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Whose Dead Is to Be Grieved? A Comparative Approach to Contemporary War Literature

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Ben Fountain's Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk (2012) and Sinan Antoon's The Corpse Washer (2013) in terms of their representations of Americans and Iraqis in the context of the 2003 Iraq War. It aims to investigate and compare the novels' approaches to the lives/deaths of Americans and Iraqis, drawing on Judith Butler's claim that people in the West conceive of and deal with the lives/deaths of these non-Westerners differently. The lives of Westerners are made the most valuable at the expense of the safety and security of those outside these geographies. The analysis is made in two paradigms: 'Western lives' and 'non-Western lives'. While Fountain's novel focuses primarily on American soldiers, who are presented as the ultimate victims of the war, Antoon's provides a counter-narrative that challenges Fountain's argument and provides Iraqi characters with extended narrative spaces to recount their grievances. In Fountain's work, American deaths are thoroughly mourned at the expense of Iraqi deaths. Antoon's narrative, on the other hand, mourns these ungrievable souls and reclaims their ignored value.

Keywords: Ben Fountain; grievable lives; Iraq War; Sinan Antoon

INTRODUCTION

On March 19, 2003, the United States launched a war against Iraq that lasted for about five years and proved to be exhausting and disastrous for all involved, especially for the Iraqi people. Years after the beginning of the conflict, many American and Iraqi writers attempted to address the untold aspects of the war and offer new readings through different frames, naming some of the prominent works, *Fobbit* (2012) by David Abrams, *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (2012) by Ben Fountain, *The Yellow Birds* (2012) by Kevin Powers, *The Corpse Washer* (2013) by Sinan Antoon, *The Corpse Exhibition* (2014) by Hassan Blasim, *Redeployment* (2015) by Phil Klay, *War Porn* (2016) by Roy Scranton, and *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2018) by Ahmed Saadawi. These works introduced some of the unexplored aspects of war and explored new perspectives on violence, and each incorporated some personal experience into the narrative.

Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (2012) was the winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction and a finalist for the 2012 National Book Award, among other accolades. It was praised by many critics, and some considered it to be one of the greatest contemporary war novels (Alosman & Sabtan, 2022). It was also described as an exhilarating, grand, intimate, fierce, terrific, eloquent, funny, angry, and moving work that can be read as a single act (Dyer, 2012; Tait, 2012). Fountain was able to effectively bring the 2003 war to America by setting the events at the core of what is distinctly American, like American football, Thanksgiving, and television (Dyer, 2012). He depicted the conflict with an interesting group of American soldiers who were flown home to be publicly rewarded for their bravery in a videotaped battle in Iraq.

Roy Scranton (2015) argues that Fountain's novel is a continuation of a tradition of war literature that began more than two decades ago, adopting the myth of the trauma hero that has informed most war literature since. The myth of the trauma hero primarily tells the story of the trauma and recovery of a man who goes to war with romantic visions of heroism, only to be surprised by death and horror on the battlefield. The myth, he adds, serves as a scapegoat, relieving national blood guilt by replacing the victim of violence, the enemy, with the victim of trauma, the soldier. He maintains that the myth dates back to the eighteenth century, with the birth of Romanticism, and first takes shape in Stendhal's *The Charterhouse of Parma* and Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. Like Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds* and Phil Klay's *Redeployment*, Scranton (2015) contends that Fountain's novel adheres to the myth. He critiques the works' apologetic approach to the soldiers' role in the conflict, as they fail to hold them accountable for the killing of thousands of Iraqi people and the destruction of the entire country; instead, the novels present Americans as victims of war and trauma heroes. Nevertheless, Adam Kaiserman (2021) believes that Fountain departs from this literary tradition described by Scranton (2015) because it presents the traumatised hero with different conclusions than those exemplified in other war narratives. It illustrates the conflicting perspectives of soldiers who experience the vileness of war on the one hand and the American public who claim innocence on the other (Barta, 2015). The interactions between the celebrated American soldiers and the naive public reveal a grave and serious disconnect. Lynn, the main character in Fountain's novel, understands the ridiculousness of the heroic and propagandistic rhetoric around him and acknowledges the need for help to deal with the fact that either America or he is seriously damaged (Johnston, 2017).

