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The Making of War Victims in Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds*

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Abstract

This paper aims at examining Kevin Powers' The Yellow Birds in terms of victimhood and its function regarding soldiers' culpability for atrocities in the context of the 2003 war on Iraq. Victimization is perpetuated in the time of war to serve pro-war narrative and justify violence against the other side of the equation. One party is made innocent and vulnerable while the other is shown to be capable of despicable acts and inconsiderate to any ethical standards. We investigate the position of American soldiers and locals in Iraq, both militant and civilian, and compare the novel's approach towards their status as war victims. Americans and Iraqis are both victims of war in Powers' novel, but Americans are its most visible and innocent casualty; their voices are consistently heard and their personal sufferings are untiringly detailed.

Keywords*: Victimhood; Kevin Powers; Iraq War; War Novel*

Introduction

In the recent war in Europe, the West did not hesitate to declare its unwavering support for embattled Ukrainians and make their sufferings the most prevalent fact of the conflict. The images and footages of Ukrainian casualties prevailed Western media which relentlessly circulated their painful stories and engaged viewers in their personal experiences of war. Western sensitivity towards refugees almost intensified to the point that some of the most anti-refugees' countries, like Poland, began to welcome Ukrainians and open their homes for them. However, the situation was drastically different when compared to the past wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, especially regarding the condition of civilians belonging to these countries. The two Middle Eastern nations were devastated and hundreds of thousands were killed and injured, yet, most Western media outlets did not show any concern about their agonies. Stories of the sufferers were kept untold to the world and their grievances stifled.

The 2001 and 2003 wars in the Middle East were the subject of many literary works which attempted to depict the war from a rather personal perspective. Oeuvres by war veterans are abundant, especially by those who served in the 2003 Iraq War, to name some, *Fobbit* (2012) by David Abrams, *The Yellow Birds* (2012) by Kevin Powers, *Redeployment* (2015) by Phil Klay and *War Porn* (2016) by Roy Scranton. Kevin

Powers is a veteran who served as a machine gunner in the US Army in Iraq in 2004. His novel. *The Yellow Birds*, was shortlisted for the National Book Award and considered one of the finest war novels on the Iraq War, a masterpiece of war literature, and an American literary masterpiece (Raihanah & Alosman, 2022; Kakutani, 2012; Mitchell, 2012; Mantel, 2012; Tobar, 2012). This novel gives the American public access to the realities of war which contradicted the rather romantic narrative on war by the US media (Walter, 2016). It recounts the despicable realities of war and its determined exertion to annihilate the lives of those involved either voluntarily or compulsorily. Yet, it does not depict Iraqi characters in depth; they are generally drawn from afar where most of their identities are anonymous (Alosman & Raihanah 2022).

In Powers' novel, the protagonist Private John Bartle not only recognizes but also internalizes the appalling reality of war in Iraq to the extent he becomes estranged from his own culture (Hawkins, 2014). Following his return to America, Bartle experiences disillusionment through incessant acts of remembrance that shatter any conceivable consciousness of a common humanity (O'Gorman, 2015), thus emerging as the victim of political deception, the American public, and war (2016, Mann). His guilt complex pervades in the narrative as he does not feel entitled for the title 'war hero' because he realizes that soldiers are primarily concerned with their survival and safe coming back home rather than sheer heroism (Nester, 2013; Precup, 2017; Alosman & Raihanah, 2020; Raihanah & Alosman, 2022). Roy Scranton (2015) departs from earlier studies on the topic and succeeds in critiquing the trauma hero tradition which emerged and evolved as part of the discourse of war literature.

The notion of the trauma hero emerged when great works of world literature like Tolstoy's four-volume *War and Peace* (Tolstoy, 1993) depicted the agony of war veterans throughout their journey of disillusionment about the war hero paradigm. With the beginning of the twentieth century, the trauma hero concept reached its culmination as a conventionalized defining aspect of war literature, and subsequently writers of war literature like Ernest Heming and Wilfred Owen constructed around it literary works that have become part of world literature. Nonetheless, the notion has, in one way or another, opened the room to overstate the facts about war narratives. If we examine the ubiquity of the trauma hero in such works of literature, we realize their contribution to the perpetuation of a semi-factual 'truth'. It is a partial truth that serves "to capitalize on the moral authority" of the trauma hero discourse thus providing a distorted account of events (Scranton, 2015). This made Powers' novel short of presenting an objective narrative of a hostile invasion as it obliterates the factual suffering of the innocent victims of war. *The Yellow Birds* promotes the scattered 'tragedies' of individual veterans to the detriment of a whole people who suffered from occupation for over a decade. The novel offers a fractional account of tragedy by downplaying the context in which the tragedy occurred and the relationship between the absent Iraqi characters and the American 'protagonists.'

