Roy Scranton's *War Porn*: An American Postcolonial Narrative of the Iraq War

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Roy Scranton's debut novel, *War Porn* (2016), and aims to uncover the novel's approach to the 2003 American war on Iraq and its impact on the lives of Iraqis. It problematizes the representation of the Iraqi people in the context of the American invasion and presence in Iraq after the 2003 war. Postcolonial literature challenges the cultural hegemony imposed by colonial powers by demonstrating the richness, diversity, and vitality of their culture. It illustrates the negative influence of colonialism on the colonized and emphasizes its impact on the people and the land of the colonized. The argument is made through three constructs: "postcolonial voices," which addresses the diverse Iraqi perspectives on the war as represented in the novel, "colonial repercussions and implications," which elaborates on the disastrous influence of colonization on the lives of Iraqis, and "postcolonial representations," which explores the depth and richness of Iraqi culture as exemplified in the novel. The study argues that Scranton's is a postcolonial novel par excellence, albeit ironically written by an American veteran who participated in the very colonial endeavour he questions in his war narrative. It is one of the few acclaimed American war novels to devote a significant narrative space to recounting the 2003 war from the perspective of major Iraqi characters, reflecting the richness of Iraqi culture and the negative impact of colonialism on Iraq and Iraqis.

Keywords: postcolonial literature; war novel; war on Iraq; Roy Scranton; American veterans

INTRODUCTION

The United States launched a war against Afghanistan in 2001 and another against Iraq in 2003 after the September 11 attacks. The conflicts proved to be far more complicated, overwhelming, and damaging than many in power had anticipated, planning for a relatively short and acknowledged triumph. The most obvious facts about these wars were the casualties suffered by all parties and the devastation wrought on these geographies. Afghanistan and Iraq became battlegrounds that experienced terrible kinds of anarchy and destruction. The lives of individuals living in these geographical areas were forever changed for the worst. The locals endured prolonged suffering and traumatic situations that cannot be forgotten. Their stories were suppressed and history was erased, while the stories of their aggressors were praised, highlighted, and humanized. More than twenty years after America's post-9/11 wars, the peoples of Afghanistan

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and Iraq are still reeling from the effects of war. The effects of colonialism continue to haunt the countries and make their full recovery difficult.

Much was written about these two wars in the United States, including Phil Klay's *Redeployment* (2012), Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds* (2012), Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (2012), David Abrams' *Fobbit* (2012), Elliot Ackerman's *Green on Blue* (2016), John Renehan's *The Valley* (2016), and Brian Van Reet's *Spoils* (2017). Many of these works were written primarily by white American veterans who participated in these wars and chose to turn their experiences into literary works. Stories of American soldiers were told and their tragedies were emphasized, while the suffering of local people in Afghanistan and Iraq was given an insignificant narrative space (Alosman, 2021). With the exception of military translators, Iraqis occupied primarily passive and secondary narrative space; they were at the margins of these stories (Peter, 2016). However, Roy Scranton, an American war veteran, chose to integrate the story of the Iraqi people in his debut novel, *War Porn* (2016).

Scranton's work was considered one of the best and most disturbing contemporary war novels because it deviated from other literary works about the Iraq War (Colla, 2016). Phil Klay (2016) claimed that he had never read a book like Scranton's and that there was much to admire in *War Porn*; "the meticulous craftsmanship, the hysterical comic passages, the way the sheer audacity of vision is matched at every turn by the innovative skill to carry it out" (Klay, 2016). Words were not enough to describe the novel; "it's what all truly excellent literature leaves you with." A sense of something shattering" (Klay, 2016). Unlike other war novels, Scranton's revealed the intersections in the lives of both American and Iraqi characters and explained the impact of the war on their existence (Peter, 2016). It caused Americans to re-evaluate their views on the 2003 Iraq War and their treatment of American service members (Peter, 2016). The novel approached the war in an immaculate manner and efficiently provided insight into some aspects of the war that most Westerners are generally unaware of.

While most war literature addressed issues of trauma, the difficulty of homecoming, and the ineffable reality of war (Molin, 2017), *War Porn* approached the American war in Iraq in a drastically different way, refusing to redeem or compassionately portray soldiers who misbehaved (Peter, 2016). It moved Americans beyond the hero worship that surrounded U.S. service members and boldly portrayed war as a destructive force that harmed everyone around it (Peter, 2016). The novel shows how Stojanowski, an American veteran character, influenced by his involvement in the torture of prisoners in Iraq, behaved sadistically with Dahlia to reiterate the fact that torture cannot be ethically justified (Kowalczuk, 2019).