Although most of the novel takes place at the Dallas Cowboys stadium, where the Bravo Squad is honoured before a predominantly pro-war crowd, the sarcastic tone of Fountain belittles all the heroic rhetoric used to glorify soldiers (Alosman & Sabtan, 2022). It exposes the gulf between how soldiers view their role in the Iraq war and how Americans glorify it. It mocks the hypocrisy of the conservative and nationalist discourse used to invoke the war. It also satirises the hypocrisy of the super-rich Americans who support the war but do not want to give their money or their lives to fight it. Contrary to the American public, soldiers see war as a never-ending abyss, not a place to be heroic. While Brian Williams (2017) believes that Fountain illustrates how the language of the patriotic American public is built on "individual civilian desire, specifically civilian feelings of guilt and inadequacy" (528), Adam Kaiserman (2021) challenges such conclusions, arguing that the fans who represent the public are shallow characters who lack any kind of interiority that Williams assumes. He alternatively suggests that the halo around the Bravo Squad is the result of conventional conservative U.S. media.

Zeng Yanyu (2017) thinks that the novel shows how trauma affects the lives of both Iraqis and Americans and challenges partial notions of war. In contrast, Sarah O'Brien (2021) argues that although the work reveals the degraded lives of American soldiers as participants in America's problematic war, it largely focuses on the American characters while ignoring the narratives of the Iraqi people. It also prevents female characters from speaking for themselves and influencing the outcome (Johnston, 2017). Despite the positive role women play in giving Billy hope, like Lynn's sister, and providing opportunities to escape the war, their role is static, does not progress, and stops short (Johnston, 2017). The novel reveals the gap that separates the soldiers' view of the war from the romanticised view of the public.

Sinan Antoon's self-translated novel *The Corpse Washer* (2013), first published in Arabic in 2010 as *Wahdaha Shajarat al-Rumman* (The Pomegranate Alone), won the 2014 Best Arab American Book Award. It was hailed as an extraordinary achievement, a compact masterpiece, a taut, powerful, and utterly compelling story (Forbes, 2013). It is a must-read because it presents a moving literary elegy for the thousands of overlooked Iraqis who died in the war in addition to their loved ones (Scranton, 2014). It provides an insider's perspective on the forgotten realms of the conflict and allows the voices of Iraqi locals to be heard.

Alosman and Raihanah (2022) argue that the novel protests the war and exposes the 'bare life' status of Iraqis, who are placed outside the law as *hominne sacri*. They are abused and murdered with impunity under the rule of the state of exception. Instead of being a sculptor who celebrates life in works of art, the 2003 Iraq War forces Jawad, the main character in Antoon's novel, to deal with death on a daily basis. Jawad's job as a corpse washer makes him the ideal witness and recipient of the envelopes of death, corpses. Jawad's work is counterproductive to the Americans' plans, as he brings due respect to the dead through the rituals of purification. In the same vein, Scranton (2014) asserts that Antoon's work provides an influential and necessary counter-narrative to American war novels, which are largely concerned with the anguish of American troops. It recounts a sad endeavour, full of concerns about separating from death through art, and contemplates the certainty of death, mostly through the preparation of corpses, largely described in horrifying detail (Restuccia, 2018). Antoon melancholically remembers the dead; he opens the wounds and leaves them open, and there is no recovery (Deer, 2017). Death overshadows every other theme with a gloomy atmosphere that pervades the lives of the Iraqis and foretells their end.

The novels in question have received considerable scholarly attention; however, there is a need for a comparative study to examine the Iraqi and American perspectives on a war that claimed the lives of thousands of Americans and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, as represented in these works. It compares their approaches to life and death on both sides and analyses their implications. Implementing a comparative approach helps identify differences between literary representations of the 2003 war and the background of such differences. This paper examines the status of life/death of American troops as well as that of local people in Iraq within the context of the 2003 war.

WHEN DOES LIFE/DEATH COUNT?

When asked by the BBC reporter about the situation in war-ravaged Ukraine, a former deputy prosecutor general of Ukraine clarifies, "[i]t's very emotional for me because I see European people with blue eyes and blond hair … being killed every day" (Bayoumi, 2022). Lucy Watson, a journalist from Poland, attempts to explain the severity of the situation in Ukraine to the world and differentiate it from other recent conflicts: "[T]his is not a developing, third-world nation. This is Europe!" (Ellison & Andrews, 2022). Another, Daniel Hannan, comments in the Telegraph that the Ukrainians "seem so like us. That is what makes it so shocking (Ellison & Andrews, 2022). Because Ukrainians look like Westerners and belong to a contiguous geography, they evoke empathy and solidarity from Western peoples and governments, not those who look different and belong to distant lands.