What is missing though is an elaborated comparative analysis of victimhood in the novel, for both American and Iraqis characters, and how their victimhood status functions in terms of culpability for war atrocities. This paper aims at examining Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds* in terms of victimhood and its implications regarding

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soldiers' culpability for atrocities in the context of the 2003 war on Iraq.

Victimhood in War

Traditionally, the concept of victimhood used to be associated with images dominated by the conceptual metaphor of seeing the victim as the object of the victimization process which implies that the role of the victim should not be questioned or explored. More recent approaches to victimhood embraced a deeper approach to the concept as a result of the sociocultural reasoning which has recently dominated the universal conceptual system. Criticizing the scarcity of studies that researched the factors leading to victimhood and the psychology of victims, Zur (1995) questions the nature and definition of victimhood in the American discourse, postulating that the implications of being a victim are embedded in the cultural systems in which the concept originates and highlighting the significance of understanding the complexity of victimhood as a gestalt, multifaceted concept.

Researching victimhood is challenging because of the sensitive nature of the concept. Conventionally, researchers tended to focus on exploring the psychology of offenders and witnesses, while avoiding any investigation of the victim's role in cases of violence or injustice because they did not wish to be accused of reprimanding the victim. Zur (1995) argues that without understanding the mindset of victims and the contextual factors that play a role in causing victimhood, it is not possible to heal cases of victimization or put an end to them. Resolving cases of violence necessitates understanding the complex nature of victimization including the relationship between the victim and the victimizer, while showing reluctance in discussing the victims' possible involvement in violence and abuse is not the right strategy to respond to victimization.

According to Zur (1995), a profound understanding of the identity and role of victims entails a thorough query into their psychological traits and the nature of their relationship with the victimizers and surrounding circumstances including their individual, social, economic as well as cultural (educational, political, legal, etc.) background. In other words, conceptualizing the complexity of victimhood requires adopting a multifaceted approach to deconstruct and unveil the circumstances surrounding cases of victimization. Although victimhood is an omnipresent universal concept, the American culture has contributed to a novel rationalization of the notion of victimhood as a result of the systemic American endeavours to nurture and entrench human rights concepts such as the freedom of choice, the freedom of expression, democracy, and others. Promoting the images of victimhood and extending them on American media outlets has contributed to fierce competition among individuals to appear as victims of different types of injustice.

Zur (1995) explains how the rights movement, pioneered and reinforced by the American legal and media systems (Hughes, 1993), has contributed to perpetuating rather than eliminating cases of victimhood. When individuals have faith in their ability to make their own choices, they assume that they need to fight for their rights to protect themselves from being exposed to the potential status of victimhood. Unfortunately, this reasoning may breed different cases of victimhood as it justifies initiating conflict and launching war. Accordingly, assuming the role of the superpower which is entrusted with the

global mission of defending the rights of victims can only exacerbate cases of injustice and conflict instead of healing them. Also, viewing a victim in a decontextualized manner without exploring their actions/reactions vis-à-vis the victimization process is defective and simplistic as it marks a state of polarization between the two extremes of being absolutely right and being absolutely guilty. Zur (1995) believes that assuming the identity of a blameless victim is problematic because it involves a sense of "moral superiority" (p. 20) that prevents individuals from monitoring their actions. In other words, a victim does not view himself/herself as accountable for grievances. To the contrary, victims always see themselves on the receiving end of different forms of injustice and, therefore, they expect others to justify their acts and sympathize with their situation, regardless of the nature or consequences of their behavior. This logic makes the victim immune to criticism or accountability.

This approach to victimhood is problematic for being deterministic in dealing with cases of violence, which may halt any future pursuing of the course of justice and eventually lead to prolonging the process of victimization. It is a common practice among scholars to avoid exploring the nature of victimhood in order not to fall under criticism for laying the blame on the victim rather than the perpetrator. In fact, in order to have a profound understanding of the victim's identity, it is necessary to consider the context in which victimization occurs.

