

The Colonial Present in Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*

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Abstract

Objectives: The objectives of this study are to explore the colonial techniques and effects used in the novel, *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (2012) by Ben Fountain. The colonial present refers to the active state of colonization and its temporal existence in the present time.

Methods: The novel is analyzed in two sections: the first section, "Colonial Justifications," examines the means employed in the novel to reinforce the colonial perspective of Iraq and its people. The second section, "Colonial Innocence," discusses how the negative colonial impact on the local population is erased throughout the narrative and how this erasure serves the comprehensive colonial argument.

Results: Although Ben Fountain's novel mocks the war on Iraq and all the accompanying pro-war rhetoric, it still presents a colonial representation of Iraq and its people. Iraq is portrayed as a desert waiting for the West to come and make it flourish and develop. The Iraqis are depicted as in dire need of Western intervention to join the civilized world and interact with advanced nations.

Conclusions: Colonial concepts persist in the novel, and the negative colonial repercussions on both the land and the people of Iraq are overlooked.

Keywords: Colonialism, Ben Fountain, War Novel, Iraq War, Iraq.

الحاضر الاستعماري في مسيرة بيلي لين الطويلة في منتصف الوقت لبن فاونت

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ملخص

الأهداف: تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى الكشف عن التقنيات والآثار الاستعمارية المستخدمة في رواية "مسيرة بيلي لين الطويلة في منتصف الوقت" (2012) لبن فاونت. يشير الحاضر الاستعماري إلى الوضع النشط للاستعمار ووجوده الزمني في الوقت الحاضر.

المنهجية: خلّلت الرواية تحليلاً نصياً في قسمين: الأول "المبررات الاستعمارية"، الذي يشير إلى الوسائل المستخدمة في الرواية لتعزيز المنظور الاستعماري للعراق والشعب العراقي، والثاني "البراءة الاستعمارية"، الذي يناقش كيف جرى محو التأثير الاستعماري السلبي على السكان المحليين طوال السرد وكيف يخدم هذا المحو الحجة الاستعمارية الشاملة. النتائج: على الرغم من أن رواية بن فاونت تسخر من الحرب على العراق وكل الخطاب المؤيد للحرب المصاحب لها، إلا أنها تقدم تمثيلاً استعماريًا للعراق والشعب العراقي. العراق هو الصحراء التي تنتظر أن يأتي الغرب ويجعلها تزدهر وتتطور. كما أن العراقيين بحاجة ماسة إلى التدخل الغربي للانضمام إلى العالم المتحضر والتعامل مع الدول المتقدمة. الخلاصة: المفاهيم الاستعمارية لا تزال حاضرة في الرواية كما يجري التغاضي عن الانعكاسات الاستعمارية السلبية على كل من الأرض والإنسان في العراق.

الكلمات الدالة: الاستعمار، بن فاونت، رواية الحرب، حرب العراق، العراق.

Introduction

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the Middle East and the Muslim other came to the fore and became the focus of western media that struggled to provide explanations of the behaviour of the assailants, their incentives, culture, and geography. The subsequent wars on Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 reiterated that discourse on the other and tried to elucidate a rather complicated conflict (Alosman, 2021). Years later, bookstores saw an influx of literary attempts to address the American involvement in these wars and their confrontation with the other, such as *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (2012) by Ben Fountain, *Fobbit* (2012) by David Abrams, *The Yellow Birds* (2012) by Kevin Powers, *The Valley* (2015) by John Renehan, *Redeployment* (2015) by Phil Klay, and *War Porn* (2016) by Roy Scranton. They offered miscellaneous views on these conflicts, raised more questions for further consideration, and involved the readership in the reality of war. Many of them could achieve success and received acclaim from a variety of critics and reviewers.

