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Soldiers and Victims: David Abrams' *Fobbit*

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Abstract

Objectives: This paper aims to examine David Abrams' *Fobbit* (2012) in terms of its approach to victimhood and the concept of war victims in the context of the Iraq War in 2003.

Methods: The analysis is divided into two main constructs: 'American Victims,' which examines the novel's representation of American soldiers as victims of war and 'National Victims' which explores the portrayal of Iraqis as war victims. The concept of victimhood is essential to the war narrative because it preserves the right for retribution to the afflicted and assigns responsibility to the other party for the violations. One side is absolved and becomes a victim, while the other is depicted as capable of committing terrible acts.

Results: Despite the novel's attempt to portray the suffering of Iraqis and describe some of the effects of the war on their lives, it also makes them responsible for most of their misery. American soldiers, though partially responsible for some major mistakes, emerge as the most prominent victims of the war in the novel.

Conclusions: The study reveals how the image of American soldiers as victims of war dominates the narrative, erasing any presence of others as victims.

Keywords: David Abrams, Iraq war, victimhood, war novel.

جنود وضحايا: رواية "فوبيت" لديفيد أبرامز

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ملخّص

الأهداف: يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة رواية "فوبيت" لديفيد أبرامز من حيث مقاربته للضحية ومفهوم ضحايا الحرب في سياق حرب العراق عام 2003.

المنهجية: جرى تحليل الرواية من خلال بنائين رئيسيين: "الضحايا الأمريكيون"، الذي يحلل تمثيل الرواية للجنود الأمريكيين وفقًا لوضعهم كضحايا حرب، بينما يحلل "الضحايا المحليون" حالة العراقيين كضحايا حرب في الرواية. مفهوم الضحية محوري في سردية الحرب؛ لأنه يعطي حق الانتقام للمتضرر و يحمل الطرف الآخر المسؤولية عن الانتهاكات. يُبرأ أحد الجانبين من المسؤولية ويتحول إلى ضحية، بينما يظهر الطرف الآخر على أنه قادر على ارتكاب أفعال فظيعة.

النتائج: على الرغم من محاولة الرواية تصوير معاناة العراقيين ووصف بعض آثار الحرب على حياتهم، إلا أنها تجعلهم مسؤولين عن معظم البؤس الذي حل بهم. إن الجنود الأمريكيين، رغم أنهم مسؤولون جزئيًا عن بعض الأخطاء الجسيمة، هم الضحايا الأكثر وضوحًا للحرب في الرواية.

الخلاصة: أظهرت الدراسة كيف تهيمن صورة الجنود الأمريكيين كضحايا حرب على الرواية و تمحو أي وجود للآخرين كضحايا.

الكلمات الدالة: الضحية، ديفيد أبرامز، حرب العراق، رواية الحرب.

Introduction

The United States of America has been involved in two conflicts in the Middle East over the past two decades as part of the 'War on Terror.' This campaign led to the deployment of a large number of American troops who served for several years in Iraq and Afghanistan. The wars were launched in response to the September 11 attacks, which claimed the lives of nearly 3,000 people, mostly Americans, and injured thousands more. Despite this, no evidence was found linking Iraq to the attacks or confirming its possession of weapons of mass destruction. Images, videos, and stories of the victims, their families, and friends circulated globally for several months, placing Americans at the center of a widespread narrative of victimhood.

Ofer Zur (1995) argues that victimization is a longstanding phenomenon in the United States. The American emphasis on choice and freedom suggests that individuals are responsible for their own destinies—whether through hard work to advance, individual effort to improve one's position, or through political and social engagement. Americans believe in their ability and obligation to shape their own futures. This belief often involves struggles for causes and rights, which usually entail adopting a victim status. This notion of victimhood may result in the victimization of one group while ostensibly liberating another. Thus, while the victimhood of one party may appear noble, it implies placing blame on another, sometimes leading to warfare that obliterates any chance of resolution and healing. Zur adds that the U.S. initiated the war against Vietnam in 1965 and continued the Cold War with the Soviet Union for four decades to avoid becoming a casualty of the spread of communism. Later, Americans felt victimized and threatened by the small island of Grenada, Noriega of Panama, and Saddam Hussein in Iraq. They had "become a nation of victims [. . .] publicly competing for the status of victim, where everyone is defined as some sort of survivor" (Zur, 20). This stance of victimhood was reclaimed and reiterated after the September 11 attacks, subsequently justifying two wars in the Middle East that wreaked havoc on these countries and their populations.