For a start, it is not easy to distinguish between the victim and the victimizer if they come from two different systems on the economic, social, political as well as legal levels. Furthermore, it is not possible to understand the psychology of the victim by investigating exterior factors. Zur (1995) remarks that the feelings of being victimized are rooted in personal traits which contribute to perpetuating rather than eliminating victimhood. The writer discusses the victims' psychological characteristics that contribute to prolonging the vicious circle of victimization. Victims believe that whatever happens in their life is the result of constant factors beyond their control.

According to this reasoning, victims feel helpless in changing their circumstances because they believe that these factors are imposed on them and not self-initiated. Also, victims develop psychological traits like lacking confidence and being a source of disgrace. These attributes are conducive to certain advantages and rewards which victims choose to sustain by maintaining their behavior. In other words, victims suffer due to the injustice inflicted on them and their suffering can be easily recognized by others, yet there are some invisible advantages which benefit victims in one way or another. For instance, if a victim wins the recognition of others for being the object of victimization, he/she acquires the right to receive their compassion and sympathy even if they become involved in an act of retaliation on behalf of justice. This implies that victims enjoy the privilege of not feeling accountable for their role in atrocities that target the perpetrators (Zur, 1995).

Jacoby (2015) discusses another aspect of complexity in delineating the concept of victimhood. Constructing the victim's identity does not happen overnight. Rather, it is the result of constant incidents that reinforce the status of victimhood on different levels. On the political level where there is protracted conflict, the victim's identity becomes a subject of dispute as the

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conflicting parties become involved in a cycle of hostility and retaliation. The author explains that once a party is affected by a conflict, they endeavour to receive recognition as victims because they recognize the benefits they become entitled to on the tangible, moral as well as political levels by virtue of acquiring the identity of victimhood where there is respect for human rights discourse. ". He also criticizes the UN's definition of a victim for lacking the concept's profound intricacies. According to the UN, a victim is an individual or group of people who suffer from physical, mental, emotional, economic or other forms of injury as a result of violating internationally-recognized human rights. The writer clarifies that this definition is simplistic and does not reflect the multiplex nature of victimhood. To illustrate, Jacoby (2015) believes that absolute categorization of victimhood in international conflicts is not plausible considering the inevitable overlapping in classifying victims and perpetrators. The reason behind the blurred taxonomy of the subjects of victimization and the objects of victimization is that each party seeks to point the figure of accusation at the other party while both parties suffer from the vicious cycle of violence and conflict, which makes it difficult to reach a clear delineation of victimhood.

As discussed earlier, if we seek to reach an objective understanding of victimhood, it is significant to identify the context in which victimization occurs. In politics, multiple factors contribute to shaping the identities of the victim(s) and perpetrator(s), including the dynamics of power and competition to control limited resources. The use of power to force certain behaviors on individuals is an act of compulsion that leads to violence and victimization. Nonetheless, "victimhood is a socially constructed identity" (Jacoby, 2015, 527) that involves multidimensional interactions with the immediate environment and understanding the nature of victimization requires thorough investigation of all surrounding circumstances, not only political conditions.

Researching victimhood from a socio-political perspective is quite significant since politicizing victimhood does not fully account for the deserved complexity of the concept for many reasons. First, in order to become part of a broader political campaign, victims need to endeavor to generate strong emotions of sympathy, criticism, dogmatism amongst the public, although the visibility of victims is not confined to the intensity of the generated emotions. Victims' visibility is an indication of the ideological system prevailing in the relevant society as victims can receive more recognition in societies that respect the rights of individuals than societies that are involved in shocking atrocities and try to conceal cases of victimhood (Jacoby, 2015). This implies that victims whose suffering lacks prominence in the international arena are subject to a double act of victimization.

The second issue with politicizing victimhood lies in the fact that conflicting parties compete to claim the status of a victim, which blurs the dividing lines between victim and perpetrator should the conflict continue to produce causalities from all concerned parties. Also, politicizing victimhood denies victims the opportunity to deconstruct the conditions that led to their victimization because they feel the need to conform to the boundaries of existing categories that are shaped by the power in control of the political scene. Jacoby (2015) agrees with the perspective of postcolonial researchers and feminists that politicizing grievances is a perilous endeavour which projects a "collective identity" (p. 529) on

cases of victimhood instead of dealing with victims independently.