Scranton demonstrated the flourishing culture of Iraq through the use of poetry and other parables in daily life (Peter, 2016). Iraqis were intelligent people; Qasim, the central Iraqi character, was a math teacher dedicated to his academic career. Western readers were introduced to a spectrum of diverse Iraqi personalities through characters like Qasim, who shifted their reflexive loyalties away from American soldiers (Peter, 2016). Several Iraqi characters were multifaceted and held a variety of political viewpoints. However, despite being one of the most important themes of the novel, the postcolonial representation of the lives of Iraq's indigenous people and the effects of the war on their daily lives were not fully addressed. There is still a need to address the lingering effects of colonialism and to reclaim the narrative of war in order to amplify the voices of local people in these embattled countries and to make such wars more abominable.

War Porn interweaves the experiences of American soldiers with those of Iraqi citizens before, during, and after the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. The story depicts Iraqis' reactions

to the news of war, their experiences during the early days of the invasion, and how the conflict affects their lives. The reader is introduced to a wide range of Iraqi individuals from a variety of occupations, ages, educational, social, and ethical backgrounds. This article examines Scranton's treatment of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and its impact on the lives of ordinary Iraqis. It problematizes the representation of the Iraqi people in the American invasion and presence in Iraq before and during the 2003 war. It demonstrates the disastrous effects of colonialism and the novel's attempt to reclaim the narrative of the war, amplify local voices, and hold Americans accountable.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: WHAT MAKES THE POSTCOLONIAL?

Postcolonial literature is primarily concerned with the artistic and political expressions in which writers, typically from the former colony, tell their own story, including the story of the colonial encounter and its aftermath (Innes, 2007; McLeod, 2020). The postcolonial is interested in how individual practises and, "successive practises by different occupying imperial powers, affected the historical, political, cultural, social and psychic lives of the local peoples who bore the brunt of colonial subjugation" (Young, 2009, p. 20). It offers a way of seeing things differently, a language and a politics for how to reshape a world in which the colonised interests come first, not last (Young, 2020). Postcolonial writings are committed to challenging the cultural hegemony imposed by colonial powers (McEwan, 2019). They always include the notion of resistance (Young, 2009); they challenge racism and colonial politics with their focus on issues of culture (McEwan, 2019). Colonized people seek to prove "the richness of their thought, the equal value of their intellect" (Fanon, 2008, p. 3). Postcolonial literature mainly seeks to reveal what is otherwise hidden by colonial representation(s) of colonized people and attempts to counter them by elaborating on the diversity and richness of the local culture.

The postcolonial examines invisible geographical zones that involve issues of history, ethnicity, complex cultural identities, concerns of representation, and creative cultural dynamics (Young, 2009). It deconstructs the idea that there is a category of people who are visible to the casual eye and makes them known, accessible and relatable (Young, 2012). It provides a space for the invisible to be seen and ensures that they are able to represent themselves in their specific forms of difference rather than as others (Young, 2012). It offers "a language of and for those who have no place, who seem not to belong, of those whose knowledge and histories are not allowed to count" (Young, 2009, p. 14). Their stories, particularities, and identities become more identifiable and thus more connected to the world.

For the colonial, the non-Western Other is known primarily for its differences from its Western counterparts. Othering is "a colonial strategy of exclusion: for the postcolonial, there are only other human beings" (Young, 2012, p. 39). Difference becomes "the fantasy of a certain cultural space or, indeed, the certainty of a form of theoretical knowledge that deconstructs the epistemological ‘edge’ of the West" (Bhabha. 1994, p. 31). The Other is primarily conceived through binary oppositions with the Westerner (2009, Young). Therefore, postcolonialism begins by deconstructing ethnocentric assumptions in Western knowledge about non-Western peoples and cultures (2009, Young). It questions Western knowledge of the Other and the means by which it is created and controlled (Said, 1980; Young, 2009). The postcolonial seeks to develop a different paradigm in which identities are no longer starkly oppositional or exclusively singular, but characterized by their intricate and reciprocal relationships with others (Young, 2009, p. 15). It also brings knowledge of other cultures into the world and makes their complexities visible. It

starts from "its own counter-knowledges, and from the diversity of its cultural experiences, and starts from the premise that those in the West [. . .] should relinquish their monopoly on knowledge, and take other knowledges [. . .] as seriously as those of the West" (Young, 2009, p. 15). The postcolonial also offers multidimensional knowledge of more simplified and/or ambiguous spheres. It offers diverse and deep histories that challenge oversimplified Western understandings.