Many American authors have addressed the 2003 Iraq War in their literary works. To name a few notable examples: Kevin Powers' 'The Yellow Birds' (2012), David Abrams' 'Fobbit' (2012), Ben Fountain's 'Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk' (2012), Phil Klay's 'Redeployment' (2015), and Roy Scranton's 'War Porn' (2016). David Abrams' 'Fobbit' is based on his experience as a Fobbit—a term synonymous with "a US Army employee stationed at a Forward Operating Base, particularly during Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003–2011)" (quoted in Abrams, 2012)—who served in the US Army in Iraq in 2005. The novel was named a New York Times Notable Book of 2012 and has been described as "funny, disturbing, heartbreaking, and as ridiculous as war itself" (Bauman, 2012), "an impressive Iraq war satire" (Basbanes, 2012), and an "ingenious study in anxiety and a disturbing description of how the military tells its truths" (Busch, 2012). Abrams is rightly praised for blending fiction with journalism; "his tale is a concerto played with several hands, each player delivering his own tune in exquisitely crafted dialogues, inner monologues, diary entries, memoranda, and press releases" (Mathonniere, 2014, p. 4). Their individual journeys sound authentic, precisely because they are "so skillfully wrought as fictions" (p. 40). The narrative is told from the perspective of four characters: Staff Sergeant Chance Gooding Jr., an Army officer at the Forward Operating Base during Operation Iraqi Freedom; Lieutenant Colonel Eustace Harkleroad, Gooding's superior officer; Lieutenant Colonel Vic Duret, a battalion commander; and Captain Abe Shrinkle, a commander under Duret.

Abrams critiques the stories of the Iraq War as propagated by the US Army—narratives shaped by individuals with subjectivities and personalities (Kunsa, 2017). The American army and media often prefer more palatable war stories, those that tend to proliferate in American culture. Susan Kollin (2015) argues that 'Fobbit' is an anti-war novel offering a parody of the experiences of American military personnel in Iraq. Paul Ady (2014) believes that the novel primarily criticizes those with higher ranks in the military, as well as Fobbits who are not directly involved in combat (Ady, 2014; Maureen, 2016)—though not those of lower ranks (Ady, 2014). Ady contends that the hierarchical struggle between higher and lower ranks is a central organizing principle of the novel. Sergeant Brock Lumley, the lowest ranked of the main characters, is introduced without the condescending descriptions given to higher ranks. Lumley becomes the novel's exemplar of the soldiers who endure the incompetence of officers like Duret and Shrinkle and observe individuals like Gooding ascend in rank without facing much adversity. However, prior studies do not sufficiently scrutinize the theme of victimhood, despite its significance to the narrative

in question and to the attribution of responsibility for wartime atrocities. This paper examines David Abrams' 'Fobbit' in terms of its portrayal of victimhood and the concept of war victims in the context of the 2003 Iraq War.

Conceptual Framework

The United Nations Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power (1985) defines victims as:

> persons who, individually or collectively, have suffered harm, including physical or mental injury, emotional suffering, economic loss or substantial impairment of their fundamental rights, through acts or omissions that are the result of criminal behavior that violates national laws or internationally recognized norms relating to human rights.

Tami Amanda Jacoby (2015) argues that, while the UN definition encompasses a broad range of harms, it overlooks a crucial issue: "the complexity of victim-based identity" (p. 515). The definition lacks an explanation of the relationship between victims and politics. In actual conflicts, the roles of victims and perpetrators can often be ambiguous, with parties to a conflict typically blaming their adversaries for the losses they have suffered while striving to garner recognition for their ultimate goals. The challenge of classifying victims in war zones underscores the limitations of any simplistic delineation of victimhood.

In many violent conflicts, victims are entwined with broader political campaigns, rendering the separation of victimhood from politics nearly impossible (Jacoby, 2015). Although no one desires to be victimized, once victimization has occurred, those affected commonly seek acknowledgment to obtain the political, spiritual, and material advantages associated with being a victim. Despite the fact that victimization is a harmful and sometimes violent act inflicted upon an individual or group, "victimhood is a socially constructed identity, built—not necessarily contingent—upon any particular perspective of that harm" (p. 527). The embracement of victimhood as an element of identity is a choice that hinges on the viewpoints of a political culture and the dynamics of its power structures.

