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Trauma and War: The Psychological Implications for Survivor-victims in Iraqi Fiction

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ABSTRACT

War-time literature about Iraq reflects the terror and the trauma that the civilian population in Iraq have had to live with in recent years. As conflicts and wars overtook the country in a rapid fashion and the state's hold weakened, the country plunged into total chaos. The infrastructure crumpled, the economy collapsed, and multiple rebel groups surfaced halting peace process in the country. The present paper examines the fictional text, The Sirens of Baghdad, to understand the civilian psychological trauma resulting from repeated wars on Iraqi soil. The gruesome deaths and uncertainty about country's future have contributed to an overall feeling of dejection and apathy among the civilian population. This research paper concludes that the psychological trauma of the civilian population belies simple categorization like PTSD, and there is a need to determine the true scale of psychological damage suffered over years of exposure to terror.

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INTRODUCTION

Wars and military conflicts have besieged Iraq for years resulting in colossal human tragedy. This extended exposure to extremely traumatic events which include encounter with grotesque deaths and total destruction has serious consequences for the mental health of the survivor-victims/characters of the select Iraqi fiction. The analysis reveals the complex nature of their trauma. With schools closed, the state of hospitals compromised and a large population

displaced, the likelihood of grave psychic injury cannot be overlooked. The dominant practices and interventions in psychoanalysis too often undermine the complex nature of traumatic exposure resulting from prolonged wars, displacement, starvation, economic deprivation, shattered self-esteem, encounter with death, loss of social-cultural fabric etc. This research paper views trauma as a dynamic process depending upon the social ecology and survivor's resilience. The paper maps the traumas experienced by the Iraqi civilian population as represented in the selected fiction from Iraq, and reveals mental landscapes as blighted and benumbed with terror.

Iraqi civilian population has also long suffered the consequences of a relentless war. The country was already crumbling under the imposed economic sanctions, when the US invasion further worsened the living conditions of the Iraqi population in 2003. Since then the civilian population is caught up in an unending cycle of oppression and destruction. Unfortunately, no proper record of war-related injury is maintained by the Iraqi authorities or the US-led coalition. According to a rough estimate, more than 182,000 civilians have been killed between 2003 and 2018, and perhaps as many wounded. Number of deaths from war-related causes such as scarcity of food, poor health care, and shortage of clean drinking water, is suspected to be several times higher ("Costs of War").

Confronting the scattered dead bodies after airstrikes is a great challenge for the civilians as it takes a massive toll on their nerves. While cities got destroyed, there is no telling how many civilians perished in the process. With the collapse of local systems, there were no organized mechanisms in place for record-keeping and body-count. Most of the bodies did not even get burial and became food for stray animals. Take the case of Mosul - when the air and ground-launched offensive finally subsided in 2017, the city was in a rubble with civilian houses, hospitals, schools and other public buildings completely or partially destroyed. From the West of the city alone, 2,140 civilian remains were removed, and in the old city roughly 1,000 dead bodies lay under the rubble days after the battle. An Iraqi newspaper reporting the carnage wrote: "The old city on the right side is still replete with the bodies of the families, most of them children and women who were killed as a result of the American bombardment" (Hamourtziadou et al., 2018).

The novel, *The Sirens of Baghdad*, is set in Iraq at the time of the US invasion of Iraq. The writer opens up about Baghdad, once a beautiful city, now in total ruins becoming a hub for several terrorist organizations each promoting a different ideology. People seem to have become indifferent to all that goes around them: the shelling, bombing, killing, children in rags; even loyalty has lost all meaning and sacredness. Grotesque deaths are the order of the day, as the novel reveals, but no one shrinks from terror any more. The dead bodies have lost sanctity for most as they themselves turn into the 'living dead'. Iraq is the country of the 'living dead' as the novel reveals. This lack of emotions has come at a very high price paid by the civilians/characters in the novel.

Statement of the Problem

War is an important subject in fictional texts about Iraq. The novel, The Sirens of Baghdad, poses important questions as to the mental health of the individuals who spend their days living under the threat of being, one day, vanquished by war. The mental health consequences for these individuals are massive, not simplistic, linear or predictable. Therefore, they are examined on

their own without being categorized under PTSD, which is used as a tool of assessment for war trauma.