The work of the postcolonial continues as long as there are unjust and unaccountable hierarchies of power in the world (Young, 2009). In a skewed world where most of the differences are between people of the West and those of the non-West, the postcolonial asserts the right of all people on this planet to equal well-being (Young, 2009). It seeks to change the way the relationship between colonial and colonized peoples and their worlds is perceived. It challenges Western assumptions and violates their norms. It attempts to present a multidimensional view of the forgotten and marginalized parts of the world, free from any colonial influence or Western interference (Young, 2009). It critically re-examines colonial history, its old oppressions, old series of wars and territorial occupations, and their current political and cultural ramifications (Young, 2009). It offers an alternative historical project that opposes the Western view of the world as the history of the West; the perspective of the colonized becomes more visible. Above all, "postcolonialism seeks to intervene, to introduce its alternative knowledge into the power structures of the West as well as the non-West [and] challenges the global apartheid system according to which different nations are divided up into absurd disparities" (Young, 2009, p. 24). It opposes the dominant perspectives of the West.

Young (2012) argues that there is a desire on both sides of the Atlantic to declare the death of postcolonial theory and that proves its constant vigour and disturbing effect on the West; "the real problem lies in the fact that the postcolonial remains [...] the twenty-first century is already the century of postcolonial empowerment." (pp. 19, 20). Some scholars in the U.S. and Europe wish to abandon postcolonial theory because it reminds them of those distant, invisible contexts that continue to provoke the transformative powers of the postcolonial. Young (2012) argues that the theory is still alive because there is still inequality, exploitation and oppression in the world. There is still a need to reconstruct Western knowledge formations and reorient ethical means.

This article argues that *War Porn* is a quintessential postcolonial novel, albeit ironically written by an American veteran who participated in the very colonial endeavour he questions in his war narrative. The argument is made through three constructs: "postcolonial voices," which addresses the diverse Iraqi perspectives towards the war as represented in the novel; "colonial repercussions and implications," which elaborates on the disastrous influence of colonization on the lives of Iraqis; and "postcolonial representations," which explores how the novel depicts the depth and richness of Iraqi culture.

POSTCOLONIAL VOICES

In *War Porn*, Iraqi voices are heard on a variety of topics and situations; they are not monotonous or identical. Iraqis have different and sometimes complicated views on almost every issue, reflecting their diverse backgrounds and status in the Iraqi regime. Even before the war, Adham, Qasim's fellow teacher, believes that the end is coming and the

> crusaders are going to bomb us to rubble [. . .] that there is a better than fair chance almighty God in his infinite compassion has willed that our beloved university will be destroyed, our city wiped from the face of the earth, our friends and relatives charred to ash so that even the vultures and rats will be left starving in a waste so total it will make the Mongols' sack of the libraries seem like Eid al-Fitr (Scranton, 2016, pp. 136-137).

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Iraqis' perspectives on the war are more nuanced than those presented by the U.S. media (Pitchford, 2011). For some Iraqis, the war is a crusade against their country. They feel that their lives will be drastically changed and their cities destroyed. The American war is also contrasted with the infamous Mongol attack on Baghdad, in which books were burned and people were massacred indiscriminately. Thus, the Americans are compared to both crusaders and Mongols, indicating the level of disgust and fear that some Iraqis feel about the war.

Iraqis' views on the American invasion of their country are complex; they are not simply for or against the war. Some Iraqis, like Luqman, the physics professor, are misled by pre-war American propaganda and openly support the American invasion. He believes that the Americans will liberate Iraqis from the regime in Iraq and allow Iraqis to "vote," "have a constitution," and "elect [their] president" (Scranton, 2016, p. 154). Scranton mocks Luqman's ambitious dreams when he cites the influence of American news outlets such as CNN in shaping his opinions. Luqman dreamily elaborates, "[n]o more secret police! No more *Abu Ghraib*! It'll be like it was in the seventies [...] everybody had a new car and nice clothes [...] Freedom! And satellite TV! We won't have to hide anymore!" [Emphasis added] (pp. 154–155). Scranton's reference to the infamous Abu Ghraib prison demonstrates the extent to which some Iraqis believe the misleading American narrative about the war. In addition, *War Porn* details the torture tactics, such as those used by Americans at Abu Ghraib, that American soldiers in Iraq have used to refute such romantic views of war.