Victims evoke strong emotions, ranging from criticism to sympathy, because they are pivotal to the success or failure of broader political campaigns (Jacoby, 2015). Victimhood holds a particularly significant identity in democratic nations. While all victims deserve empathy and support, some victims achieve greater visibility, especially in Western societies that champion rights and promote a grievance-based consciousness. Political interests typically contour the representation of victim groups within any given society (Jacoby, 2015). As a consequence, victims tailor their narratives to conform to pre-established conditions, thus serving social and political purposes. This process often renders victims as passive recipients of services, dependent on the actions of others. During the administration of George W. Bush, the concept of veterans as victims came to the fore (Breen-Smyth, 2018). The dialogue centered around the suffering and sacrifices of “our troops” during a period of intense criticism against the American-led coalition (p. 226). As the failures and costs of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan mounted in 2007, public support for these engagements dwindled, yet the compassion for soldiers – fueled by the concern for bereaved families and wounded veterans – remained steadfast. As war victims, veterans possess a political leverage that is not available to most other suffering groups, and there prevails a broad consensus that American administrations have not adequately fulfilled their obligations to veterans. The narrative of soldier victimhood has faced opposition from some military officers, who contest the 'war hero' trope and express concern over its effects on military morale and recruitment (Stann, 2016; Michaels, 2014). Despite this, the victimhood of veterans continues to be a prominent theme in both social and media discourse.

To be identified as a victim is to assign blame, to claim moral ascendancy, and simultaneously to absolve oneself of any responsibility for one’s actions and their repercussions (Zur, 1995). Whenever victims resort to violence, "it is only as a last resort, in self-defense" (p. 20). This position is compelling because it always positions them as the moral authority, exempting them from responsibility or accountability for their behavior, while warranting perpetual compassion. The victim mentality hinges on the belief that external forces govern one's fate: "what occurs to an individual is dependent on events outside of their control rather than their actions" (p. 25). These controlling forces are perceived as stable and consistent, as opposed to random or fortuitous

(Rotter, 1971). Victims harbor a sense of self-inefficacy, feeling powerless to shape their life conditions. They are inclined to attribute the outcomes of their actions to external circumstances rather than to internal factors.

In his response to decades of racial oppression, William Ryan, in his book *Blaming the Victim* (1971), contends that to blame the victim is to perpetuate the existing state of affairs, benefiting those in power. While Ryan's (1971) warning about the dangers of victim-blaming is valid, given the historical context, Zur (1995) argues that it has also silenced examination of victimhood in subsequent periods, inadvertently encouraging further victimization. This reluctance among scholars to explore victimhood, for fear of being accused of 'blaming the victim', stifles discussions of the victim's role.

The distinction between victims and non-victims lies in how they view themselves, the world around them, and their relationship to trauma (Zur, 1995). Key psychological factors in those who perceive themselves as victims include feelings of guilt, helplessness, low self-esteem, an internalized sense of wickedness, and shame. The actions of the victim yield enough rewards to perpetuate victim behavior. This paper seeks to analyze David Abrams' 'Fobbit' (2012) in terms of its portrayal of victimhood and the concept of war victims within the context of the 2003 Iraq War. It examines the novel through two primary frameworks: 'American Victims,' which explores the depiction of American soldiers as victims, and 'National Victims,' which investigates the portrayal of Iraqis in the narrative.

National Victims

In 1969, Time magazine published an article about a massacre in Vietnam that had occurred the previous year but had only recently come to the attention of the American public (Musiał, 2020). William Calley, the army lieutenant who led the platoon responsible for the majority of the killings in the village of My Lai, was the only individual convicted and punished. The article, entitled "My Lai: An American Tragedy," recounted the events in the village, incorporating quotes from the platoon involved in the massacre, their families, and American politicians, to elucidate and contextualize the underlying reasons for the actions of the U.S. soldiers. Musiał (2020) questions the reasoning behind the headline:

> What—what myths, delusions, and needs—would drive one to designate an event like the massacre an 'American tragedy'? Why were these myths and needs so compelling as to shape much of the representation and interpretation of the Vietnam War in the American mainstream? (Musiał, 2020, p. 120).