Judith Butler (2004, 2009) addresses this question of human value in her influential books *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, p. 20), "whose lives are considered valuable, whose lives are mourned, and whose lives are considered ungrievable[?]" (Butler, 2009,

p. 38). She argues that people are treated 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, p. 20). The notions of loss and vulnerability are linked to people's social backgrounds and affiliations with others; belonging to certain groups or categories makes one less/more vulnerable, depending on the group in question. As is often the case in Western countries, the lives of those who belong to non-Western communities are not considered lives at all; they are not even considered human because they do not fit the category (Butler, 2004). Having dehumanised these people, they are then targeted with violent means, reinforcing the notion of dehumanisation that is now operative in the culture (Butler, 2004). This discourse is also at work when the attack on non-Western people is relegated to oblivion (Butler, 2004). Not surprisingly, Americans remember the names of some 9/11 victims and recall their stories, but they cannot relate details about Afhani or Iraqi victims of the 2011 and 2003 wars.

People who are killed in American wars have no obituaries, and there cannot be one 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, p. 34). If a life is ungrievable, it is not a life; it does not count as a life and does not deserve to be valued. Butler (2009) contends that war divides people into two groups: 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, p. 38)

Thus, the victims of the 9/11 terrorist attacks are known by their proper names, photographs, relatives, families, and stories. They are entitled to public mourning, and their images are iconic for the entire country, yet there is significantly less community mourning for those who are not Americans and no mourning at all for illegitimate labour (Butler, 2009). Being included or excluded from a particular group of people is the factor that makes the difference.

People believe that their survival depends on those who share the same national affiliation, who are familiar with, and who adhere to some culturally defined concepts of what the culturally recognisable human is (Butler, 2009). It is through these means that the difference is made between those people upon whom we depend to exist and those who are a threat to our existence and life (Butler, 2009). Thus, when a certain group of people appears to be a threat to Western life, they do not appear as life but as a threatening enemy that intimidates their lives. Those non-Westerners who are killed as a result of such a differentiating approach are seen as not fully human and not fully alive, and this explains why such deaths do not evoke the same level of anger as the deaths of those who share a similar religion and/or national identity.

It is quite strange that people are shocked and morally disgusted by suicide bombings while they have no such reaction to state-sponsored violence (Asad, 2007). Clearly, people are more disturbed and disgusted by the taking of human life under certain conditions than under others. Although Western countries do not always follow the Geneva Conventions, they accept as true that they are ethically advanced and different from countries that belong to different geographies (Asad, 2007). Western countries can use violence and escape accountability for their illegal acts without having to provide solid justifications for their acts of violence; "they have always constituted an integral part of the right to defend oneself and one's way of life" (Asad, 2007, p. 60). Modern states guarantee the lives of their soldiers, who are trained to kill and die for their countries, “yet whose health, longevity, and general physical well-being are objects of the democratic state’s solicitude” (Asad, 2007, pp. 61-61). As seen in post-9/11 public rhetoric, specific rules outline who is considered human, entitled to human rights, and who is not, illustrating 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, p. 75). The conceptualisation of grievability creates an almost “impossible paradox of a human who is no human, or of the human who effaces the human as it is otherwise known” (Butler, 2009, p. 76). This explains the two post-9/11 wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, where both Iraqis and Afghans are killed because they are treated as threats to the humanly modernised countries, "who are worth valuing, whose lives are worth safeguarding, whose lives are precarious, and when lost, are worth public grieving" (Butler, 2009, p. 125). Western people are thus protected at the expense of non-Western people, who are thus vulnerable to violence and occupation.

This study examines Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (2012) and Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* (2013) in terms of their representations of Americans and Iraqis in the context of the 2003 Iraq War. Through a comparative approach to the selected novels, the analysis is conducted in two paradigms: 'Western lives', which examines representations of Western lives in terms of their grievability status, and 'non-Western lives', which shows how these works treat the lives of Iraqi people in the context of war.