Ben Fountain's novel, *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (2012), is among the most distinguished novels that have garnered praise and awards, including winning the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction. It was also a finalist for the National Book Award in 2012, among other honors. It is hailed as one of the finest contemporary war narratives, described as exhilarating, fierce, grand, intimate, terrific, eloquent, and poignant (Dyer, 2012; Tait, 2012). Fountain effectively brings the Iraq War to the American public by setting the novel at the heart of undeniably American cultural touchstones such as football, Thanksgiving, and television (Dyer, 2012). The novel tells the story of a group of American soldiers who are flown back to America to be honored and celebrated for their bravery in a battle in Iraq, which was inadvertently captured on tape.

Many novels on the Iraq war, including Ben Fountain's, raised classical questions that resurrect after each war about its motives, implementation, and consequences on the people, economy, and troops involved. Roy Scranton (2015) is one of those vocal critics of what he calls the 'war literature tradition,' a tradition prevalent in war literature that vindicates soldiers from any sort of accountability regarding atrocities committed at wars. He contends that current literary works on war avoid questioning the incentives behind the American military presence in Iraq and the responsibility of American soldiers for inflicting death and destruction in Iraq. Soldiers, instead, are made the ultimate victims of war and its trauma heroes. Nevertheless, Adam Kaiserman (2021) departs from Scranton's (2015) contention and claims that Fountain's novel deflects from that literary tradition, as it presents the trauma-hero with different conclusions, not like those epitomized in other war narratives. Like many American literary works on the Iraq War, Fountain's novel presents the clash between the American public, who claim a myth of innocence, and the soldiers, who live the reality of war and comprehend its baseness (Barta, 2015). The interactions between the Bravo Squad soldiers and the ignorant American public disclose a grave and serious disjunction that overshadows the narrative.

Fountain's novel exposes the ignorance of Americans regarding the reality of the battlefield and troops' lack of motivation for wars, particularly concerning the Iraq War of 2003 (Johnston, 2017). The public are also shocked when they know that the Bravo Squad has to redeploy to Iraq after their Victory Tour in the United States. Billy, the main character, realizes how illogical and pointless the heroic narratives around him are and admits the need for help to comprehend whether America or he is thoroughly damaged (Johnston, 2017). Brian Williams (2017) argues that Fountain's novel illustrates how the American pro-war rhetoric corresponds to 'individual civilian desire, specifically civilian feelings of guilt and inadequacy' (528). However, Adam Kaiserman (2021) disagrees with Williams' (2017) conclusions, since American football fans are flat characters with no interiority as Williams assumes. Alternatively, Kaiserman (2021) suggests that the popularity of the Bravo soldiers is the result of the long-established patriotic language prevalent in American conservative media like Fox News.

Zeng Yanyu (2017) thinks that the novel introduces the trauma both American soldiers and Iraqis experience in war, rejects biased notions about war, reveals the unfair power relations between countries, and exposes the truth of war as a consumption site. However, Sarah O'Brien (2021) argues that although the work illustrates the relegated lives of American troops as sponsors in the troubling work of the United States, it involves chiefly American characters and neglects the narratives of the Iraqi people. Though women, like Billy's sister, give some hope for Billy to escape war and offer chances

to avoid the sterile heroism atmosphere, the role of female characters does not mature or develop since the narrative thwarts female characters from speaking for themselves (Johnston, 2017). Although the novel, for the most part, celebrates the gallant feats of the Bravo Squad members, the mocking tone ridicules the whole heroic rhetoric employed by the public to celebrate the troops. It reveals the gulf that separates soldiers' attitudes toward the war from the way the community romanticizes it. As in the war depicted in Kevin Powers, the *Yellow Birds* and Phil Klay's *Redeployment*, war is portrayed as an endless abyss that devours the lives of American militaries for no sound reason. Nonetheless, the colonial representations and implications in Fountain's work are not examined within the context of the post-9/11 wars, though they are essential elements in the novel. Uncovering the colonial implications in the novel raises awareness regarding the consequences of war on Iraqis and makes their agonies more visible and hence more recognizable.