Research Questions

1) How are wars destructive for an individual's mental health, especially with reference to The Sirens of Baghdad?
2) How do civilians in the novel respond to the grotesqueness, humiliation, and destruction caused by war in their country?

Qualitative research method is employed to examine and interpret the selected text guided by the research questions of the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Herman (1997) points out that "unlike commonplace misfortunes…traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death"(33). What is clear from this definition of trauma is that exposure to violent events cause behaviour changes which are visibly different from normal everyday responses of individuals to calamities. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD, involves study of symptoms diagnosed as psychiatric disorder involving people who have been directly exposed to traumatic events. The term was first introduced in the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III) by the American Psychiatric Association in 1980 (APA). With the introduction of DSM-III-R and the DSM-IV, the popularity of the term has grown immensely. However, the term does not effectively deal with traumatic experiences of those who may not be directly exposed to traumatic events but "mere knowledge of the exposure of a loved one to a traumatic event can be traumatizing as well" (Figley & Kleber 1995). Figley and Kleber distinguish between the primary and secondary stressors where the former involves direct contact with the event, the latter refers to behaviour and responses of people who are affected by knowledge of the event. These are people who are family members, friends, doctors, social workers, neighbours, emergency personnel and colleagues who may be trying to help a person suffering from trauma. These have been described variously as "peripheral victims" (Dixon 1991), "secondary survivor" (Remer and Elliott 1988 a.b), and "vicarious traumatization" (McCann and Pearlman 1990). In other words, traumatic events affect a much wider range of people than it is often assumed. The most common symptoms of this secondary stressor or vicarious trauma are powerlessness and disruption (Figley and Kleber 93) brought upon by a process of identification with victims and their suffering. The empathetic response for victims results in greater identification and stronger emotional bonding which produces secondary stress or vicarious trauma. Studies have suggested that close family members suffer the most when a loved one is suffering. The institution of family is greatly affected by events such as wars. In a study conducted on children of US prisoners of war during the Vietnam war, the secondary stress symptoms were found on children in these families (McCubbin et al. 1977). Children from these families showed strained relationship with parent while their school performance was also visibly affected. In a similar study carried out on the children of survivors of the Nazi Holocaust, "negative effects" of their parents' experiences could be traced (Figley and Klebber 85).

Individual suffering is a matter of concern for psychiatrists but when wounds impact social identity, they become collective traumas. Jeffrey Alexander and Elizabeth Breese explain that while responses to individual traumas include repression and denial which are eventually brought into consciousness for a working through, collective traumas are enacted through "symbolic construction and framing, of creating a narrative and moving along from there" (xiii). They further emphasize that it is important to have a sense of "we" after a calamity and a reflection of the collective shock and pain in cultural narratives. Collective traumas are experienced after defeat when collective identities are obfuscated or challenged. The authors recognize that it is not the "massive suffering of many individuals" that leads to any sense of "collective political and moral perceptions" but it is the identification with injury and pain at collective level that makes possible cultural trauma. Klebber et al. (1995) explain this imbrication of trauma and society in these words:

Trauma goes beyond the individual. It has a far wider context. We interpret war, loss, violence, and disasters in ways shaped by our culture, by our society, and by its values and norms. We cope with serious life events in ways provided and approved by our surroundings. (1)

Rui Gao throws light on how massive torture and deaths are forced not to go beyond individual suffering due to lack of symbolization (Eyerman et al. 2016). She interrogates the failure of Maoism to reconstruct suffering of Chinese people at the hands of Japanese during World War II. This was, in part, due to repression of collective memories by Maoist regime forcing them to remain "private and individual" and seldom finding their way into "the public sphere of expression". Without the necessary projection, these memories of injustices failed to raise to the level of collective consciousness of the nation. No mechanism was adopted at national level to redress the pain endured by individuals. As Gao reveals, the experiences of the masses were not allowed to translate into any collective form of representation and were even replaced with the trauma narrative of the ruling Chinese elite who saw themselves as victims and not the Chinese people *per se*. If trauma narratives are to be constructed by the elite group in society or those in power, it cannot represent collective consciousness of the masses. Without this recognition of trauma as cultural phenomenon and the subsequent repression of painful memories, the trauma remains at individual level at the mercy of individual mechanisms of control and management and does not enter the mainstream cultural discourse.