The perspectives of the Iraqi characters are neither simple nor naive, despite their occasional reliance on American military propaganda. While Othman carefully applies his literary understanding to the current state of Iraq, Mohammed relies primarily on his nationalist and historical background to support his position. Mohammed believes that the American invasion would be a "plague of crusaders [. . .] They're going to come in like pharaoh and put their foot on the neck of Iraq" (Scranton, 2016, pp. 176). Othman, on the other hand, thinks that Americans want Iraqis "to modernize" and live in a "democratic Iraq, an Iraq where every voice can be heard" (p. 178). Although not entirely certain, Qasim shares some of Othman's views, believing that "[m]aybe Bush will be a strong leader. Maybe *he* will keep Iraq strong [. . .] And maybe he'll make Iraq strong again. Then we can build our democracy" [Scranton's Emphasis] (p. 180). Although Scranton ridicules Iraqis who believe American propaganda, he delves into their perspectives. He details their worries and desires, which helps the reader appreciate the different points of view of Iraqis. The novel is full of Iraqi voices; their perspectives on every facet of life are presented and elaborated.

COLONIAL REPERCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The postcolonial is primarily concerned with interrogating colonial histories of violence, domination, inequality, and injustice (Young, 2012). Scranton's novel provides ample narrative space to expose the impact of the war on the lives of Iraqis and to elaborate on their extended suffering. Before the American invasion of Iraq, the people were preoccupied with the future of their country. Unlike Luqman, Qasim is not optimistic about the future. He imagines what would happen if American threats were carried out:

> What would happen to his city, his country? Every farewell stuck in his throat, each goodbye seeming to be the last, because nothing would ever be the same again in a week, even if, God willing, Luqman and Anouf and Lateefah and his uncle Mohammed and everyone else important to him survived. It was as if the calendar went up to the deadline and stopped: everything after that was blank.

> Except it won't be blank. It'll be terror, death, and fire from the sky. It'll be like before, with power outages, burst water mains, no food and police crackdowns. The UN will come in with their humiliating aid and we'll stand and beg for a bag of rice (Scranton, 2016, p. 154).

The American presence in Iraq seems to be associated with death and devastation. Qasim's sad premonition of his country's grim fate is intertwined with his loss of a wife, relatives, and friends. He foretells his nation's future under American auspices on both personal and social levels, as exemplified by his own horrific murder at the hands of Americans at the end of the novel. Iraqis are expected to be deprived of basic necessities such as electricity and water, to go hungry, and to be humiliated by humanitarian aid. Scranton paints a bleak picture of American dominance in Iraq and the resulting personal and social devastation.

Scranton enhances the story by providing a thorough account of the terror and shock felt by Iraqis during the bombing. The story examines the impact of the war on Iraqi families and individuals who will be remembered by their names and distinctive personalities as they live in a state of fear due to the American bombing where they are in

> constant terror, especially at night, especially last night. The bombing started in the afternoon, massive raids in waves that shook the city. Sometimes they'd hear the hum of jets, sometimes not, then the first booms. If they were farther away, it sounded like thunder, but the closer they got, the more it sounded like the earth itself was breaking apart. The house shuddered. Everyone froze, then ran to the living room, which, having no windows, was the safest place in the house. The adults sat on the couch and armchairs, the children on the floor, as if they were all having tea, and waited while the booms multiplied and stirred to crescendo. Typically, the wave was simple, peaking then fading into fewer, quieter booms and, eventually, silence. Sometimes it was longer, more complex, and orchestral: a peak would be followed by a lull, a quieter stretch mistook for a denouement, only to rise again, reborn with a rumble of hideous thunder. It could happen twice, three times, or just once, as Othman observed (Scranton, 2016, pp. 206-207).

The nuances of Iraqi grief are genuinely conveyed on an individual level. The narrative describes the location and nature of the bombing and the human reaction; you can feel how these attacks affect the area and how each individual reacts differently depending on their age and gender. Iraqi lives are not seen collectively as a dead mass.