This paper aims to demonstrate the colonial means, techniques, and implications employed in Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (2012). The analysis is made in two sections: the first, termed "colonial justifications," refers to the means employed in the novel to reinforce the colonial perspective on Iraq and the Iraqi people, and the second, termed "colonial innocence," stands for the negative colonial influence on locals being erased throughout the narrative and how such elimination serves the colonial overarching argument.

The Colonial Present

In his seminal book, *The Colonial Present*, world-renowned geographer Derek Gregory (2004) contends that after the 9/11 attacks, the United States has formed the other through 'architectures of enmity' by implementing imaginaries of fear to extend the colonial past into a colonial present in Iraq (Gregory, 2004: 13, 20). Diverse means of such architectures are employed to outline the other into a despised adversary, to launch an offensive against it, conquer and colonize its land. 'The asymmetry that underwrites the colonial production of imaginative geographies was endlessly elaborated through the repetition of a single question. "Who hates America?"' (Gregory, 2004: 20). The other is, in essence, presented as hateful of the West and all that is Western to justify action against it.

Edward Said (1979) argues that there is an essential and organic relationship between Orientalism and colonialism. Through Orientalism, the Orient, its civilization, populations, and geographies are interpreted and explained; it is a creation of definite 'political forces and activities' (203). The other is transformed 'from being textual and contemplative into being administrative, economic, and even military' (210). As a result of the accumulated decades of Western treatment, the Orient is changed 'from alien into colonial space' (211). Orientalism works as an anchor for war because it permits Western countries to rationalize being in a continual state of war to defend themselves from their adversaries (Smith, 2006). Orientalism is still operative in endorsing Western colonial goals in Middle Eastern geographies by providing a cultural foundation for future and present colonial ambitions (Kalin, 2004; Maira, 2009).

Gregory (2004) argues that, through self-production stories, the West produces self-sufficient myths to accentuate its modernizing role of the other, without which modernization would not have reached the East (Gregory, 2004). Western self-productions involve the construction of the other, ultimately accentuating Western centrality and superiority (Gregory, 2004; Semati, 2010). Hence, imaginative geographies are the Western self-constructions that endorse Western interests in the East. As imaginative geographies are accretions of time, 'sedimentations' of consecutive histories, they are also acts of space, i.e., colonization (19). Banners such as Western civilizational missions, which celebrate Western supremacy, are utilized to further Western colonial projects in the Middle East, such as those in the post-9/11 wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (Gregory, 2004; Gafaïti, 2008).

Through three strategic acts, 'locating, opposing, and casting out,' the US administration is used to manage its enemies in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks (Gregory, 2004: 248). Locating indicates reducing adversaries to objects which generates 'an abstraction of other people as "the other"' (248). As demonstrated in Iraq, 'the imaginative geographies that were given such terrifying force by the events of September 11 were connected to performances of space that have been (and continue to be) deployed in other circumstances' (Gregory, 2004: 248). Consequently, American weapons demolished the buildings of Baghdad and degraded the Iraqi arms but 'never killed Iraqis' (248). Gregory adds,

"Opposing" mobilized a largely cultural register, in which antagonism was reduced to a conflict between a unitary Civilization and multiple barbarisms [. . .] "Casting out" mobilized a largely political-judicial register, in which not only armed opponents [. . .] but also civilians and refugees were reduced to the status of *homines sacri*. Their lives did not matter. The sovereign powers [. . .] disavowed or suspended the law so that men, women, and children were made outcasts, placed beyond the pale and beyond the privileges and protections of the Modern (249).

As a result of Western imaginative geographies, the other is reduced to an object in a graphic arena. It becomes the enemy of the civilized Westerner and is ultimately turned into a worthless being. Consequently, the huge figures of deaths and casualties among Iraqis are not accurately stated or recognized, but rather given in aggregate. It is common sense for most people to recall the number of the 9/11 attacks' casualties, as well as some of the victims' heartbreaking stories.