WESTERN LIVES

For people in the West, people's allegiance is the most important factor in determining their status; if life belongs to the West, it is valuable and deserves mourning, but if it belongs to people from other regions, it is neither valued nor grieved (Butler, 2009). In *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, Billy Lynn, a U.S. Army soldier, and his fellow members of Bravo Squad are flown home from Iraq after being videotaped at the Battle of Al-Ansakar Canal, Iraq. The squad's bravery in this footage goes viral and is on every tongue across the country. They are celebrated all over the U.S. in what is called the Victory Tour. Yet, despite the celebratory mode that surrounds him, Lynn is haunted by the memories of the Battle of Al-Ansakar Canal; he cannot escape these images from Iraq as he remembers “poor dead Shroom and the grievously wounded Lake there are two Silver Stars and eight Bronze among them, all ten of which defy coherent explanation” (Fountain, 2012, p. 4). The death of Shroom, Lynn's friend, haunts the entire narrative despite the exuberant nature of the celebrations. The dominant idea of bereavement produces a kind of eulogy in the story; a valued human being is lost and deserves to be mourned with honour.

Shroom is omnipresent in the narrative; his name is mentioned about a hundred times throughout the novel. His memory is even invoked and sought for guidance and comfort. In the crowd, Lynn's "gaze sweeps the stadium's upper reaches where the punts topped out, but it's just air; he needs the concrete marker of the punts' arc to get that vibe of Shroom hovering on the other side" (Fountain, 2012, p. 41). He is summoned to provide answers to open questions and to make sense of an unfathomable life. His absence has left a large void, at least in Lynn's life, that reflects his importance and value. Lynn notes his special relationship with Shroom when he tells the reporter that he thinks about him a lot “every day. Every hour. No, every couple of minutes. About once every ten seconds, actually. No, it’s more like an imprint on his retina that’s always there, Shroom alive and alert, then dead, alive, dead, alive, dead, his face eternally flipping back and forth” (p. 42). Memories of Shroom do not dissolve amidst the masses or amidst the celebration;

he is still missed, and his absence is still mourned. His omnipresence is a sign of his preciousness and undeniable grievability.

Shroom also has a sacred status in Lynn's life; Lynn does not understand or accept Shroom's involvement in substandard occupations. Therefore, he is pleased when he believes that Shroom has escaped being part of the commercialisation of the Bravo Squad story; “the long arm of marketing can’t touch Shroom now” (Fountain, 2012, p. 36), while it touches those soldiers in the squad who are still alive. Lynn communes with Shroom: “Shroom, Shroom, the Mighty Shroom of Doom who foretold his own death on the battlefield [. . .] “I’m going down,” he [Shroom] yelled into the racket, which at the time Lynn heard as *it’s*, "It's going down," [original emphasis] (p. 42). Later, Lynn consults the godlike Shroom, "[o]h Jesus. Oh, Shroom. What would Shroom do? What would he do if he was Billy[?] [. . .] Oh, Shroom, Shroom, the Mighty Shroom of Doom who foretold his own death on the battlefield" (p. 296). Shroom is not a mere casualty of war; he has divine status, possessing some celestial traits that allow him to anticipate the future, and therefore his death is all the more mournful.

In contrast to the deaths of Iraqis, which are not mentioned or commented upon, Shroom's death is elaborated upon. His body is flown to his homeland and given a respectful military funeral. For the second time, the event of his death is recounted, this time to the pastor. Lynn describes his feelings while witnessing Shroom's last moments;

> "it's like I wanted to die too." But this wasn't quite right. "When he died, I felt like I'd died too." But that wasn't it either. "In a way, it was like *the whole world died*." Even harder was describing his sense that Shroom's death might have ruined him for anything else because when he died? When I felt his soul pass through me? I loved him so much right then; I don't think I can ever have that kind of love for anybody again. So what was the point of getting married, having kids, raising a family if you knew you couldn't give them your very best love? [emphasis added].
>
> (Fountain, 2012, p. 218)

Grief for the loss of Lynn's friend overwhelms all other emotions in the narrative. Grief is induced to acknowledge the enormity of the loss and the value of the deceased. It summons the world to mourn him and the American dead, “the many thousands gone, and those to follow” (p. 220). The novel mourns not only Shroom but every American soldier who has died and will die. It denounces the war and condemns the way it consumes the lives of people like Shroom, but it refrains from demonstrating its devastating impact on the local people of Iraq. The only lives that matter are those of Americans.