Iraqis live under strikes where nights are long, awful, "restless and terrifying, spent at the edge of anxious exhaustion" (Scranton, 2016, pp. 207–208). As the airstrikes on Baghdad continue, people periodically go up on rooftops after the strikes to survey the damage, to see what part of the city is shattered and burning. "Columns of smoke strung across the sky" (Scranton, 2016, pp. 207). Sirens declare air-raids and "they'd all jump and run into the living room and it would all start all over [...] They scrounged bits of sleep, on the couch, on the floor." (p. 207). American jets are not the carriers of salvation for Iraqis, but rather the messengers of death; "[g]reat silver jets against the sky and the hundreds of bombs they carry, each one death for someone" (p. 208). Providing details of the lives of Iraqi people challenges the colonial amnesia that obscures the implications of the colonial project (Gregory, 2004). Iraqis are not just numbers on a screen or shallow characters like those in Powers' *The Yellow Birds*. It is not Americans who pray for the safe return of their soldiers from war, but Iraqis who live death every moment. Scranton defies the dominant war narratives that insist on magnifying the agony of Americans while relegating the misery of Iraqis to a secondary narrative space (Alosman, 2021).

The news of an imminent American-led attack on Iraq preoccupies Iraqis as they struggle to take the necessary steps before the attack. The information weighs on everyone's life, including the life of Qasim, the central Iraqi character, who is struggling to fulfill his dream of earning a

Ph.D. in mathematics. The war seems to shatter his social life, his work, and his academic dream, as he must decide whether to stay at the university in Baghdad, teach, and finish his studies after working so hard, or leave everything behind to join his wife, Lateefah, and his mother in Baqubah, as they need him there before the war begins. He thinks about it,

> The hours of teaching uninterested students, the longer hours of grading, the years of study, tutoring, working odd jobs, doing accounting for his uncle, all the effort he'd put into the dissertation. And now when he phoned Lateefah, drained to the point of hopelessness, she only made it worse. Punishing him with her silence. Blaming him (Scranton, 2016, p. 136).

He is torn between his ambitions and his duty to his family. His mother reminds him that "[m]aybe going back would give [them] another chance. You don't have to be a mathematician. [. . .] It won't make up for . . . but maybe Lateefah—maybe she and I . . ." (p. 136). She suggests that they might be targeted while he is in Baghdad. When he talks to his wife on the phone, "[h]is knees went weak. His voice went weak" (p. 146). The conflict casts a pall over the lives of Iraqis, forcing people to make difficult decisions about their livelihoods and uncertain futures. Locals suffer long before the war begins; they are not anonymous numbers or nameless faces lumped together; they are real beings whose suffering is conveyed on an individual level. Iraqis experience the trauma of war long before it manifests itself on the ground; they are the victims of a conflict that disrupts their lives and imposes new agonizing condition

The impact of the war on the personal level is illustrated to disambiguate the Iraqi perspective of fear and suffering. Even before the war, although those influenced by American news outlets are optimistic about the outcome of the American invasion, all Iraqis foresee a bleak personal future. They are prepared for the worst; "[t]his may be our last night. The Last Night for Iraq" (Scranton, 2016, p. 199). They listen to the news while engaging in war stories and other related conversations. After midnight, Othman wakes up "to the walls' dull shaking." The world shuddered once, then again and again. Antiaircraft guns attacked in the distance. There were several more explosions, far but not that far, and more guns "(p. 200). He and Mohammed go upstairs to the roof, only to see Baghdad "in flames [...] the city dancing with shadowed fire" (p. 200). The trauma experienced by the Iraqis during the attack can be inferred from their reactions, facial expressions, and voices. Readers can empathize with the agony of the Iraqis under attack because the war is told from their perspective. They are at the centre of the narrative, not at the periphery like the locals in other American literary works about the Iraq war.

American planes are bad omens for Iraqis, who associate them with horror, death, and destruction. After learning that nine American B-52s are on their way from Britain to Iraq, Othman imagines a future scenario. American pilots push buttons, and "hundreds of bombs would fall from their machines onto his city. The earth would shake, buildings crumble, men die engulfed in storms of white-hot metal, children and women screaming, blood bubbling on blistering lips" (Scranton, 2016, p. 206). Even Othman, the pro-American interventionist, recognizes the high human cost of the war that Iraqis will pay. Othman also imagines those same pilots "would high-five, saying, "How you like those apples?"" (p. 206). The American pilots will return home to resume their lives as if nothing had happened; "they'd drive to fancy restaurants in sports cars, wear tuxedos, and eat steak and drink Johnny Walker Black" (p. 206). A contrast is drawn between the safe lives of American pilots and the hazardous lives of Iraqis.