Musiał (2020) provides a review of different American texts on the war in Vietnam for a critical account of the American ideological approach to victimhood and the strategies used to turn the images of American soldiers as victims of war into a ubiquitous 'reality' that distorted facts in the interest of the powerful. The author criticizes these texts for being detached from the actual context they sought to represent, in an attempt to construct a myth of an American tragedy in which the perpetrator emerges as a victim, thanks to the invincible influence of the superpower. He explains how the US media manipulates the concept of victimhood to promote the pro-colonial American discourse. For instance, the writer criticizes the American media approach to victimhood in an article published in *Time* under the title 'My Lai: An American Tragedy' to investigate the details of a massacre that occured in a Vietnamese village during the Vietnam war. The enquiry deals with the narrative from the perspective of US soldiers who committed the atrocity, their families and American politicians in order to justify the genocide and sustain the pro-war American spirit.

For this purpose, the article employs several strategies which flip the metaphoric domains of victimhood from "victim as the object of the massacre" into "victim as the perpetrator of the massacre". The first strategy used in the article is to conceptualize the massacre as an inexorable result of the war rather than the "U.S. policy in Vietnam or the systemic perversions of the U.S. presence in Indochina" (Musiał, 2020, 121). Also, the article attempts to contextualize the massacre in light of the blurred relationship between the American soldiers and the villagers who are viewed as possible sources of threat to these soldiers by virtue of being indistinct from guerrilla fighters. Furthermore, the article tries to justify the massacre using the theme of revenge for the loss incurred by the American soldiers in terms of souls and injuries among them. The genocide is presented from the perspective of the American soldiers who committed the crime in a way their narrative prevails as an unfiltered, natural, as well as rational account of 'facts', which detaches the crime from its actual indigenous context and conceals the ideological side of the incident reflected in the American role in the war: the crime is in fact downsized.

In other words, presenting the indistinguishability of Vietnamese friend and foe as part of the natural surround of Vietnam, and repeating the soldiers claims of revenge at face value and not as basis for critical insight, in fact disguises the U.S.-centrism of this perspective and dilutes the critique of the war's immorality—immorality not in the universal, humanistic sense of "war is hell," but immorality in the sense of someone's tangible interests, power, and political accountability. (Musiał, 2020, 123)

The danger in depoliticizing the circumstances surrounding the atrocity lies in justifying and legitimizing not only a heinous crime that amounts to the level of a genocide against armless civilians but also a flagrant invasion of another country in the name of liberty and human rights, a logic that would perpetuate the savagery of warfare and extend it to new destinations in a similar scenario.

This is exactly what happened at an advanced stage when the media used the same rationalization to polish the American involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq and make the USA appear on the defensive

rather than offensive, using the metaphor of "veterans as victims" (Breen-Smyth, 2018, 226). Media campaigns to promote this metaphor intensified not only on the US media but also on influential international media outlets, like the BBC, depicting the suffering of the American and British soldiers and their families using a series of relevant narratives which highlighted their agony having become homeless, disabled, mentally ill, or imprisoned.

We investigate the position of American soldiers and locals in Iraq, both militant and civilian, and compare the novel's approach towards their status as war victims through two constructs, 'American victims' and 'local victims'.

American Victims

American soldiers are at the center of Powers' novel and occupy most of its narrative space. Through Private John Bartle, an American soldier deployed to Iraq, the war and its aftermath unfold to the readership in poetic prose. The first lines of Powers' novel introduce the predicament American soldiers face in Iraq. War chases them in Iraq like a mythical monster that tries to devour its preys in "spring", "summer" and "every day"; "[w]e were not destined to survive" (Powers, 2012, 3-4). War is the agent of death that extinguishes the lives of its "citizens", Americans and Iraqis (3). Considering the numbers of deaths among soldiers, less than a thousand American soldiers by September, 2004, Bartle and Daniel Murphy (Murph), the young soldiers in the US Army, fear "being the thousandth killed" (4). American soldiers do not take their lives for granted as they witness death everywhere in Iraq trying to claim more souls. As they feel targeted by the machine of death, their utmost goal becomes to "survive" (107). Therefore, when Bartle arrives at the airport and receives appreciation from travelers for his service in Iraq, he forgets everything around him; "I was aware of my mother and of her alone. I felt as if I'd somehow been returned to the singular safety of the womb, untouched and untouchable to the world outside her arms around my slouching neck" (109). In a dangerous world, the mother's womb becomes the only and last resort for a frightened soul. Bartle is thus the innocent victim of war, not a participant and contributor to the death of people in Iraq. Powers depicts the war as a blind predator who is after Americans and Iraqis' lives. Iraqi civilians and American soldiers are placed in the same category, i.e., victims of war, while the agency of death is exclusively attributed to war.