Memory has an essential role in implementing the colonial present by two seemingly opposing effects: colonial amnesia and colonial nostalgia (Gregory, 2004). While colonial amnesia involves disremembering by what means Western cultures labeled dissimilar peoples as other, colonial nostalgia entails restructuring the colonial past into a present. It is not only about demonstrating other peoples and cultures as exotic, bizarre, and alien but also about how Western cultures covered their destructive 'appropriations of other cultures' (Gregory, 2004: 10). Gregory clarifies, 'there is often nostalgia for the cultures that colonial modernity has destroyed' (2004: 10). The American post-9/11 War on Terror can thus be interpreted as a militant return of the colonial past, 'with its split geographies of "us" and "them," "civilization" and "barbarism," "Good" and "Evil"' (2004: 11). Colonial nostalgia reconstructs the colonial past by distinguishing between the self and the other and nurturing the post-9/11 clash of civilizations discourse, which finally leads to the colonial present.

To serve Western imaginative geographies, the locals are reduced to voiceless objects of history, passive individuals, and never recognized as active subjects (Said, 1985; Gregory, 2004). Palestine has been depicted as a 'desert' that needs to be wisely administered in order to bloom, to bring life to earth again with the assistance of the modernized people (Gregory, 2004: 79). Palestine is formed through Western imaginative geography within the framework of the binary opposition between desert and civilization, darkness and light, which later leads to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands to change the wasteland into bloom (Gregory, 2004).

Spaces of visibility are the situations or events that are accentuated and popularized, while spaces of invisibility refer to those that are overlooked, ignored, and silenced. Spaces of visibility and invisibility indicate the intertwined act of highlighting and concealing or disregarding certain occurrences simultaneously. Concerning violence, only the events that happen in Western nations are popularized, whereas terrorism in non-Western countries is not narrated or acknowledged (Gregory, 2004; Kumar, 2012). Thus, by employing imaginative geographies, 'the distinction between 'us' and 'them' consistently overshadows any distinction between 'just' and 'unjust' (Gregory, 2004: 27). The 9/11 attacks are formed by a group of imaginative geographies into 'public cultures of assumption, disposition, and action' (Gregory, 2004: 28). Through imaginative geographies, those who conduct the attacks, their peoples, and geographies are made others or enemies (Gregory, 2004). Fear of the other is shaped and triggered in Western media, making them visible (Gregory, 2004: 49). The image of 'the other' is reframed in many ways; however, 'time and time again in the holy communion of the colonial present, it oscillates between light and darkness, between the visible and the invisible' (Gregory, 2004: 49).

In America's post-9/11 wars, photos of the thousands of civilian fatalities in Iraq are restricted and assigned a space of invisibility in order to avoid interrupting and reducing public support for the American colonial present in Iraq (Gregory, 2004). Nonetheless, media in the US created a visible space through which related peoples and geographies to the attacks would appear simply as 'points on a map or nodes in a network: in short, as targets [. . .] Ground truth vanishes in the ultimate "God-trick," whose terrible vengeance depends on making its objects visible and its subjects invisible' (Gregory, 2004: 53, 54). People in the US are not exposed to the whole image of what is happening on the ground. They are only allowed to see what is designed for them to see through a play of visibility. Those in power take charge of what the audiences can or cannot see, thus controlling the narrative.

Imaginative geographies of the other are produced and proliferated through media and cultural means, making the enemy visible (Gregory, 2004). Allen Feldman (2004) argues that the United States revived Orientalism in the post-9/11

wars to reiterate the role of the West in making the Eastern Other visible. The history and geography of the other are made visible within a framework of accountability for the terrorist attacks. Americans have sought answers regarding the 9/11 attacks through the targeted sites, which are made visible. Finally, they destroy these geographies, as shown in Afghanistan.