The massacre was portrayed as an inevitable outcome of war that exposed the darker aspects of human nature. The event was attributed to the convicted officer and his troops, rather than being linked to the general conduct of the U.S. war in Vietnam or to the broader catastrophe of U.S. involvement in the region. Musiał (2020) contends that this approach to naturalizing the massacre exemplifies a widespread representational tactic prevalent in a broad spectrum of literature and film on the subject.

The American inability to distinguish between innocent civilians and combatants was thus ascribed to the specific challenges of the conflict in Vietnam, rather than being indicative of any shortcomings of the soldiers or their commanders (Musiał, 2020). The article featured statements from U.S. soldiers who expressed confidence in their authority and the neutrality of their account. They felt frustration due to the guerrillas' lack of uniforms and the inclusion of women and children within their ranks. As a result, all Vietnamese were perceived as potential threats to the American troops, fostering a climate of fear and paranoia. Revenge was frequently cited as the motive behind the massacre. With the article repeatedly highlighting that the soldiers of C Company had suffered significant losses, it concluded that witnessing the death of a comrade in such conditions could push a soldier to the brink of madness.

In the Vietnam War, when civilians became indistinguishable from combatants, the American response seemed justified through the rationalization of a revenge motive (Musiał, 2020). Rather than addressing the unjustifiable presence of the U.S. in Vietnam, the misconduct was minimized. Critiques of the war’s morality were overshadowed by presenting the conflation of civilians with combatants as an inherent aspect of the Vietnam conflict, echoing the soldiers' justifications of vengeance. Although the article expressed sorrow for innocent victims, it simultaneously conveyed a tacit acceptance of the slaughter as an unavoidable consequence of war. In doing so, it nearly legitimized the concept of avenging military losses with retaliatory violence against civilians.

A similar rationale emerged regarding Iraqis in the 2003 Iraq War. In Abrams' 'Fobbit', Iraq is depicted as "the land of Lose-Lose" (Abrams, 2012, p. 15), a place where all present are fated to partake in suffering. Civilians invariably bear the brunt of wars fought on their soil, and the Iraqis are no different. 'Fobbit' illustrates the repercussions of careless actions by soldiers that lead to unintended harm to both Americans and Iraqis. For instance, Captain Abe Shrinkle's reckless decision to "throw [...] a thermite grenade in the cab of a perfectly good Heavy Mobility Tactical Truck to disable it [...] a grenade at a U.S. fuel truck" (p. 133) results in a tragic outcome. After extinguishing the flames of the burned truck, the soldiers discover the body of a deceased local beneath it. Nevertheless, the narrative suggests the Iraqi bore some responsibility, whether it was for choosing such a hiding place or perhaps harboring hostile intentions towards the Americans. Thus, the local becomes a victim with a degree of complicity in his own demise.

Both Americans and Iraqis are victims of the Iraqi mentality and insurgency. The insurgency hinders the Americans' persistent efforts to help rebuild Iraq's infrastructure. As the Americans try their best to help the Iraqis modernize, the locals resist, producing a counter-effect on the ground.

> the nation rebuilding that was, in itself, a constant struggle, suicide bombers or no suicide bombers. There were sewer lines to patch, electric substations to rewire, schools to build, backpacks to distribute to solemn-faced boys and girls, local sheikhs to convince that what America brought to the table really was better than anything Saddam had offered during his decades of tyranny. That was the mission that was supposed to consume the larger percentage of his [Duret's] time [. . .] [original italics] (Abrams, 2012, p. 104).

On the one hand, Americans are modernizing Iraq, rebuilding its shattered infrastructure, helping to educate the locals and sending their children back to school. On the other hand, Iraqis are resisting these efforts and making it very difficult for the Americans to achieve their benevolent goals. The Iraqis are becoming their own enemies by hindering such modernization efforts; they are to blame for much of their suffering.

Most of the death inflicted on Iraqis is the result of insurgent attacks; insurgents target pilgrims at two positions and a mosque (Abrams, 2012). Seven Iraqis are killed and several dozen injured. The Americans intervene and target these militants from the air and on the ground. Iraqis are also targeted in another place; a "terrorist" spreads a false alarm among pilgrims, who panic and cause a stampede (p. 277). The crowds

> pushed and screamed, shoved and ran, jostled and tripped, the fallen trying to rise but being kicked down by more and more feet fleeing the feared blast zone, those at the edge seeing the surging human tide and turning, walking rapidly at first, then, as they felt the hot breath on their necks, also starting to run and also tripping and falling and lying flat to be stomped and suffocated by all those sandalled feet [. . .] Dust clogged the air, swirled by screams and flailing limbs [. . .] People were crushed, the breath pushed from their lungs, their ribs cracked, their organs compressed, the legs and arms and necks of young children snapped like thin, dry twigs (p. 277).