American soldiers are innocent youngsters, Bartle is nineteen and Murph is eighteen, whose circumstances have placed them in a hostile place; they are the blameless casualties of war. Soldiers hear a "humbled weeping", a "bleating *lamb*" [Emphasis added] (Powers, 2012, 118), which is later identified with a dying American soldier; "his teeth chattering, mewling like a *lamb*. He was gut-shot and dying" [Emphasis added] (118). The medics tried to put his insides back in his body. He was a pale shape. The medics were covered in his blood and he shook in his delirium [. . .] His lips turned dark purple in the light and quivered. Snot ran onto his upper lip and the shaking of his body threw small flecks of spittle over his chin. I realized he had been still for a while and he was dead. No one spoke (118-119).

Powers likens an armed American soldier who dies on a foreign land his country declares war against to a lamb, a symbol of pure innocence. Though soldiers are aware of their being sent to warzones, they are still

made its innocent victims despite their part in the atrocities committed against locals (Scranton, 2015). Central to Powers' novel is the story of Murph and Bartle's failed promise to bring him back home unharmed. After witnessing the despicability of war, Murph becomes more and more "disintegrat[ed]" (Powers, 2012, 120), and, finally, gets lost. As his platoon search for him, Iraqis, through translators, tell them that foreign boy walked naked [. . .] He walked as a ghost, his feet and legs bleeding from his walk through the wire and detritus [. . .] When he reached them, he raised his head absently to the sky and paused [. . .] Murph shuffled his feet at them, and swayed gently from side to side, his body flecked in sweat. He showed no awareness of their presence [. . .] They had attempted to break Murph's trance, screamed and pleaded with him to return to the outpost. But as they screamed, the boy's eyes caught the shape of an old beggar. He turned and looked through them both for what seemed to be an endless moment, then walked off (195-196).

After being constantly described as a boy, who is only eighteen years old, Murph returns to his total innocence as he loses his mind and moves around naked. Later, Bartle and Sterling find Murph dead and his body twisted at absurd angles. He is thrown from a mosque minaret, broken and bruised, his eyes had been gouged out, the two hollow sockets looking like red angry passages to his mind. His throat had been cut nearly through, his head hung limply and lolled from side to side, attached only by the barely intact vertebrae [. . .] His ears were cut off. His nose cut off, too. He had been imprecisely castrated (205-206).

His body floats in the Tigris, "where he passed beneath the shadow of the mound where Jonah was buried, his eyes just cups now for the water that he floated in, the fish having begun to tear his flesh already" (60-61). Bartle feels obliged to remember him properly, "because all remembrances are assignations of significance" (61). Murph's story bears a double victimhood effect due to the horrible way he is killed with as well as Bartle's unfulfilled promise of bringing Murph back home safe to his mother. Bartle is constantly reminded of his failure to accomplish his pledge despite his being another victim of war where no one is shown to be in control.

Even after leaving the battlefield in Iraq, many soldiers suffer from psychological repercussions that accompany them back home. In his way home to the US, in Germany, Bartle's muscles become tensed and he begins to sweat; his body does not realize his present noncombatant situation:

> "My fingers closed around a rifle that was not there. I told them the rifle was not supposed to be there, but my fingers would not listen, and they kept closing around the space where my rifle was supposed to be and I continued to sweat and my heart was beating much faster than I thought reasonable," (54).

Like many American soldiers who return from battlefields, Bartle is diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PSTD) which prevents him from resuming his normal life (Alosman & Raihanah, 2020; Sagar & Shehadah, 2020). At home in the US, Bartle feels tired of his mind over-occupied with things he remembers and others he does not remember, but still he blames himself "on account of the sheer vividness of scenes that looped on the red-green linings of [his] closed eyelids". He wants to sleep and never wake up; "there is a fine line between not wanting to wake up and actually wanting to kill yourself" (135). Soldiers are made the dejected sufferers of war whose miseries

surpass the battlefield, accompany them home, and make their lives less livable.