By the same means, American forces in Iraq are shown in a manufactured space of visibility. Military violence is presented as a 'cinematic performance,' not an atrocious act of war that led to the death of thousands of innocent civilians (Gregory, 2004: 198). 'Spaces of constructed visibility are always also spaces of constructed invisibility' (199). During the Iraq War, American imaginative geographies portrayed US troops as 'heroes' who were above the law, while Iraqi people were depicted as 'anonymous' unknown mobs. Consequently, their suffering remained invisible to Western audiences (198). The targets in Iraq are assigned a space of visibility while Iraqis are ignored and given a space of invisibility. American soldiers are depicted with their families and their affectionate particularities, while Iraqi soldiers are presented with no families or personal 'affiliations' (207).

Colonial Justifications

Though Fountain's novel mocks the Iraq war and all the accompanying propaganda spread by American conservative media, colonial representations and implications are prevalent throughout the narrative. Americans are shown to be taken by surprise in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks; they are "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: 39). After accentuating their innocence and victimhood status as well as the cruelty of their aggressors who frighten them, then cause their anger, the geographical space related to the enemy becomes a justified target for their military intervention. Military assault becomes not only justified, but also necessary to defend Americans; "[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] (39). The lives of all those who occupy the space of enmity, the targeted geography, become the legitimate aim of the American military. Nonetheless, if the preceding options do not produce the desired results, 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] (39).

What is of paramount significance is the safety of Americans, regardless of any potential civilian casualties among the targeted people. When it comes to the security of westerners, the lives of non-westerners become devalued (Gregory, 2004). The use of nuclear weapons underscores the devaluation of Iraqi lives and their vulnerability, given the known long-term and devastating effects of such weapons on current and future generations in Iraq.

In his coverage of the recent war in Ukraine, CBS News senior correspondent in Kyiv D'Agata states that Ukraine 'isn't a place, with all due respect, like Iraq or Afghanistan, that has seen conflict raging for decades. This is a relatively civilized, relatively European city, one where you wouldn't expect that, or hope that it's going to happen' (Bayoumi, 2022). A former deputy prosecutor general of Ukraine, in an interview with the BBC, says, '[i]t's very emotional for me because I see European people with blue eyes and blond hair . . . being killed every day' (Bayoumi, 2022). Another reporter from Poland, Lucy Watson, tries to draw attention to the gravity of the situation and differentiate it from previous conflicts and wars: 'this is not a developing, third world nation. This is Europe!' (Ellison and Andrews, 2022). Daniel Hannan writes for the Telegraph, 'Ukrainians seem so like us. That is what makes it so shocking' People are thus classified into groups of those who look like 'us' and those who do not, those who are western and those who are eastern, those who are civilized and those who are uncivilized. (Ellison and Andrews, 2022).

Difference allows cultures to confirm their uniqueness and exceptionality by creating cultural designs of the other, such as in literature, where other cultures are reduced, distorted, and brutalized to be controlled and colonized (Bhabha, 1994). In order to pave the way for violent action against any country, the difference between the targeted people, their geography, and those of the colonizer are illustrated, accentuated, and reiterated. Difference plays an essential role in any colonial discourse which accentuates the superiority of the invader and the backwardness of the local. The contrast is drawn between

civilization and its antithesis, 'barbarousness.' In the United States, they have 'civilized meals and take civilized dumps, indoors, in peace, on toilets that flush, in the common decent privacy that God intended as opposed to the wide-open vistas of the barbarous desert' [emphasis added] (Fountain, 2012: 59). Despite the novel's sarcastic tone toward American society, the differential attitude toward Iraq persists; it dominates the argument and emphasizes the stark opposition between the two entities. The contrast is drawn between entities at two extremes: what is inside and what is outside the circle of civilization.