Civilians are the victims of sectarian attacks, which target religious congregations in order to cause mass casualties. Children are among the dead; they are trampled to death, their frail bodies cracked and crushed, adding to the enemy's ruthlessness. Like Americans, Iraqis are victims of the same source of violence, which makes no distinction between civilians and militants. Americans and Iraqi civilians are placed in the same category of victimhood because they share a common enemy, the insurgency. The episode accentuates the inhumanity of the attackers, the analogous victim status of Americans and Iraqis, and the role of Americans as saviors of Iraqis.

In Abrams' novel, Iraqis are sometimes the victims of arbitrary detention by American forces. While many of those arrested in Scranton's (2016) *War Porn* are innocent, and some are even tortured to death, like the Iraqi character Qasim, most of the detainees in *Fobbit* are guilty. Gooding acknowledges that there is "*certain amount of collateral damage when we make these raids and trap insurgents in our net, sometimes we pick up a few innocents along with the way . . . to whom we later apologize and send on their merry way*" [original italics] (Abrams, 2012, p. 94). But these innocents are few among more than four hundred "bad guys" (p. 93). Gooding admits that some mistakes, albeit few, are made by Americans. But the general unexplained antipathy of Iraqis towards Americans, as illustrated by the tank episode, makes the locals less victims and more antagonists.

The true number of Iraqi casualties and the circumstances of their deaths are not released to the media by the Americans in order not to anger the Iraqi people. Gooding's senior officer, Eustace Harkleroad, tells him not to "draw attention to the Local National deaths if we don't have to" (Abrams, 2012, p. 67). Yet the vast majority of these figures are the result of aggressive attacks by "terrorists" (p. 66). Similarly, when an Iraqi bystander, "a four-year-old boy, was killed by a ricocheting bullet" (p. 236), the official story is that it came from the barrel of an enemy gun. But Harkleroad assures his mother that, "there is some doubt to that story" (p. 237). Iraqis, like Americans, are victims of war and of news manipulation by Army Public Affairs, which is reluctant to address the conditions behind these casualties.

The war also targets the mentally ill, those in need of special care; no one seems to be exempt from the tortures of war. After the Americans receive a report of an Iraqi acting suspiciously and wearing a heavy outfit near a petrol station in the hot Iraqi summer, an American unit is sent to the scene. Within minutes of their arrival, to the surprise of his soldiers, Captain Abe Shrinkle shoots the man with his pistol. The man crumples to the ground and begins "to groan, arch his back, and kick his legs, heels digging into the dirt" (Abrams, 2012, p.114). Two women in black robes come running, "wails rising from their throats like sirens. They alternately clapped their hands to their heads and pointed at the man writhing on the ground. Their tongues ululated and strings of saliva dripped from their chins" (p. 114). They rush up, bend over the body and intimately bathe him "with tears and saliva" (p. 114). The man is later reported to be "MENTALLY RETARDED," not wearing a suicide vest or belt as previously thought, and the report is "CLOSED" (p. 115). The novel shows how innocent civilians are sometimes murdered because of mistakes made by some American officers, but the Americans are there primarily to protect the locals from a suspected suicide bomber, alerted by the man's suspicious outfit and provocative actions. They are there to protect the Iraqis from their own suicide bombers; they are the saviors of the locals, even if they sometimes make mistakes. Iraqis are not the most obvious victims of war, although they share some of the characteristics of victims with American soldiers. The source of most of their misery is local, which absolves the Americans of most responsibility.