Scranton mocks American promises about the future of Iraq after their intervention in 2003; Othman recalls Rumsfeld's words, "it'll be short" (Scranton, 2016, p. 209), and imagines, in a surreal manner, "[j]ust a few weeks of insanity, just a few weeks of war, then the Americans will

give us peace and democracy. We'll be a great nation again [...] We'll become the new economic centre of the Arab world "(pp. 209-210). He dreams of a free Arab state after "a little war, a little trouble" (p. 210). However, Scranton chooses to conclude the argument about the validity of this notion of American salvation by recalling the infamous Abu Ghraib prison, where Iraqi prisoners are "punched, hadjis [Iraqis] standing on boxes, hadjis with panties on their heads, naked hadjis getting laughed at by skanky Nasty Girl" (pp. 279–280). Post-invasion Iraq is not a happy and safe place, as portrayed by the U.S. media (Alosman et al., 2018), but rather a dark and dangerous place.

Scranton illustrates the misbehavior of some American troops who disregard the privacy of Iraqis. While American soldiers search a house for suspected drugs, they insult and beat the Iraqi men inside. They also break, destroy, and scatter property while women scream and children witness their homes being invaded and male relatives being abused and ridiculed. In the end, the Americans realize that they have targeted the "[w]rong house" (Scranton, 2016, p. 284). One of the soldiers realizes on his way back that he still has some of the letters from the house they searched in his pocket. He looks at them; "[t]he pages dance in the wind, the words so much meaningless ink. They tell a story, maybe, just not to me. I let them go, and in the humvee's slipstream they lifted and scattered"(p. 284). For Scranton, the American intervention in Iraq is a disaster that has turned Iraq into a void because Americans are unable to understand the country's culture and behave appropriately.

The war is devastating the lives and prospects of both men and women. As airstrikes hit her city of Baghdad, Maha, Qasim's seventeen-year-old cousin, wishes she were somewhere else; the war will "ruin her life, she knew it, it was going to ruin her chances for marriage, it was going to ruin everything" (Scranton, 2016, p. 214). While Warda, Qasim's eldest cousin, keeps herself busy to avoid

> grim thoughts about her husband and her boys. She could not bear to think of her little Siraj, lifeless and torn, or Abdul-Majid, who cried and fussed so much, falling silent forever—it was an emptiness the depths of which Warda refused to peer into. To lose her beloved Ratib, whose skin she adored, whose hips and back and shoulders she clung to, whose lips and cheeks and eyebrows she loved so dearly they made her ache, after all their struggles, would be like losing the world (pp. 115-116).

She busies herself with daily chores while singing "songs from her childhood, in a sweet and lilting voice that sounded through the house, soothing the family" (p. 216). However, those around her "couldn't see the horror behind her gentle eyes, couldn't hear how her songs were only noise to hush an endless silence, so they were calmed by them, and this in turn helped calm Warda" (p. 216). As she sings, she can also imagine a future in which she goes back to work, votes, grows old with her husband, Ratib, and sees her sons become men. The inner voices and concerns of the Iraqi people are given narrative space to access their untold stories and understand their hidden aspirations.

In Scranton's novel, Iraqis are the most affected victims of American intervention, not American soldiers. Their trauma is assigned a significant narrative space where the personal is interrelated with the collective. People can easily relate to these agonized characters who have no power over their circumstances:

> Day and night, bombs crashed into Baghdad. *You* watched it on TV, *you* heard it on the radio, *you* saw it from the roof and when you ventured out into the street: *soldiers and civilians*, *arms* and *legs roasting*, broken by falling stone, *intestines spilling* onto concrete; homes and barracks, walls ripped open; Baathists and Islamists, Communists and Social Democrats,

> grocers, tailors, construction workers, nurses, teachers, all scurrying to hide in dim burrows, where they would *wait to die*, as many died, some slowly from disease and infection, others quickly in bursts of light, thickets of tumbling steel, halos of dust, crushed by the world's *greatest army*.
> As the bombing grew worse, the terror of it stained every living moment. Sleep was a fractured nightmare of the day before, cut short by another raid. Stillness and quiet didn't mean peace, only more hours of anxious waiting—or death. Even family comfort was rubbed raw [emphasis added] (Scranton, 2016, p. 214).

The narrator speaks directly to the reader, intimately recounting the scenario to engage the reader in the experience of being there and what it means to live in a conflict zone. The reader's involvement in these events is followed by gruesome photographs of Iraqi casualties. Those who are dying and those who are struggling to avoid death. They are not just statistics on the screens of news organizations; they are real individuals struggling to survive and die with dignity (Alosman et al., 2020). In the midst of these excruciating sights, Scranton mockingly brings in the invader, "the greatest army" (p. 214), to assert its full responsibility for targeting harmless civilians. Iraqis also suffer from the psychological effects of the war on their lives, which will have long-lasting effects on their lives, especially children.