In the essay, "The Media and Iraq: A blood bath for and Gross Dehumanization of Iraqis," Daud Kuttab (2008), an award-winning Palestinian journalist, reveals that there was and has been no attempt from any side to focus on the human tragedy that unfolded in Iraq. In his words, "Iraqi civilian death tolls are treated as nothing more than statistics" (879). He agrees that wars are fought for the hearts and minds of the people in question, in other words for psychological and emotional victory. A report on Iraqi casualties reveal that in the year 2003 alone, 124 journalists of which 102 were Iraqi citizens, were killed (Kuttab 2008). Unfortunately, most of these deaths occurred as a result of US military firing. The journalists from the "enemy media" are open targets because their reporting can upset the narrative claims of the other side.

DATA ANALYSIS

Trauma in *The Sirens of Baghdad*

Wars have defiled and despoiled Iraq. Khadra tells us that the country has become "disfigured, filthy, at the mercy of its demons" (2008). The writer offers a contrast when he reminisces about

old times before bombs disfigured the country's capital city, Baghdad. Baghdad used to be beautiful "with its great thoroughfares and its posh boulevards, bright with gleaming shop windows and sunny terraces" (132) but is now turned into a "battlefield, a firing range, a gigantic butcher's shop" (148). Protracted wars, killings and large-scale destruction have led the Iraqi civilians to a spiritual collapse. The survivor-victims struggle to live with intense feelings of loss, intensified by a sense of disintegration, isolation, and stasis. There is a breakdown of community structure and human connection at all levels. The atmosphere in Iraq is dominated by a sense of impending death and doom. The novel, *The Sirens of Baghdad,* brings us face to face with the ugly reality that empathetic understanding is impossible especially when terror and trauma become political. The novel testifies that repeated wars turn the city of Baghdad into a market of terror where humans are first branded and later traded as ammunition. In such putrid atmosphere, it is the power-relations that determine the value of human life. Psychological terror is created and sustained to inflict extreme trauma on the civilian population of the country.

After years of perpetual death-linked trauma, the survivor-victims experience a severe form of numbing which involves the annihilation of physical as well as psychic life. In an attempt to dissociate the mind from traumatic and grotesque deaths, the mind becomes "deadened" resulting in the self becoming "severed from its own history, from its grounding in such psychic forms as compassion for others, communal involvement, and other ultimate values" (Lifton 1967). This paralysis of the mind suggests a stasis and disintegration of the symbolizing process. In *The Sirens of Baghdad*, the protagonist experiences this sense of annihilation, of being dead, when the US soldiers insult his father, which assails him completely, "I was finished. Everything was finished – irrevocably, irreversibly" (102). His mind immediately dissociates and deadens his cognitive impulses:

I don't remember what happened after that. I didn't care. Like a piece of wreckage, I let myself drift wherever the waves took me. There was nothing left to salvage. The soldiers' bellowing didn't reach me anymore. Their weapons, their gung-ho zeal hardly made an impression. They could move heaven and earth, erupt like volcanoes, crack like thunder, I could no longer be touched by that sort of thing. (103)

The humiliation of parents before their children is not a small thing in Iraqi culture. They are not prepared to cope with the distress it causes them, as a result when calamity strikes the protagonist's family, his mind fails to respond as it is trained to do in ordinary situations. His mind refuses to process the sensory input just as all his systems experience a shut down: "I couldn't turn away. I was hypnotized by the spectacle the two of them presented to my eyes. I didn't even see the brutes who surrounded them. I saw only a distraught mother and a painfully thin father in shapeless underwear, his eyes wounded, his arms dangling at his sides, stumbling as the soldiers shoved him along" (103).