American Victims

Victimhood is regularly characterized by an emphasis on agony, cost or fear, to the extent that victims have limited or no capacity to perceive a positive side to the victim condition (Breen-Smyth, 2018). The Americans in *Fobbit* are exposed to various means of torment as they try to sort things out in a country left in chaos. Like those in Kevin Powers' (2012) *The Yellow Birds*, the American soldiers in Abrams' novel are haunted by the ever-present specter of death (Raihanah & Alosman 2022). They "dodge the roadside bombs that ripped limbs from sockets and spread guts like fiery paste across the pavement" (Abrams, 2012, p. 4). Death comes in many forms and from many sources. Soldiers can be killed by IEDs, mortars and other types of lethal weapons. Through Staff Sergeant Chance Gooding Jr, the veiled stories of American soldiers are exposed, the unadulterated facts of their deaths and injuries are revealed to expose and make visible their agony.

Categorizing oneself as a victim can lead to a sense of vulnerability and hypervigilance. Victims are sometimes preoccupied with their own condition and demands that "it compromises their ability to take account of the impact of their actions on others" (Breen-Smyth, 2018, 217). Officers are also powerless in grave situations, as they are required to bring their soldiers back safely to their base from the midst of an unpredictable war (Abrams, 2012). Even for Lieutenant Colonel Vic Duret, a senior officer, the war seems far beyond his control. During one of the deadliest episodes in Baghdad, as his subordinates look up to him for orders, he is too confused to make a decision or take action. He is haunted by memories of his home in the US; now he wants his dog, Ginger, and his wife to put his face on his wife's chest so as to nurse "like he was a baby and if he was lucky she wouldn't catch him crying over all the bad shit he'd brought home from Baghdad" (p. 17). Although the tone is satirical, Duret is made into a passive victim of war whose only wish is to regain his status as an ordinary man living his normal life with his wife and dog.

Americans are made the most vulnerable objects in the war, as the lives of the Iraqi people are prioritized at the expense of those of American soldiers. Duret hopes to resolve a battlefield situation "with minimal death to innocent Iraqi citizens or his own men (in that order, as per the rules of engagement)" (Abrams, 2012, p. 21). He worries about the lives of soldiers

trapped in a tank with an explosives-laden car underneath. He reminds Captain Abe Shrinkle that these soldiers are depending on them to resolve the situation "so they dislodge from the ticking time bomb" and return safe to their base (p. 21). They are threatened by unjustified terrorism from people like the driver of the car. The Americans try to defuse the explosive and protect the lives of both the American soldiers inside the tank and the many curious Iraqi bystanders. American soldiers are the recipients of violence, not the initiators.

While the Americans are concerned about the safety of the Iraqis, the locals seem to sympathize with a "terrorist" (Abrams, 2012, p.16), a badly injured foreign driver, later identified as a "Swiss" (p.58), in an explosives-laden car stuck under an American tank. As American soldiers set up a cordon around the area to prevent locals from approaching for their own protection, a young Iraqi boy manages to escape the cordon and find his way to the car. Sergeant Lumley decides not to take him back and "get himself blown" to save a "stupid" boy (p29). When the boy reaches the previously "scowling" driver (p. 29), he smiles at the boy who offers him a bottle of water. The boy puts the bottle to the man's lips and helps him to drink, "cupping his hand beneath the blood clotted bread to catch drips. When the man finished drinking, he leaned close to the boy and spoke few words before his head rolled back against the head rest and he passed out" (p. 29). The Iraqis are shown to be on the side of those who are trying to inflict death on the Americans, those who are risking their lives to protect them. Soldiers are thus targets of both civilians and militants in Iraq. The nationality of the driver, a Syrian who is later identified as Swiss, an outsider and a "terrorist" (p. 16), reiterates the position of the Americans as victims of both foreign militants and Iraqis.

Iraqi sympathy for anti-American groups is further underlined when the boy is interrogated by Americans through a translator. The boy tells them that the man in the car asked him to tell the Americans,

> "he is from Syria and his terrorist group has planned to launch many vehicle bomb attacks today and also other attacks will follow. He say he is here to kill Americans and it is his supreme pleasure to follow Allah's will as he sends us to the flames of hell."

Duret stared at the boy, who returned the look without cracking a smile. This was the problem with Iraqis, he thought. They believed everything they heard. Now this [taboo] is a hero in this kid's mind and he thinks he's earned a place at Allah's right hand just because he gave the [taboo] a sip of water (Abrams, 2012, p. 30).