Despite Bartle's acknowledgement of the American soldiers' role in killing Iraqis, both civilian and militant, the novel persists in making them appear as the most palpable sufferers of war. Readers get access to the excessively damaged lives of soldiers who manage to come back physically intact from war. The author dedicates a good part of the novel to highlight the post traumatic experiences of the veterans and the public's inability to comprehend their rather intense pain. Bartle becomes "a kind of cripple [. . .] I feel like I'm being eaten from the inside out and I can't tell anyone what's going on because everyone is so grateful to me all the time and I'll feel like I'm ungrateful or something" (144). He thinks that he should be hated, not appreciated and loved, for what he did in Iraq. A pang of conscience takes hold of him as there is not any making up for killing women or even watching women get killed, or for that matter killing men and shooting them in the back and shooting them more times than necessary to actually kill them and it was like just trying to kill everything you saw sometimes because it felt like there was acid seeping down into your soul" (144).

He finds it contradictory for Americans to appreciate his participation in war for being a "murderer" while he has been taught that such acts cannot be forgiven (145). However, American soldiers are not fully responsible for their actions as they are still young, "boy[s]" (21), "boys", "like children" (80), and forced into such hostile circumstances. Though Sterling kills two old Iraqis with his machine gone when he could not recognize their noncombatant status with the naked eye, his innocence is illustrated when a small girl walks toward the corpse of the old woman. The kid is immediately targeted with "[e]rrant bullets" coming from farther positions (Powers, 2012, 23). Sterling, the very person who targeted the car minutes ago, orders his colleagues to tell the other platoon to stop shooting at the kid who shuffles to the body of the old woman and tries to drag her.

[H]er face contorted with effort as she pulled the old woman by her one complete arm. The girl described circles into the fine dust as she paced around the body. The path they made was marked in blood: from the car smoking and ablaze, through a courtyard ringed by hyacinths, to the place where the woman lay dead, attended by the small child, who rocked and moved her lips, perhaps singing some desert elegy that I couldn't hear (23).

The targeting of innocent people is the result of the difficult situation in Iraq and the soldiers' inability to identify the militant/civilian nature of Iraqis at the right time. Sterling and the other American soldiers in other platoons could not realize that those Iraqis were unaggressive and, therefore, reacted accordingly to defend themselves.

The novel provides examples that show the cruelty of Iraqi militants to emphasize Americans' rather civilized manner. They are the victims of an amoral enemy who commits desecration of the dead. Iraqis use the body of a dead man whose head is cut off and lain on his chest as a human bomb to target Americans. He is made "an unwilling weapon" by being captured, killed, eviscerated, and stuffed with explosives (Powers, 2012, 127). When Iraqis realize that Americans have recognized the trap, they detonate the explosives and the remnants are "scattered in pieces, some small and some large, others appearing infinite like the pieces we found near our

feet: a piece of skin and muscle, entrails. Others were larger, an arm and bits of legs" (126). American soldiers imagine the last few moments of his life; "[w]e saw him struggling and begging and asking Allah to free him, then realizing he would not be saved as they cut his throat and his neck bled and he choked and died" (127). Americans are made the merciful mourner of the Iraqi man whose body is used to terminate their lives which reflects their moral superiority over their enemy's.

The lives of American soldiers are portrayed in full details, especially with their familial bonds, which makes their non-combatant nature more visible, endorses their humane image, and enhances more empathy for their conditions. As soldiers bid farewell to their dear ones before their deployment to Iraq, "throngs of mothers hanging on their sons' shoulders, the fathers holding their hands on their hips, smiling on cue" (43), Bartle notices the traces of tears in his mother's eyes. He imagines her taking the flag and seeing him lowered into his tomb. "That she'd hear the salute of rifle shots roll in quick succession through the air" (44). He sees his mother off, kisses her, and smells "her hair, her perfume, [his] whole life back home" (45). She leaves and he follows her with his eyes.