To facilitate and justify colonialism, both the hostility and inhumanity of colonized people become visible, as well as the humanity and benignity of the colonizer. We are not introduced to Iraqi people who are depicted with any human features but rather to enemies whose only feature is their blind antagonism towards Americans; they are enemies and principally enemies. In Iraq, it is difficult for American soldiers to meet their masculine needs without 'mortal enemies all about and always, always, always some torment of nature with which to contend, bugs, rain, wind, dust, extremes of temperature, no misery too small for such a small thing as a man' (Fountain, 2012: 81). The local environment also appears to be in allegiance with Iraqis against Americans. The torment of the lurking enemy is combined with the hostility of the local environment. The enmity of the people, Iraqis, and geography, Iraq, are ascribed a space of visibility to pave the way and justify violence against them.

While the novel stops short from including the destructive impact of the war on Iraqis, it suggests that Americans are doing their part to improve the already miserable situation in Iraq. Billy, a soldier in the US army and the main character in the novel, thinks that despite the determined efforts of Americans to mend the conditions there, Iraqis are ungrateful, which sounds 'weird' to him (Fountain, 2012: 97).

It's like the Iraqis really hate us, you know? Just right there in our own AO, we're building a couple of schools, we're trying to get their sewer system up and running, we bring in tankers of drinking water every day and do a meal program for the kids, and all they wanna do is kill us. *Our mission is to help and enhance*, right? And these people are living in shit, literal shit, their government did nothing for them all these years, but *we're the enemy*, right? So what it ends up coming down to is *survival*, I guess. You just pull in, you aren't thinking about accomplishing anything, you just wanna get through the day with all your guys alive. So then you start to wonder why we're even over there [emphasis added] (97).

Instead of addressing the primary reason for the feelings and behavior of Iraqis towards the US troops in Iraq, which is, America's military intervention in their country, the novel, through the means of colonial amnesia, tries to divert attention from that crucial point and interpret Iraqis' behavior in terms of their enmity towards Americans. Iraqis are portrayed as unappreciative recipients of Americans' aid, with their hatred being portrayed as exclusively the result of their nature rather than any other external factor. Moreover, Iraqis, who resist the presence of foreign forces on their land, are depicted as responsible for hindering America's benevolent efforts in Iraq. Iraqis' 'unjustified' enmity is accentuated and portrayed as having a detrimental effect on Americans' civilizing mission.

The US troops in Iraq are portrayed as keen on changing the condition in Iraq for the better. Though they are fierce fighters, they are compassionate and willing to offer a helping hand to those who need it, even if they belong to the opposing side of the war. Billy remembers how he used to hate Dime, a sergeant in the US Army, for sending them out to the dangerous and 'pointless' streets of Iraq (195). While patrolling the streets of Iraq, a group of Iraqi boys, aged between fourteen and fifteen, approaches American soldiers,

aspiring hustlers with fuzzy mustaches and not much better than rags for clothes. "Mister," they cry, swaggering up to Bravo, "give me my pocket! Give me my pocket!" "What the fuck," Dime says, staring at them. "I think they want money," Shroom says, turning to Scottie for confirmation. Scottie was Bravo's interpreter at the time, so named for his resemblance to the former Chicago Bulls star Scottie Pippen. Scottie speaks to the boys. "Yes, they want money. They say they are hungry, they are asking you to give them money." " 'Give me my *pocket*?' " Dime laughs. "Yes! Yes! Mister! Give me my pocket!" "No, no, no, that's fucked, that's not the way you say it. Tell them I'll teach them how to say it, but we aren't giving them any money." Scottie explains. Yes! the boys cry. Yes! Okay