After showing how attacks against Americans in Iraq are carried out by non-Iraqis, the suicide bomber is said to be part of a "group" involved in large-scale attacks against Americans (p. 30). The killing of Americans, associated with "Allah's will" (p. 30), is made the purpose of the man who has a "dog-eared copy of Koran" (p. 26) to show the influence of the Quran on him. Thus, the source of the man's hostility towards American soldiers is the result of his exclusively religiously motivated hatred of them. The Iraqi boy's behavior is also antagonistic and not innocent, as he refuses to smile, which reinforces this hatred. He is also related to such religiously based antagonism towards Americans. The simplicity of the Iraqis, Duret believes, shows how easily they are manipulated by such religious-based ideologies, which further affects their children and reinforces their blind antipathy. Gooding's diaries underline Duret's point: "*this nanosecond before the next bomb is detonated, before the next grubby thumb presses the remote-controlled cell phone trigger or the next zealous Muslim chanting "Allahu Akbar!" steers his car bomb towards a U.S. convoy*" [original italics] (p. 323). Americans are therefore the target of religiously motivated, uncivilized bigots whose only aim is to cause more death among them.

Despite their humane behaviour, some American soldiers are victims of anti-American operations. The story of Kyle Pilley, an American soldier, demonstrates this benevolent behaviour when he is targeted by an insurgent sniper hiding in a van. He miraculously escapes death and manages to identify the source of the bullet. He and his platoon pursue the militants; one soldier aims at the van's tire but hits the sniper himself instead (Abrams, 2012). They tackle one of the insurgents on the run and the other, the wounded one, runs into a house. McKnight aims his gun and hits a large vein under the insurgent's armpit, who stops after losing a lot of blood and sits down as the blood flows rapidly. Pilley opens his first aid kit and slaps it on the man. He saves the very man who tried to kill him a few minutes ago. He does not see the man as an enemy; he helps because he knows he "needed to help him, no matter who he was" (p. 214). Nevertheless, Pilley's Humvee is hit by an IED a few days later. The vehicle is split in two, the engine thrown meters away, one soldier is killed, and two are injured; Pilley's leg is

"blown clean off below the knee" (p. 216). Pilley, the magnanimous soldier, is targeted again, this time by an IED, and leaves with a permanent injury that will follow him for the rest of his life. He is the noble casualty of war, holding no grudge against the very enemy who wants him dead and makes a festival of his killing by filming the shooting.

As death continues to haunt the lives of American soldiers in Iraq, deceased soldiers become objects shipped back to the US in boxes. Their identities remain anonymous for days until officials release their names (Abrams, 2012). Because of the increasing number of American deaths, Gooding tires of typing the sentence,

> *Names of the deceased are being withheld until next of kin have been notified*. Whatever emotional impact these words might have once carried had gone fuzzy and numb by all the repetition. Dead soldiers were now little more than names and hometowns, corpses simply objects to be loaded onto the back of C-130 somewhere and delivered like pizzas to the United States [. . .] like orders at a pizza joint, those bodies kept rolling in. All he could do to keep up with the demand was type the same press releases time after time until they become like words to a song he was memorizing [original italics] (pp. 271, 272).

Names are not released by the Division Army Public Affairs in Iraq, but by the Pentagon after a week or two, "after the soldier had been delimbed by the bomb or barbecued in the driver's seat of the Humvee" (p. 272). American soldiers are thus victims of both the war and its callous bureaucracy, which disregards the humanity of soldiers and sends them home to their families like commodities. Like any product in any market, the large number of bodies makes them less valuable. Therefore, the novel details the processes these deceased soldiers go through to reclaim their disenfranchised human status and make them more visible as victims of war through the character of Gooding, who serves as a watchdog and reclaimer of the soldiers' status as victims of war.

Though Captain Abe Shrinkle's behavior and major blunders are mocked throughout the novel, with a constant reminder of his responsibility for the killing of an innocent Iraqi hiding under the American truck, which still sounds suspicious, he receives the most horrific form of capital punishment when he is targeted by a mortar fired by insurgents.

> He'd taken a direct hit from the mortar while the rest of them had survived–drenched with the pink rain from the pool, yes, and suffering the unforgivable horror of a severed arm in one's lap [. . .] It was almost too much for their minds (Abrams, 2012, p. 316).