Soldiers serving in the Iraqi army have names and families waiting for their safe return; they are not just unidentified enemies who hate Americans for no apparent reason. To them, Americans are "invaders" who are to be "repel[led]" from their country (Scranton, 2016, p. 146). Iraqis also hope they "destroy the Americans quickly" (p. 149). In addition to civilians, readers can also empathize with the human side of the lives of Iraqi soldiers, who have their family ties and are watched and seen by their families as they "surrender [. . . and] die. They watched their brothers and husbands and sons forced to their knees and thrown like trash into the backs of trucks, blindfolded and hog-tied" (Scranton, 2016, p. 217). Iraqi soldiers have families and friends who mourn their deaths, feel their humiliation, and sympathize with them; they are not the unidentified corpses in Powers' *The Yellow Birds* or Phil Klay's *Redeployment*.

The novel also describes the effects of the impending war on everyday life, such as education, where students are unable to attend class and turn in assignments on time. Qasim's colleague complains that only two students "turned in their work this week [...] Barely half the class even bothered to show up! [...] Every class gets smaller and the ones that show up barely pay attention. But there is a war coming. (Scranton, 2016, p. 137). However, Qasim empathizes with the students, "I can understand their trouble. I haven't touched my dissertation in weeks (p. 137). The anticipation of war seems to overwhelm Iraqis, affecting every aspect of life.

Qasim is not an ordinary lecturer whose only struggle is to get paid at the end of each month; he is too passionate about his work and emotionally connected to his students. When most classes are canceled, Qasim almost cancels the class himself, "but it was his favorite, and he wanted to see them all one last time" (Scranton, 2016, p. 149). He speaks enthusiastically to his students, "[i]f we're not able to reconvene this class, I'm going to recommend everyone be given the grade you've earned to this point" (p. 149). He reflects on why he will not fail anyone

> because they're crippled? Because they're dead? He remembered the last war, the trucks and tanks full of smoking corpses. "I'm not going to fail anyone because they can't make it back to class. The worst that will happen, the absolute worst case, is that you'll take a withdrawal." Pray God, the absolute worst (pp. 149-150).

He worries about the future, lest the worst happen with the coming war. He worries about the lives of his students and cannot imagine some of them being injured or killed. He remembers

the terrible results of the previous war and fears a similar future. Qasim and his students are portrayed in their daily struggle to cope with a looming, unjust war forced upon them. Scranton's novel details the devastating effects of war on every aspect of life in Iraq, on both a personal and collective level. The groans of the Iraqis are heard and the misery is seen on their faces; people can relate to their stories and empathize with their agony.

POSTCOLONIAL REPRESENTATIONS

The main goal of postcolonial writing is to resist the colonial perception of the Other and to give it a narrative space to express its cultural complexities and diversities. War Porn presents many educated Iraqi characters with diverse political views and backgrounds. In a more postcolonial stance, Scranton depicts the rich Iraqi culture where people use poetry and other parables (Peter, 2016). Through Qasim, a spectrum of complex Iraqi characters is introduced, which shifts the reflexive sympathies away from the American soldiers (Peter, 2016). Another character who reflects the richness of Iraqi characters in the novel is Othman, Mohammed's best friend since childhood; "[w]hile Mohammed was an engineer, a pragmatist, and a nationalist, Othman was a poet, a romantic, and a cosmopolitan" (Scranton, 2016, p. 175). While Mohammed builds houses and offices, Othman, exiled in Beirut for two years, writes poetry and translates "Hart Crane's *The Bridge* and Lautréamont's *Les Chants de Maldoror*" (p. 176). These characters offer different perspectives on the Iraqi people on the periphery of contemporary war novels about Iraq. The complexity of these characters reflects the depth and diversity of the Iraqi people and resists colonial simplification.

The character of Qasim is an excellent example of educated, middle-class young Iraqis striving to achieve their goals in a challenging environment. Despite his mother's insistence on his return and his wife's silent protest against his desire to stay in Baghdad to continue his doctoral studies, Qasim decides to stay and not join them in Baqubah: "Qasim thought of Lateefah—alone in the hole he'd dug her. The pain he caused His mother's shame. And when the war came? Could he stand it?" (Scranton, 2016, p. 150). Qasim's perseverance and insistence on achieving his dream despite all family pressures and obligations challenges the prototypical images of Iraqis in war narratives, where Iraqis are inactive or shallow characters (Alosman, 2021). Except for military translators, Iraqis mainly occupy passive and secondary narrative space in most American war narratives; they are on the margins of these stories (Peter, 2016).