yes! So there in the street Dime conducts a little English lesson. “Give me money.” Repeat. *Give me money*. “Give me five dollars.” *Give me five dollars*. “Give me five dollars, bitch!” *Give me five dollars beech!* “Thank you!!” *Thank you!!* “Have a nice day!!!” *Hafa naice day!!!* The boys are laughing. Dime is laughing. The rest of the Bravos are laughing too, laughing as they scan rooflines and doorways with their weapons raised. “Thank you!” the boys cry when the lesson is done, and each boy ceremoniously shakes Dime’s hand. “Thank you! Mister! Thank you! Give me money!” And so they’re bellowing as they walk down the street, Give me money! Give me five dollars! Give me five dollars beech! “Wow,” Shroom says in hushed, trembling tones of New Age feelingness. “Dave, that was just beautiful, man. That was a beautiful thing you did.” Dime snorts, then lards up his voice with smarm. “Well, you know what they say. Give a man a fish, he eats for today. But teach a man to fish—” “—*and he eats for a lifetime*,” Shroom concludes [original emphasis] (195-196).

The boys are introduced as aimless loiters who are left alone by their parents in the streets with their humble clothes. As they beg for money with their broken English, Dime offers to teach them how to ask for money despite the hazardousness of their extended stay in an exposed area. Still, Dime gives a mini lesson to the boys with a jovial spirit that gains him applause and appreciation. Dime’s positive attitude towards the children, despite being in the midst of a dangerous space, shows his supreme human quality which overcomes any feeling of enmity. When Iraqi parents fail to take responsibility for their children, leaving them unattended and uneducated in the streets, Americans step in to guide and educate them, striving to improve their lives. While the novel persistently criticizes the war on Iraq and the accompanying rightist propaganda, Fountain could not escape western colonial influence when addressing Americans’ involvement with locals in Iraq. The novel portrays Iraq as exerting a strange influence on Americans, causing them to become less merciful and more aggressive towards their enemies.

In Iraq, both the locals and land exert a peculiar influence on Americans, leading them to become less merciful and more aggressive towards their enemies. When American soldiers are under attack, they respond with extensive fire that “blew apart hair, teeth, eyes, hands, tender melon heads, exploding soup-stews of shattered chests, sights not to be believed and never forgotten and your mind simply will not leave it alone” (Fountain, 2012: 125). Yet, Billy reminds the public to have some patience before passing judgments on the troops because they are ignorant of the situation in Iraq. He addresses the public; “[o]h my people. Mercy was not a selection, period” (125). The troops are thus forced to behave in such a way due to the lack of other options, as if they are forced by the land and/or local people to be merciless. “Only later did the concept of mercy even occur to Billy, and then only in the context of its absence in that place” (125). The place, Iraq, is accordingly where Americans’ genuine qualities are overwhelmed and made passive. Furthermore, to absolve the American troops from any responsibility and emphasize their innocence, the novel ensures that people remember that even before the American invasion of Iraq, mercy did not exist there. Thus, the ruthless situation in Iraq after the war is not portrayed as the consequence of American intervention, but as an intrinsic reality of the place and its people.

Colonial Innocence

The novel is highly critical of the war on Iraq; however, it ignores the catastrophic influence it has on the lives of the Iraqi people, the infrastructure, and the state in general. The agonies lived by American soldiers are persistently presented and elaborated on at the expense of the anguishes of the local people who are not assigned any narrative space. There are no Iraqis to be remembered, no local stories or histories to be narrated; all that is related to the local people is covered and overlooked. On the other hand, the deaths of Americans in the war are assigned an extensive degree of grief and mourning; the name of Shroom, who died in the Iraq war, is mentioned more than one hundred times in the novel whereas the Iraqi deaths are not mentioned.

The whole episode of the Battle of Al-Ansakar Canal, Iraq, which was videotaped by Fox News and went viral all over the US, presents the epic feat of the American soldiers and their bravery in confronting ‘merciless’ Iraqi insurgents. An American soldier dies and another gets severely injured; “poor dead Shroom and the grievously wounded Lake” (Fountain, 2012: 4). Billy shoots at Iraqis with one hand while working on Shroom, who is injured at the time, with the other. He does

ten different things simultaneously, “unpacking his medical kit, jamming a fresh magazine into his rifle, talking to Shroom, slapping his face, yelling at him to stay awake, trying to track the direction of the incoming rounds and crouching low with absolute fuck-all for cover” (Fountain, 2012: 60). American soldiers are shown as the victims of the merciless Iraqis who are inclined to kill Americans for no specific reason. What is meant to be illustrated in this episode is not Billy’s heroism but rather the victimhood of American soldiers in the face of a merciless enemy. The novel, however, obliterates the fact that Americans are basically occupying a foreign land and their presence there is not welcomed by Iraqis.