Grief is evoked through the imagination not only for those who have died but also for American soldiers on active duty in Iraq. Lynn imagines how his family members would react to the news of his death. While Kathryn, his sister, “would survive, a triumph of rage over guilt” (Fountain, 2012, p. 255), Patty, the oldest sister, would be comforted by her young son, Brian. However, the situation would be very different for his mother; “it would be awful for her, possibly fatal, though not right away” (p. 255). He contemplates “a long slow process of interior numbing-out that takes form in his mind as weather, a plague of bitter-cold days with wind, freezing rain, a pall of daylong dusk fading to black” (p. 255). Through the reactions of his loved ones to his death, Lynn evokes grief and thus emphasises his value through grievability; he is an American soldier who deserves to be mourned.

The American soldiers in Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*, on the other hand, are given minimal space, and that is only to illustrate their disastrous influence on the lives of Iraqis. The Americans control the people and the land in Iraq and pose a constant threat to the lives and peace of Iraqis. They always use their armoured vehicles, Humvees, tanks, Apache helicopters and fire jets to destabilise every aspect of life in Iraq and to "humiliate" Iraqis (Antoon, 2013, p. 68). Americans are the aggressors, the agents of death responsible for the deaths of Iraqis, not the victims of war, as we see in Fountain's novel. They are first and foremost soldiers on duty, sent to a foreign country to participate in a war. Thus, there are no American deaths in the novel. There are no major American characters in Antonn's narrative, yet their negative influence on the lives of the Iraqi characters is evident. The gap between the two works, Antoon's and Fountain's, portrayal of death among American soldiers is due to their drastically different approaches to war and soldiers' responsibility for the atrocities of war. For Antoon, American troops are responsible for all the atrocities of war in Iraq, while in Fountain's novel, they are the innocent victims of war.

NON-WESTERN LIVES

When asked about the hundreds of thousands of Iraqi children who died as a result of the U.S.-led sanctions against Iraq after the 1990 Gulf War, Madeleine Albright, then the U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations and later the U.S. Secretary of State, replied, "[w]e think it's worth it" (Quoted in Gregory, 2004, p. 175). In *The Corpse Washer*, the American presence in Iraq seems to cast a shadow of death over the lives of the locals. The lives of the Iraqi people are subjected to different kinds of death from different sources, but the main blame is placed on the American military presence in Iraq. The main character of the novel, Jawad, who reluctantly helps his father in his profession of washing corpses, eventually inherits his father's job and abandons his academic ambitions to provide for his family. The author's choice of corpse-washing as a profession serves as a reminder of the countless Iraqis who have died under American auspices.

Even before the 2003 war, Antoon (2013) recalls the Iraqi civilians who died needlessly and how the no-fly zone that was then imposed in southern and northern Iraq to prevent the Iraqi regime from "oppressing citizens, but [American] fighter jets would kill innocent civilians and even herders. I never knew whether it was out of sheer idiocy, or whether it was a game, using Iraqis for *target practice*" [Emphasis Added] (p. 59). Antoon (2016) argues that in order to understand the situation in Iraq after the 2003 war, it is important to revisit what happened before 2003. He recalls the well-known incident in which a thirteen-year-old young Iraqi shepherd was killed by a rocket while herding his family's cattle. Derek Gregory (2004) notes that many civilians were repeatedly targeted in Iraq during this period. Similarly, when Jawad takes his father's body in a car to be buried in Najaf after the start of the 2003 war, he knows that "[o]nly a mad person would want to be inside a moving car while bombers and fighter jets were hovering overhead, ready to *spit* fire at any moving object" [Emphasis Added] (Antoon, 2013, p. 65). The lives of civilians in Iraq seem worthless in the context of war; all Iraqis are made possible targets for American weapons without adequate efforts to distinguish civilians from militants.

Jawad's girlfriend, Reem, is also a victim of the Americans, as Jawad has a frequent dream in which she is lying undressed on a bench, then a Humvee approaches them, masked militants get out, his head is amputated, yet he can see them with his eyes as they take Reem into the Humvee and disappear (Antoon, 2013). The culpability of Americans for Iraqi deaths is emphasised in this dream, as Humvees are associated with American forces throughout the novel. The dream also illustrates how Iraqi lives have no value to Americans, who can kill in cold blood without fear of being held accountable.

Another Humvee, this time a real one that looks like “a mythical animal intent on devouring us” (Antoon, 2013, p. 66), stops the car of Jawad and his friends, who are on their way to bury Jawad's father in Najaf, and American soldiers order them to get out of their car.

