemed less catastrophic! I was finished. Everything was finished.²⁹

Psychological trauma is also repeated with many characters in *The Sirens of Baghdad* along with the narrator, especially the young men who lose their youth and hope because of war and its consequences after 2003. One of these men is Omar who was a corporal in the army before invasion, but now he is unemployed until he finds a job in Baghdad later. Most of the young men in the village of Kafr Karam are unemployed, so they spend most of the day in the village's café playing cards and watching television like Yaseen and his band who later descend into violence and terrorism. The narrator describes the people in the village: "At the barbershop, in the café, by the walls, people chewed over the same subjects. They talked a lot and did nothing at all."³⁰

On the other hand, the American troops suffer from the same problem, in *The Yellow Birds*, the main three characters face both physical and mental destruction as Murph is going to be killed, Sterling will commit suicide, leaving Bartle alone to suffer the bad memories of war after returning home and being imprisoned. Bartle lives the contradictions of the two friends:

In this battlefield, Pvt. Bartle finds himself caught between the conflicting demands of his role as soldier: becoming the ruthless killer Sgt. Sterling expects him to be and being the protector Murph needs. His inability to reconcile those contradictions is pulling him apart.³¹

Al-Janabi comments on Powers' perspective towards war and its negative results:

29 Khadra, Yasmina. *The Sirens of Baghdad*. Trans. John Cullen. London: Vintage Books, 2007. P. 101-102. Print.

30 Ibid., 47.

31 Tobar, Hector. *Kevin Powers' Haunting Iraq War Novel*. Los Angeles Times. 11 Nov. 2012. Web. 12 March 2020.

Without mentioning political conflict or hatred between him and the enemy, highlights his vision of the war as a force beyond human control. This description also serves to deprive the war of pretension to nobility or glory. He emphasizes war is nothing but an evil force that kills human beings, achieving nothing but pain and destruction.³²

Conclusion

Just like war novels in general, the central theme in Iraq war novels is war itself, which involves other related sorrowful themes like violence, bloodshed, fear, destruction, immigration, departure, veterans' readjustment problems, ... etc. However, the points of view differ from one work to another, and sometimes depend on the ideology, belonging and background of the writer himself. For the American writers, they tackle the theme of war usually from western perspective since the main characters are usually American troops who take part in the war. Whereas those novels written by Iraqi or Arab novelists usually tackle the war from Eastern perspective as they present Iraqi characters as the main characters.

Subsequently, most of Iraq War novels focus on the bad and negative side of war and its effect on the individuals. In *The Sirens of Baghdad*, Khadra tackles this idea from the viewpoint of a young Iraqi man who was affected by the invasion of his country and the bad behaviors of the American troops, which pushed him to descend into violence and terrorism. Whereas in *The Yellow Birds* Powers portrays the ugliness of war and its negative effect particularly on the American troops in Iraq, since the writer himself is a veteran of Iraq War and witnessed its disastrous events.

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32 Al-Janabi, Zainalabdeen Aal Shinian. "Critique of the Cruelty of the Iraq War: The Symbolism in Kevin Powers ' *The Yellow Birds*". *Journal of Literature and Arts Studies*. May 2019, Vol. 9, No. 5, 486.

تأثير الحرب في روايتي "صفارات انذار بغداد" لياسمينه خضرا و"الطيور الصفرة"

لكيفن بورز

محمود فائز كداوي*

المستخلص

تناول البحث روايات حرب العراق التي ظهرت بعد غزو العراق من قوات التحالف بقيادة الولايات المتحدة في سنة ٢٠٠٣؛ إذ يناقش البحث موضوع الآثار السلبية للحرب في روايتي "صفارات إنذار بغداد" للكاتب الجزائري ياسمينه خضرا و"الطيور الصفرة" للأمريكي كيفن بورز؛ إذ تناقش الروايتان الموضوع من وجهات نظر مختلفة، ولاسيما أنّ الرواية الأولى كانت قد كتبت من كاتب جزائري عربي وتروي الأحداث برواية شاب عراقي، في حين كتبت الرواية الثانية من جندي أمريكي كان قد خدم في الجيش الأمريكي في العراق، وتدور أحداث الرواية من وجهة نظر شخصية الجندي جون بارتل الذي خدم في الجيش الأمريكي في العراق.

ويركّز البحث على تداعيات الحرب وآثارها السلبية كالموت والعنف وفقدان البراءة والاضطرابات النفسية للجنود الأمريكيان وصعوبة تأقلمهم بعد العودة إلى ديارهم.
الكلمات المفتاحية: أدب الحرب، روايات حب العراق، الإرهاب، صدمة الحرب.