The only remaining part of his body, his arm, is "burned down to nothing but nubs" (p. 336). A few soldiers will miss him, "a doofus who made a lot of bad decisions" (p. 322), but Sergeant Lumley thinks it is catastrophic that this should happen to him. "No one deserved to be "obliterated." Not even the worst officer in the United States Army" (p. 322). In fact, Shrinkle's act of killing "an innocent man" (p. 313), though condemned throughout the novel, is unintentional, as he has no prior knowledge of the man's existence under the truck. In contrast, the attack that causes his death is obviously premeditated and carried out by insurgents who target him while he is sitting in the middle of a pool enjoying a can of beer, rather than on the front line or on an offensive mission, reflecting both his innocence and his counter-heroic status; he becomes another victim of terrorism in Iraq rather than a miscreant officer.

After the terrible death of Abe Shrinkle, Gooding remembers the time he first meets him; he wishes to go back in time and pulls him "*out of the war zone entirely* [. . .] *Saving one man's life from the death that waited for him to step off the curb*" [original italics] (Abrams 2012, p. 346). Days after his death, the place where Abe Shrinkle is used to work is bombed; Gooding comprehends that Shrinkle *"would have been killed anyway, no matter how many times I pulled him out of that pool in my dreams. Death is relentless and unswerving*" [original italics] (p. 348). Similarly, in the final lines of the novel, Gooding realizes that the longer he stays in Baghdad, "the more he is convinced that he will "be leaving in a pine box" [original italics] (p. 349). As in Keven Powers' *The Yellow Birds*, death seems to lurk everywhere for American soldiers in Iraq, making their lives unbearable and more like hell (Alosman & Omar, 2022).

American soldiers are also victims of their own army, which manipulates their heroic stories to serve its war propaganda. These soldiers are called "moneymakers" because they help promote the US Army's narrative and garner public support for its operations in Iraq (Abrams, 2012, p. 204). Officers in the Army Public Affairs Division have plans for Kyle Pilley, a moneymaker, to be interviewed by the major news outlets in the United States. Days later, however, he is hit by an IED

and has the lower half of his leg blown off, which disappoints these officers, not because of his serious injury, but because he is no longer available for interviews. Soldiers seem less important than their stories, which are used for war propaganda.

Similarly, the media in the US treat American soldiers as statistics, with no regard for what those numbers represent, i.e., soldiers. They wait impatiently for the next unfortunate soldier to have "*his fifteen minutes of fame as number 2,000*. [. . .] *The media are drawn like jackals to watering hole by the number 2,000*" [original italics] (p. 324). The lives of these Americans are reduced to numbers and statistics. These numbers represent soldiers killed in a war over which they have no choice; they are only "produck[s]", products (Fountain, 2012, p. 36), "popsicle sticks" (Abrams 2012, p. 326), and objects of war. Like those in Fountain's novel, the American soldiers in *Fobbit* are victims of their own people, who are primarily concerned with such "grim milestones" around numbers (Abrams 2012, p. 326), which gives them a sense of a distant and unknown war. As Zur (1995) argues that it "takes a certain consistency in the environment to raise a victim" (p. 20), Abrams' novel consistently emphasizes the status of American soldiers as the most visible victims of war.

Conclusion

Like most American narratives of the 2003 war, such as Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds* (2012), Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (2012), Phil Klay's *Redeployment* (2014), and Roy Scranton's *War Porn* (2016) (Alosman 2021; Alosman 2022; Alsoman & Sabtan 2022; Alosman & Omar 2022), *Fobbit* (2012) asserts the futility of war and its intangible costs. Despite the fact that Abrams' novel critiques the war and the entire establishment behind its propaganda, it absolves the lower ranks of the military of any responsibility, making them the forgotten victims of the war. Since the maintenance of a victim identity depends on the person's ability to "keep a victim narrative going" (Breen-Smyth, 2018, 218), it is imperative to say that *Fobbit* affirms the victimhood of American soldiers where Iraqis are at least partially responsible for the death and destruction inflicted on their lives.

Exonerating soldiers from responsibility for their actions on the battlefield has serious consequences, as it gives soldiers a green light to commit further violations and atrocities against civilians in future conflicts. All those who take part in wars must be responsible for their actions, regardless of their rank or position; they are there by choice, as no one forced them to join the army. If everyone is held accountable for their part and knows the consequences of their actions in war, the human cost of war can be significantly reduced and made less costly. Literary works should be examined in order to expose and make more visible the victim approach to the behavior of soldiers on the battlefield, as this study has done.

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