The Sirens of Baghdad (2008) is set in war-time Iraq in the isolated town of Kafr Karam. The novel traces the transformation of the protagonist from a "docile, courteous boy" to someone whose "inextinguishable rage" can burn down cities: "I wanted to turn the country into an inferno from one end to the other. Everything I put in my mouth tasted like blood; every breath I took stank of cremation" (134 & 159). Repeated encounters with traumatic events destroy his mental peace, and instead of forcing a retreat, the unfortunate events drive him to take destructive course. He moves to Baghdad, a city destroyed by war. But Baghdad is no longer the

center of learning or business, that it used to be. It's a destroyed city, at the mercy of militias who are wrecking life and every day bomb explosions take innocent lives. The novel reveals that these sudden, unannounced attacks have become a norm in Iraq. Not only do these events strike terror in the hearts of the local population, they take away their desire to live. A wedding feast is spoiled when a misguided missile lands in their midst. Reeling from the immediate shock from the blast, the mind fails to describe what it has witnessed. When a man is asked to describe what happened, his mental faculties fail him:

I don't know anything. The guests were having a good time, and then the chairs and tables blew away, like in a windstorm. It was crazy…It was…I can't describe it. Bodies and screams, screams and bodies. If it wasn't' missile, them it must have been lightning from heaven (91).

The missile attack on a wedding feast unsettles the protagonist emotionally and shakes his whole being: "My hands bandaged, my shirt torn, and my pants stained with blood, I left the orchards on foot and walked home like a man stumbling through for" (95). He feels as if the sky has fallen on me and that he would never be able to forget the appalling scenes he witnessed there. His mind is unable to reconcile with external reality, and this failure leads to a shocking realization – that he is dead too, "A voice knocking at my temples kept repeating that the death stinking up the orchards was contaminating my soul, and that I was dead too" (97). His guilt embroils him in the murder of the innocents. Hurting himself is his way of coping with the terror. He doesn't know how to process this terror or what name to give it: "People don't die in bulk between dance steps; no, what had happened at the Haitems' made no sense" (98).

In the same way, just when the protagonist is preparing himself to become a suicide bomber, he realizes that he has lost all sensibility, that his senses have become numb. Days before he is supposed to carry out the plan, he tells his comrades that he feels nothing and nothing disturbs him now. After witnessing a suicide bombing, he realizes that nothing stirs inside him and that he has simply yielded to impulse of the city. He is not repulsed by the repelling act of the suicide bomber who has heaped misery on his own people. He feels nothing, as in his own words: "While the victim's relatives raised their hands to heaven, howling out their grief, I asked myself if I was capable of inflicting the same suffering on others and registered the fact that the questions didn't shock me" (179). And later just days before he is supposed to carry out the act, he is more like a dead man walking the earth. No emotions stir up inside him to disturb his peace and no regrets bother him. He is a dead man, "I'm a dead man waiting for a decent burial" (263).

Robert J. Lifton (1967) sees anger and resentment as an "integral part of the symbolic death and rebirth process" which could either "enhance mastery" or present a "formidable barrier to mastery" of experience (318). The "static persistence" of these emotions as with numbing result in compromised psychological functions. In *The Sirens of Baghdad*, the protagonist's feeling of hatred towards invading US army stems from his sense of irreparable loss and unresolved anger. His inability to process this anger becomes the reason for his gnawing sense of alienation and detachment from everyone around him: "I don't like crowds and I detest this city" (3). Beirut and its life is abhor-able because of his unprocessed trauma. His psychological stagnation renders him incapable of realizing any life outside his reckoning and experience: "I hate it with all my heart for its gutless, illogical pride, for the way it falls between two stools, sometimes Arab, sometimes Western, depending on the payoffs involved" (2). As rage consumes him, his hostility gives way to cold indifference of others: "I had only one desire. I wanted the whole planet, from the North Pole to the South Pole, to go up in smoke" (8). Lifton states that emotions of revenge are more common among the survivors of concentration camp whereas the hibakusha have

seemed to attain wisdom by transcending revenge (535). He also contends that revenge may take many forms depending upon the severity of trauma and individual psychological response to it. However, as with numbing, feelings of revenge invite a "profound formative impairment" (536).