> Two of them headed toward us, pointing their guns at our heads, and stopped about five meters away. [. . .] The third soldier removed the cover of the coffin with the barrel of his machine gun and got up on the driver's side to take a look, and then said, "It's a fucking coffin. Clear. Clear." [After the soldiers left,] [w]e stood up and shook off the dirt from our clothes. I realised that we'd just *survived death*. A slight move in the wrong direction would have resulted in a shower of bullets. [. . .] As we got our car back on the road, Hammoudy said, “Looks like these *liberators* want to *humiliate* us” [Emphasis added].
>
> (pp. 67-68)

The scene captures some of the routines that Iraqis encounter as they move between cities in war-torn Iraq. The simplest of mistakes could result in the deaths of as many as there are in the scene. Iraqis are simply "objects" of sovereign power with almost no rights to claim (Gregory, 2004, p. 62). The lives of civilians are threatened in order to protect the lives of American soldiers.

The lives of non-Western people are not a primary concern for Western armies on the battlefield. Therefore, a wide range of weapons are used regardless of their long-term effects on the lives of the targeted people (Gregory, 2004). In *The Corpse Washer*, the consequences of these weapons with radiating substances affect the life of Reem, Jawad's fiancée, who disappears for some time and then writes a letter to Jawad explaining the reasons for her unexpected absence and that she has been diagnosed with cancer (Antoon, 2013). The doctor informs her that cancer rates in Iraq “have quadrupled in recent years and it might be the depleted uranium used in the ordnance in 1991” (Antoon, 2013, p. 114). Antoon highlights the vulnerable position of Iraqis, as no safety or precautionary measures are taken to protect the lives and well-being of civilians.

Another incident that proves the worthlessness of Iraqi lives in the context of the 2003 war takes place when a chauffeur stops his car to urinate, leaving the passenger in the taxi. In less than a minute, an explosion shakes the place. The driver sees his car as a "ball of fire" as an "American Apache" leaves the scene (Antoon, 2013, p. 145). He struggles to pull the burning man out of the car and tries to extinguish the fire. He reports "the incident, but no one explained why the Americans had fired at the car" (p. 146) and later files a claim for compensation, “but it’s all talk. Nothing came out of it” (p. 146). The implication of this episode is that targets are chosen at random, and no precautions are taken to ensure the nature of the target and whether or not it poses a threat to Americans. The Americans seem to have no regard for the consequences that might result in such cases because there are none.

In Antoon's work, Iraqis are targeted like insects and animals whose lives have no value and who can be killed at will. Any moving object becomes a legitimate target for American fighter jets, “which were hovering and hunting humans *as if they were insects* [. . .] The Americans were firing at any vehicle. We ran like mad dogs for more than two hours without turning back [Emphasis Added] (Antoon, 2013, p. 117). A journalist who accompanied the U.S. troops in Iraq notes that “Iraqis were driven ahead of us like animals” (Gregory, 2004, p. 165). They are reduced to “cockroaches” and “sheep,” “sitting ducks,” “rabbits in a sack,” and “fish in a barrel” (p. 165). Native Iraqis are treated not as people whose lives are precious but as animals whose deaths are tolerable.

Death can also be humiliating for Iraqis in times of war when the bodies of the dead are piled up, and the remains of human bodies are collected from around the sites of death. Their bodies are “plucked from their families and lives, tossed into the garbage in Baghdad’s outskirts, thrown into the river, or rotting in the morgue” (Antoon, 2013, p. 131). Only “fortunate” people can die “without losing an eye or their entire head” (p. 108); therefore, to be buried with a whole body is a privilege in postwar Iraq. Most of the corpses that arrive to be washed have no papers or identification, and Jawad records the causes of their deaths: "a bullet in the forehead, strangulation marks around the neck, knife stabs in the back, mutilation by an electric drill, headless body, fragmentation caused by suicide bomb" (p. 131). He keeps their faces in his mind to give their deaths some respect since their identifying information is anonymous. He preserves a certain grievability and reference for Iraqis. In fact, Jawad's profession as a corpse washer is counterproductive to that of the Americans in the sense that it mourns some of the ungrieved deaths and establishes their value. It also functions as a death watch, reminding the world of the forgotten deaths and their ungrieved status.