The story of Murph's mother in particular details the suffering of soldiers' families. She waits for any news from her son after his deployment to Iraq since he rarely was "more than a few miles away from her during the first seventeen years of his life" (Powers, 2012, 29). Before his deployment, she asks Bartle to promise her that he will take care of her son, Murph, while in Iraq. "Nothing's gonna happen to him, right? Promise that you'll bring him home to me" (47). After his death, Murph's mother forgets herself, "no longer bathing, no longer sleeping, the ashes of the cigarettes she smoked becoming long and seeming always about to fall to her feet" (207-208). The personal aspect of soldiers' lives makes people identify and empathize with them more, and this makes them more victimized.

Bartle's promise to Murph's mother is fundamental to the notion of soldiers' vulnerable position in war. Bartle's then team leader Sergeant Sterling overhears him making the promise and gets furious when he later meets him; Sterling knocks him to the ground quickly and hits him "twice in the face, once below the eye and once directly in the mouth" (Powers, 2012, 47). Sterling's anger emanates from his previous deployment in Iraq, understanding the real nature of war, and how it is impossible to guarantee soldiers' safe return from the battlefield. Bartle only realizes the wisdom of Sterling's predicament and comprehends the reality of war after his deployment there, which reiterates Bartle's inexperience and confirms his innocence. Despite the fact that American soldiers are capable of wrongdoing in the time of war, they are intrinsically humane, but war coerces them to behave violently under certain conditions. They are first and foremost the victims of an unethical war they have no control over and circumstances that are forced upon them.

Local Victims

Local people are present in Powers' novel, though within limited narrative space and with shallow characters. The first pages of the novel bring in Iraqis as Americans' comrades in suffering and present their situation during the time of war. Thousands of Iraqis are killed by September, 2004; "[t]heir bodies lined the pocked avenues at irregular intervals. They were hidden in alleys, were found in bloating piles in the troughs of the hills outside the cities, the

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faces puffed and green, allergic now to life" (Powers, 2012, 4). Carcasses bloat in the sun and are eaten by rats and dogs; "I watched the dog as it loped off down an alley with a mangled arm clenched tightly in its jaws" (123). Iraqi militants are shown dead in large numbers. "X number of enemies were lying dead in a dusty field" (Powers, 2012, 15). One of them is shot repeatedly until some parts of his face are "gone" and is surrounded by a pool of his blood (21). Though Powers includes Iraqis as in the circle of war preys, their anguishes are not elaborated on or described in personal detail like American soldiers. The wails of Iraqi people are collectively recounted, a "chorus of grim wails" (169), "strange wailing" (85), as opposed to the individual perspective.

Malik, the Iraqi translator for American soldiers, is one of the few Iraqi characters with proper names. He gets shot at and killed while chatting with American soldiers, Bartle and Murph. They do not see how, but they suddenly find his blood on their uniforms. After the fire ceases, Murph asks, "[d]oesn't count, does it?" and the other answers, "[n]o. I don't think so" (Powers, 2012, 11). Bartle later confesses that he is "not surprised by the cruelty of my ambivalence then. Nothing seemed more natural than someone getting killed" (11). Minimal information about Malik's personality is recounted, though Bartle acknowledges soldiers' lack of sympathy with his death, which accentuates his victimhood. Nonetheless, Malik is targeted as a collaborator with Americans, which relates his victimhood to that of Americans'.

Iraqis are Bartle's comrades in sufferings as more of their miseries unfold to the world to witness the despicability of war. Many horrible scenes are presented to support the novel's total argument regarding soldiers' victimhood at the hands of Iraqis who are the war's victims as well. Soldiers hear the sound of a "bleating lamb" (Powers, 2012, 118). They move forward to see "two boys, sixteen or so, their battered rifles lying akimbo at the bottom, had been shot in the face and torso. Their skin had lost most of its natural brown" (118). The sound does not come from the militant Iraqi boys since they are already dead, but from an American soldier who is dying nearby. Though the Iraqi militants are made victims of war because of their young age, American soldiers are shown as the most innocent victims of it; they are its lambs, which accentuates their total blamelessness.