The US soldiers show a total disregard for Iraqi culture and their long-standing values when they invade their villages and homes. As members of a society that shows extreme sensitivity towards a cultural outlook that has shaped their lives for centuries, the peoples of Kafr Karam see this violation as an attack on their honor. As a result, when the protagonist's house is invaded and searched he feels threatened and betrayed in his own house: "I didn't have time to reach for the lamp switch. A squad of American soldiers barged into my privacy….Those shouts! Atrocious, demented, devastating. Capable of unraveling you thread by thread and making you a stranger to yourself" (99). This and the humiliation meted out to his family members cause him great distress; he feels incapable of action; a sort of psychic numbing takes hold of him: "I felt faint. My hand search in vain for something to hold on to" (100). Unable to do anything, he witnesses with horror as his father and mother are dragged out of their rooms under-dressed and terrified. Not used to seeing his parents, especially his father, without proper clothes, the protagonist is horrified by what he has to witness. His father, always careful and immaculate before his children, feels as though he has been publicly dishonored: "With his threadbare undershirt hanging loosely from his thin shoulders and his stretched-out drawers fallen nearly to his knees, he was the very image of boundless distress, walking misery, an affront personified in all its absolute boorishness" (101). The invading US soldiers do not understand the cultural mindset of the Iraqi peoples. Seen as the basic unit of society, family is central to Iraqi culture. Within this system, elders especially fathers, are regarded with utmost respect even after they can no longer fend for their family. In a culture like this it can be very distressing to witness the dishonoring of one's parents. In the novel, the protagonist battles with this shock at the night of the raid. Knowing fully well how important it is for the father and children not to see him naked, the mother tries to shield him: "My mother tried to walk in front of him, to spare us the sight of his nakedness. Her terrified eyes implored us, begging us to turn away" (Khadra 101). But no amount of begging can undo what happens next. The father's private parts are exposed and the protagonist's world comes to an end. He feels as if he is part of an unending cycle of violence which will destroy not only him but the rest of the world too: "That sight was the edge of the abyss and beyond it….I heard the foul beast roar deep inside me, and it was clear that sooner or later, whatever happened, I was condemned to wash away this insult in blood" (101-102). Cultural norms have a symbolic value for a society and its members, and any injury to those principles can seriously undermine human connectedness. They give meaning to life. The protagonist cannot overcome his sense of shame and anger when the long-standing traditions of his community are destroyed by war. He describes the pain as a "venom" with which he will destroy everyone because for a Bedouin "honor is no joking matter. An offence must be washed away in blood, which is the sole authorized detergent when it's a question of keeping one's self-respect" (133). Honor cannot be negotiated and in a closed society like Iraq it is part of their psychological makeup.

Another character, Hussain, experiences cognitive dissonance after witnessing grotesque death of his cousin and friend during a suicide mission: "when the cops fired on him and he exploded, it was as if I disintegrated along with him. He was someone I really liked. He grew up on our patio" (210). Hussain is changed forever after this incident and even though he remains part of the militant group, he loses all desire to act. The violent death of his friend costs him his mental stability and sanity, as at times he behaves in a most bizarre manner: "I sincerely mourned him,

but then the mourning was over, and now, whenever I picture him stabbing at his explosive belt and cursing, I burst out laughing" (210). The novel reveals that the civilian trauma takes different forms, such as, death- guilt, fear and doubling among others.

The immediate response to such traumatic encounters is numbing which renders both physical and psychical actions virtually impossible. Lifton explains this through the equivalent of a soldier who witnesses his fellow-soldier killed - he wants to help him survive and at the same time feels inundated with emotions. Unfortunately, the soldier-victim can do neither: "both physical and psychic actions are virtually impossible. One can neither physically help victims nor resist victimizers; one cannot even psychically afford experiencing equivalent feelings of compassion or rage" (Lifton 1967). The inactivation may have serious psychic consequences as opposed to the capacity for activity. This may result in the victim feeling responsible for what they have not done or felt. This self-condemnation is the prime cause of psychological guilt. Associated with extreme helplessness at the time of trauma, both self-condemnation and psychological guilt are forms of a lingering, perpetual trauma (Lifton, 1967). The protagonist's cry is reminiscent of the guilt which he cannot comprehend: "I had been saddled, once and for all, with infamy…. I found myself hating my arms, which seemed grotesque, translucent, ugly, the symbols of my impotence; hating my eyes, which refused to turn away and pleaded for blindness; hating my mother's screams, which discredited me" (Lifton, 1967).