The Iraqis in Fountain's novel are not sympathetic human beings like those in Antoon's novel, but rather the enemies who make Americans' lives miserable. The deaths of these "enemies" become more acceptable in order to defend the lives of Westerners. Therefore, when Americans after the 9/11 attacks are “[s]o scared all the time, and so shamed at being scared through the long dark nights of worry and dread, days of rumor and doubt, years of drift and slowly ossifying angst” (Fountain, 2012, p. 39), it is natural for them to consider militant solutions to protect their lives. Military solutions come first, “*[w]hy don’t they just* . . . Send in more troops. Make the troops fight harder. Pile on the armor and go in blazing, full-frontal smackdown and no prisoners” [original emphasis] (p. 39). In Iraq, when Americans sense danger, the lives of Iraqis, whether combatants or noncombatants, become unimportant, and Americans can

> drop bombs. More and bigger bombs. Show these persons the wrath of God and pound them into compliance, and if that doesn't work, then bring out the *nukes* and take it all the way down, *wipe it clean*, reload with fresh hearts and minds, a *nuclear slum clearance* of the country’s soul [emphasis added].
>
> (p. 39)

The lives of the Iraqi people are worthless because the Westerner feels threatened, even if that means jeopardising the lives of the civilian population as a whole. Despite the well-known implications of the use of nuclear weapons, their disturbing consequences, and their long-lasting effects on all living things in the contested areas, the option is still there, at least in the imagination of some Americans, illustrating the unworthiness of Iraqi lives when the safety of Americans is at stake. The idea of using nuclear weapons in Iraq is also mentioned in many American narratives, such as Kevin Powers’ *The Yellow Birds* (2012), Phil Klay’s *Redeployment* (2012), and Roy Scranton’s *War Porn* (2016), which emphasise its prominence in the American consciousness. Despite the fact that the notion is sometimes used pejoratively, the availability of such weapons of mass destruction and the idea of using them suggests the unworthiness of locals and the insignificance of their lives.

Although Fountain mocks the pro-war rhetoric in America, it does not present the whole picture of the war and ignores the huge number of casualties among Iraqis. Thousands of Iraqi civilian victims who died under the American military presence in their country are not even mentioned. The only negative aspect of the war presented in the novel relates to the traumatic experiences of American soldiers and their struggle to cope with the war in Iraq. The absence of Iraqi deaths in a novel about the war in Iraq reveals the insignificance of their lives and their ungrievable status. As in John Updik'e *Terrorist* (2006) and Andre Dubus III's *The Garden of Last Days* (2009) (Alosman et al., 2018b, 2018a) regarding Muslims, the only presence of Iraqis in Fountain's novel is exclusively related to their enemy status, "the enemy" (Fountain, 2012, p. 97), and their religiously based hatred of Americans. The only lives that count are those of American soldiers, while the lives of Iraqis are considered unworthy of even passing mention. In contrast, Antoon's novel serves as a counter-grievability narrative that challenges the ungrievability of Iraqi deaths as depicted in Fountain's narrative, ascribes them grievability, and reclaims some of their confiscated value.

CONCLUSION

Butler (2009) rightly wonders what would happen if all those killed in today's wars were openly grieved? Why are the names of all the victims of war not given to the people, along with the victims of U.S. troops, of whom the people have no pictures, no names, no stories, "never a testimonial shard of their life, something to see, to touch, to know?" (p. 39). Open grieving for these neglected souls would surely create outrage against the injustice done to them and discourage further violations. Antoon's work attempts to provide this narrative space for these neglected souls and to make their stories recognisable throughout the world, which can help stop violence against those with similar status and save lives in future conflicts.

Both novels, Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* and Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* condemn the war in Iraq and demonstrate some aspects of its heinousness and its lingering effects on the lives of those involved. The deplorability of death is also of paramount importance in both novels. They complement each other in the sense that each novel addresses an element of war; while Fountain devotes a large narrative space to mourning the deaths of American soldiers, emphasising their value and the empty place they leave behind, Sinan mourns the unattended deaths of Iraqi people, preserving some of their neglected value. Fountain mourns the already grievable, i.e., the dead American soldiers, and emphasises their already acknowledged value, while Sinan mourns the ungrievable, i.e., the Iraqi civilians, and tries to retain their confiscated value and some of their basic human rights. Fountain is concerned about the American militant troops on active duty, and Antoon is focused on the ignored innocent civilians in Iraq.

Giving a platform to the stories of the unprivileged and exposing the biased narrative of war told by some American writers does some justice to the victims and makes their suffering more reprehensible. It questions the practices of the aggressor, making them more abhorrent and hopefully less likely to be repeated. The lives of all people should be valuable, and their deaths should be grievable.

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