War is in charge of transforming American soldiers, who are otherwise kind-hearted, into merciless killers. Iraqi militants are shown to be also the victims of the blind war. While exchanging fire with Iraqi militants, a frightened Iraqi runs for his life with his weapon. Bartle's "first instinct was to yell out to him, "You made it, buddy, keep going," but [he] remembered how odd it would be to say a thing like that" (Powers, 2012, 20-21). The man tries to check his surroundings and Bartle wants to ask his comrades to stop firing at him, "to ask, "What kind of men are we?"" (21). Bartle himself feels saved because the man is saved. He also feels frightened like him. Then, he realizes with a great shock that he is "shooting at him" (21). He shoots until he is "sure that he was dead, and [he] felt better knowing [they] were killing him together and that it was just as well not to be sure [he is] the one who did it" (21). What causes Bartle to reclaim his military status and act according to his training is realizing the situation he is forced into which is the battlefield. Powers shows the good part of Bartle who naturally empathizes with the Iraqi insurgent and wants him to survive, which makes him, like the Iraqi, another war victim.

Iraqi civilians are among war victims and the most passive recipients of its mercilessness. Iraqi civilians are targeted by American soldiers who cannot determine their non-military status, and hence deal with them as threats. As a car drives toward Bartle's platoon, Sterling runs to the gun machine to take action. With his scope, Bartle identifies an old man behind the steering and an elderly woman in the back seat. Sterling, who could not see them clearly with the naked eye, shoots at them before Bartle could warn him. "I'll yell, I thought. I'll tell him they are old, let them pass" (Powers, 2012, 22). Bartle sees the "old woman ran her fingers along a string of pale beads. Her eyes were closed. I couldn't breathe" (22). The car stops, but Sterling keeps shooting until the bullets rip through the car and out the other side. The door opens and the old woman falls down. She tries "to drag herself to the side of the road. She crawled. Her old blood mixed with the ash and dust. She stopped moving" (22). Though Bartle is surprised, he confesses that there is "no grief, or anguish, or joy, or pity in that statement" (22). Powers reiterates the man and woman's old age and relates their unnecessary and tragic death to accentuate their civilian and noncombatant status and make their victimhood more visible. He describes how life continues naturally despite the despicability of the anecdote, yet not to posit blame on soldiers, but to describe their uncontrolled circumstances. Civilians are shown to be killed as a result of some soldiers' incapability of identifying the nature of the approaching car which is considered a threat to their lives. The soldiers' erroneous actions are related to the incomprehensibility of war and the randomness of death. Nonetheless, the novel fails to provide a reason for their military presence inside a civilian area.

Iraqis are also the victims of weapons used by Iraqi insurgents such as mortars and IEDs. The ghosts of dead people follow Bartle to the US and fill the empty seats; "boys destroyed by mortars and rockets and bullets and IEDs to the point that when we tried to get them to a medevac, the skin slid off, or limbs barely held in place detached" (Powers, 2012, 104). They die young and leave behind their unaccomplished dreams. Iraqis here are the victims and perpetrators of death. While Americans are shown to be keen on the lives of civilians, though with some mistakes, Iraqi militants are not shown to take any measures to protect the lives of civilians. As American soldiers are not clearly made in charge of the death inflicted on Iraqis, Iraqi insurgents are made the evident perpetrator. Thus, Iraqis become the victims of their own hands. The fact that the anguishes lived by Iraqis and death inflicted on them are recounted by an American soldier gives him credit and makes him a messenger of truth. In fact, Bartle's narrative on the locals is not a simple one as it serves his status as a victim and makes Iraqis his comrades in suffering which reiterates the agency of war per se and soldiers' innocence.

Conclusion

The Yellow Birds recounts the anguishes of both Iraqis and Americans in the context of the 2003 war on Iraq, yet, with different degrees of visibility. The personal aspect of Americans' lives and the catastrophic psychological repercussions of war on them are essential in making them the most visible victims of war. Private John Bartle takes credit for exposing the influence of war on the locals, which makes him their partner in sufferings. The notion of soldiers' victimhood as well as casting blame on the abstraction of war implies soldiers' innocence and their unaccountability for war

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atrocities. Though the novel exposes the despicability of war and makes it all evil, it stops short from recognizing the part played by soldiers and their culpability for the miseries inflected on locals.

Making soldiers war victims is rather grave as it equals the prey with the predator and liquidates responsibility in war. Soldiers cannot be considered war victims since they are its main perpetrators and without whom there would not be any wars. Absolving soldiers from their culpability in war inspires more war violence and sends a negative message to the real victims of war, civilians. More research should be conducted on war literature to expose the pro-war as well as pro-soldiers' narrative, which will make the evils of wars more visible and, hopefully, more preventable. The lives of all human beings, regardless to their religion, color or ethnicity, should have an invaluable weight.

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