The protagonist's internalization of grief and trauma results in self-hatred. However, as Horowitz notes self-blame, disgust, and hatred are common grief reactions which become pathological when an individual is exposed to trauma repeatedly. Freud and Abraham distinguish between normal grief and pathological grief. The former is characterized by feelings of painful dejection, loss of interest in life functions and loss of activities, while the latter is marked by reactions such as panic, self-hatred, narcissistic self-preoccupation and deflated self-esteem. Consumed by self-hatred and guilt, the protagonist becomes numb to every other sensation. He is 'stuck' in time and in that moment when calamity struck. There is no joy worth living for and no meaning left in life worth struggling for: "The gates of hell would have seemed less catastrophic!" (112) Whatever he does, he cannot shake off the image of defeat and disgrace he saw on his father's face. Even the random people at the checkpoints remind him of his father "because they all carried on their faces the unmistakable mark of the defeated" (120). This is a manifestation of the unresolved grief and trauma.

Another incident perpetuates this self-hatred in the protagonist. In a country where direction of life cannot be dictated, the protagonist finds himself in deeper mess than after he leaves Kafr Karam for Baghdad. The destroyed city is the shadow of his lost self: "we were very much alike; we'd lost our souls, and we were ready to destroy others" (134). With bombs exploding almost every hour, the city is an image of total anarchy and chaos. In the absence of law and order, nobody is safe anymore. There are destroyed neighborhoods, and everywhere beggars and thieves, a product of wars and economic sanctions, fill the roads. These survivor-victims are struggling against absolute destruction which cannot be explained neatly under the simple head PTSD. We are told that the city is infested with famished orphans, the "tatterdemalion young werewolves covered with sores, who would stop at nothing" (142). The protagonist describes his own encounter with these kids who have lost everything to war and who are now left to fend for themselves under very harsh conditions. The society has become so disintegrated that nobody seems to care about others, not even orphans who have otherwise a special place in Iraqi Sunni/Shia religion and culture. The protagonist describes these small street kids or orphans as

"a pack of cubs" who will attack and even kill for food or money. He describes a kid of ten who follows and then attacks him with a knife before cutting a hole through his bag: "He had disturbing eyes and a treacherous smile playing about his mouth. His long shirt reaches his calves, his trousers were torn, and he was barefoot. His damaged toes, black with dirt, smelled like a dead animal" (142). Can the Western notions of trauma and post-trauma explain this form of total destruction experienced by Iraqi children? They are stressed to their limit and there is no purpose to their life except gross survival. Even the protagonist knows he has nothing to live for. He feels nothing, and knows not what he wants from life. It is as if he is in "another dimension" where he feels "neither anxious nor galvanized" (160).

In his lecture titled, 'Why Export Mental Health?' Derek Summerfiled critiques the idea of global mental health and argues against exporting Western mental health concepts and methodologies: "When we globalize mental health, concepts of mental health, practices, and the ideology behind them, we are globalizing a particular way of being a person, a contemporary Western war of being a person." Human responses to stress and traumatic events are shaped by specific socio-cultural conditions. Ways of living, literacy-level, technology, connectivity, self-worth, nationhood, belief-system, etc. impact the way individuals perceive and respond to threat, injury or loss. Therefore, Summerfield thinks that it is imperative to find and develop a method of analysis that is not one-sided and takes into account various culturally specific expressions of grief.