Iraqi insurgents, in the novel, are merely depicted as religious zealots who behave irrationally to threaten the lives of peaceful Americans. In most cases, Americans are under attack, but still, they are ready to engage and be deadly to their enemy when necessary. A colonel tells *Time* magazine about insurgents, “[i]t seems this particular group of insurgents wished to die [. . .] and our men were more than willing to oblige them” (Fountain, 2012: 125). Like those in many American war novels on Iraq, insurgents are camouflaged somewhere (Alosman and Raihanah, 2020), before they show up, “little kamikaze band of eight or ten bursting from the reeds at a dead sprint, screaming, firing on full automatic, one last rocks-off martyrs’ gallop straight to the gates of the Muslim paradise” (Fountain, 2012: 125). The novel highlights the religious perspective of the assailants as well as their maniac-like behavior while obliterating the basis of their stance against Americans who are in their land. The anti-colonial incentive of Iraqis is covered for an exclusively religious one to invalidate their anti-colonial endeavor and mark it as a fundamentalist one.

Western knowledge of the Middle East is structured theoretically through binary oppositions between the West and the East, and that has a demonizing effect on the other, the non-western (Young, 2009). The contrast between America and Iraq is restated to stress the gap between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ between what is American and what is Iraqi. “Everything is so clean [in the US]. Iraq is trash, dust, rubble, rot, and bubbling open sewers, plus these maddening microscopic grains of sand that razor their way into every orifice of the human body” (Fountain, 2012: 68). Iraq is presented as the opposite of America, a contaminated environment unfit for human habitation. The Iraqis are also blamed for the man-made waste that is not safely and properly disposed of. What is missing from the above argument, and what is given an amnesiac colonial status, is the hidden agent behind the current state of sanitation in Iraq. The novel omits the role of the occupying power, the United States, in creating sanitation problems after destroying Iraq’s infrastructure and governmental institutions responsible for these issues. The negative colonial effects of the war are covered up at the expense of natural and local agency. Iraqis are blamed for the consequences of the US occupation of Iraq.

Conclusion

Although Ben Fountain’s novel mocks the war on Iraq and all the accompanying pro-war rhetoric, it offers a colonial representation of Iraq and its people. Iraq is depicted as a desert awaiting Western intervention to make it bloom and prosper. Iraqis are portrayed as in desperate need of Western intervention to join the civilized world and catch up with advanced nations. There remains a chasm that separates the West from the East, depicting the latter as less livable and more backward. Fountain critiques the war not primarily for its catastrophic effects on local people, but for its destructive impact on the lives of American soldiers. The novel condemns the war primarily for its lasting passive influence on the lives of ‘innocent’ Americans who find themselves on battlefields without proper knowledge of the circumstances of violent conflicts.

By identifying the colonial elements in seemingly anti-war narratives, readers’ awareness of the consequences of war for the local population is heightened, making those consequences more understandable and thus more deplorable. This challenges the absence of acknowledgment of the local people’s suffering and gives them a visible space to curb future wars. It is not only war but also all aspects of colonialism that should be questioned and condemned in order to limit violence and make it less acceptable and more preventable. All forms of suffering should matter, regardless of the religion, race, or affiliation of those affected. Violence cannot be properly challenged without addressing all related languages of difference, hostility, and fear. There should be more efforts to uncover and expose all colonial practices that seek to exclude the other from fair treatment and objective representation.

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