The Iraqis in *War Porn* come from different social and economic classes; they are not homogeneous. Although they all work at Baghdad University, Qasim, Adham, and Salman come from different and unrelated backgrounds. While Adham "from a wealthy family in Fallujah, and Qasim, whose middle-class family stood solidly behind their construction business and their date farms in Baqubah" (Scranton, 2016, p. 148). While Salman, who "came from people little better than peasants" (p. 148), worked as an informant for the Iraqi regime to support his mother and sisters, "he drove a taxi three, sometimes four nights a week and could be found for certain odd jobs if the price was right" (p. 152). The diversity of these characters' social and financial environments provides the reader with greater insight into their motivations and actions.

The daily lives of Iraqis and their family interactions are presented in a sophisticated way. Readers can relate to these Iraqi characters and identify mutual concerns by following their ups and downs. Thurayya, a typical Iraqi woman, dotes on her daughters, and her corrections usually take the form of good-humored annoyance or gentle scolding. She kneels and wipes her son's face "while he cried [...] She kissed his head and gave him some candles to carry" (Scranton, 2016, p. 169). Only in the most extreme circumstances does she lose her temper, and when she does, there

is no mistaking it. Later, she speaks to her husband; "[a]re you staying for lunch, my dearest husband, great and wise lord of the home?" (p. 173). Relationships within Iraqi families are cordial and generally subject to a hierarchy, with fathers occupying the highest position, followed by mothers who share some power with the fathers.

Iraqis have strong family and social ties that ensure the safety and well-being of those who belong to the extended family or, to a lesser extent, the tribe, especially in times of hardship. Qasim's uncle bravely promises to protect his family as long as he can "lift a rifle" (Scranton, 2016, p. 147). He assures his nephew Qasim that "[y]our family is my family. They are safe in my home, always"(p. 147). While living in Baghdad, Qasim himself stays at his uncle Mohammad's house, where he shares every aspect of life, even to the point of his uncle's wife mending his clothes. Such ties, however, do not come without many obligations and responsibilities to family and tribe.

Places in Iraq have their own names and characteristics; they are not anonymous spaces in unidentified spaces, as in Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds*, Phil Klay's *Redeployment*, and Ben Fountain's *Billy Fynn's Long Halftime Walk*. In *War Porn*, readers are introduced to many familiar streets and places in Iraq: "Salman drove up over the Al-Jumariyah Bridge, catching the outdoor fires from the masgouf restaurants along Abu Nuwas Park flickering orange in the black waters of the Dijlah, and descended into the subdued hustle of Yafa Street" (Scranton, 2016, p. 169). Iraq, though very hot in the summer, has some "beautiful nights" (p. 148). We know how Iraqis enjoy their life in their beloved country; "[t]his is my favourite time of year. We leave the rain behind, but it's not hot yet. It's a pleasant time to be in Baghdad "(p. 148). Iraq has many interesting places to visit; it is not the boring country or the merciless desert described in other American novels about Iraq. Iraqi people belong to "an Islamic civilization, not merely a people or a religion" (pp. 177); they have sophisticated traditions and customs. Scranton's novel presents Iraq as historically and culturally rich; it is not the barren desert found in most contemporary American war novels.

CONCLUSION

The study revealed the means used by the author to deconstruct the American colonial narrative on Iraq and showed how *War Porn* departs from the prevailing American literary works on the war, showing the devastation of Iraq and the agonies lived by Iraqis and holding Americans accountable for them. This study also showed how the novel departs from the norm of the American war novel by presenting Iraqis as diverse characters with different political and intellectual backgrounds. Iraqis' voices can be heard, their perspectives comprehended, and their facial expressions observed as their cities are bombed and their loved ones are lost. Minutes of their daily lives and family idiosyncrasies can be recalled through the various characters of the narrative. Individuals can identify with these experiences and understand what it is like to be in such conditions.

As long as the colonial remains present in most American war narratives, erasing the stories of local people and silencing their voices, it is imperative to challenge it and encourage works that deconstruct colonial means and attempt to hold the colonial accountable, such as that of Scranton. Colonized geographies continue to be distorted and misrepresented and need to be addressed. Young (2012) argues that colonial histories and narratives should be contested, opposed, and exposed. As a result, postcolonialists should expose distorted representations, create narrative space for the colonized, and celebrate the richness of their past and the justice of their cause.

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