Lifton argues that as a result of this experience of alienation or, what he calls, radical discontinuity, there is a danger that the self may be dislodged "from its forms" and become vulnerable to "doubling." He states that "severe stress can make contact with some prior vulnerability to dissociation, to splitting, to discontinuity" (Lifton, 1967). The protagonist in *The Sirens of Baghdad* is the victim of 'doubling.' His embittered traumatic self becomes a danger for himself and others. In a dissociative state, where his mind loses its ability to function properly, he finds it easy to commit evil. Additionally, his involvement in killing other people gives him an opportunity to overcome his own death anxiety. In this sense, doubling is a way of adapting to evil and is enabled by overcoming conflicts (Lifton, 1967). Emery and Emery explain this phenomenon of traumatic doubling from another perspective. They argue that psychic trauma is the outcome of the conflict between the desire to destroy and desire to surrender which they explain as the "split in the ego." The traumatized state experiences a double identification with the aggressor and the victim, which eventually create feelings of extreme helplessness in the victim (Brett, 64). This simultaneous psychic reenactment of victim and aggressor roles also suggests a breakdown in the synthesizing process. The embittered, conflicted, and vulnerable trauma victim is a danger for himself and others.

The rising number of individual suicide cases as well as mass suicide bombings in Iraq during wars and even afterwards clearly indicate the extreme nature of their trauma. The novel reflects this total destructive nature of trauma. The protagonist and his fellow villagers select the path of destruction out of sheer helplessness. Omar, a fellow villager, deserts the Iraqi army after he witnesses too many innocent deaths. He too is the victim of psychic doubling. Before he joins army, he is assailed by thoughts of destruction and wants to inflict the same pain, if not more, on everyone else: "I wanted to turn the country into an inferno from one end to the other. Everything I put in my mouth tasted like blood; every breath I took stank of cremation" (159). This aggressive attitude, however, does not last long. An encounter with horrific death replace this aggression with helplessness and withdrawal. The protagonist also alternates between

different psychic states, like acute numbing, life-in-death, anger, and dissociation. After taking a destructive course and offering himself up for a suicide mission, he observes calmly that he is no longer the delicate boy from Kafr Karam: "another boy had taken his place," and feels as if he is born again as someone else: "someone hard, cold, implacable" (194-195).

Kroll-Smith and Couch (1993) state that a breakdown of a person's social support system can adversely affect his psychological well-being resulting in what they call "alienation" (83). While Mirowsky and Ross conclude that alienation is one of the most significant causes of psychological distress or trauma (Kroll-Smith & Couch 84). Alienation is also closely linked to feelings of powerlessness and lack of control. An immediate outcome of wars is the shattering of a sense of control. Victims feel powerless to do anything to protect their families and themselves. Their loss of faith in themselves is well exhibited in the death-in-life like state they succumb to. This deepening sense of alienation is clearly visible in the protagonist whose university life is halted because of the US invasion. Everything he looks forward to as a young boy in a university comes crumbling down. War destroys his plans to propose a girl he fancies at the university: "I was just on the point of declaring myself and unveiling to her the prospect of a bright future, when strange fireworks lit up the sky over Baghdad. The sirens echoed in the silence of the night, building started to explode in smoke, and from one day to the next, the most passionate love affair dissolved in tears and blood" (19). This and other experiences of war deepen his alienation from his physical world.

The city of Baghdad exacerbates his fears and feelings of alienation. Wherever he goes in Baghdad, his fears accompany him. As this fear grows, it is internalized and becomes a part of his character noticeable to everyone. In a restaurant, he gets paralyzed with fear upon being surrounded with strangers. The waiter, with an air of cold indifference, asks him if he has been through a traumatic situation: "I've been holding out this plate to you for a good minute, and you just stare right through me. What's wrong? Have you escaped a raid? Or maybe survived an attack?" (144). The waiter's response clearly indicates how terror and death have become the order of the day in Iraq. The nightmarish existence is relived in the dreams at night. The protagonist dreams of himself as an animal trapped for slaughter in the capital city of Iraq which like a "sieve" leaked everywhere (148).

While Lifton underscores the issue of death, it has traditionally been omitted from posttraumatic stress" (12). Survivors' death immersion has direct impact on their attitude towards life and the feeling of guilt they carry after the death encounter: "If you haven't lost your mind yet, that's because you haven't seen very much," a driver tells the protagonist (127). He also tells him that he has nightmares every night because of what he has had to witness. Omar, a fellow villager, decides to quit the army after a rather close encounter with grotesque deaths: "when I saw those mountains of shoes at the site where the panic took place, those kids with blue faces and their eyes half-closed…" (159).

CONCLUSION

The novel reveals a total collapse and breakdown of the characters' psychological and emotional lives. As they confront all sorts of external and internal threats posed by the looming darkness surrounding them, the characters willingly numb themselves to protect their sanity. Yet, this protracted form of numbing has more devastating consequences for their mental health than they realize. Psychological numbing as it becomes chronic leads to distortion of reality and denial of suffering. The analysis makes clear how this results in their inability to feel or process emotions.

Laub describes this loss as the loss of self, "This loss of the capacity to be a witness to oneself and thus to witness from the inside is perhaps the true meaning of annihilation, for when one's history is abolished, one's identity ceases to exist as well" (82).

Repeated traumas are seen to have more serious, life-threatening consequences. While the prolonged effects of psychic numbing are visibly present in the characters, they also exhibit an extreme form of mental breakdown. Their failure to cope with serious external threat and trauma takes on another dimension involving self-slaughter or suicide and mass-slaughter. Lifton associates suicide with what he has described as the "*hibakusha* state" which is a state of being benumbed. He wonders if death immersion or identification with the dead is the major cause of this total psychic meltdown and the reason for giving up on life. Lifton argues that a survivor's identity becomes subsumed in the identity of the dead leading to such chaotic thoughts as *it is impure of me to be alive; I had better been dead too* (Lifton 207). Nevertheless, as can be seen in the novel *Sirens of Baghdad*, traumatic events such as death encounter are not the only causes of total meltdown. Humiliation and guilt can also act as strong catalysts for traumatic collapse taking away the desire to live. While a majority of the survivor-victims make a "psychic bargain" to live at a "devitalized level" through numbing, some are goaded into action by a deep sense of shame and guilt from which they fail to recover. Lifton writes that "the suicidal attempt can, in fact, represent a desperate effort to emerge from psychic numbing, to overcome inactivation by the act of killing oneself" and that "suicide can be a way of seeking both to master death and to reassert, however magically, *a form of symbolic integrity* and a sense of immortality" (Lifton 507). In *The Sirens of Baghdad*, humiliation not death-encounter sends the narrator down the path of self-annihilation:

I heard the foul beast roar deep inside me, and it was clear that sooner or later, whatever happened, I was condemned to wash away this insult in blood, until the rivers and the oceans turned as red as the cut on Bahia's neck, as my mother's eyes, as the fire in my guts, which was already preparing me for the hell I knew was waiting….(102)

A sense of meaninglessness, also common with numbing, weighs heavily on the survivor's consciousness forcing him to throw his life away. According to Frankl "if each and every case of suicide had not been undertaken out of a feeling of meaninglessness, it may well be that an individual's impulse to take his own life would have been overcome had he been aware of some meaning and purpose worth living for" (Arons 2003).

Wars have turned the city of Baghdad into a pool of death where "murderous attacks are the order of the day" (148), and its people are shown to have become benumbed by the excessive trauma and terror they have had to witness. The protagonist witnesses death almost daily and realizes how ordinary life has become. There is nothing like normal life there; the people or the survivor-victims experience a life-in-death like situation. Khadra tells us that the sidewalks are filled with "sleepwalking people" who have no idea where to turn (148).

Death is no ordinary event and gruesome death has far greater consequences for the witnesses. The daily exposure to gruesome deaths involving fractured, mutilated bodies results in feeling of being immersed in death. Not having any escape and tied to this gruesome reality, the survivor-victims experience a psychological malfunction in the form of intense hate, anger, and death-guilt. They are fated to carry the burden of the dead as long as they walk this earth. They are the walking-dead who despite being alive are like the dead. There is no name for this total

psychological destruction these survivors experience, hence a dire need for a reevaluation of the psychological dictionary for traumatic events.

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