

Situating Women in Trauma of War: An Analysis of *Baghdad Burning: A Blog from an Iraqi Woman*



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Abstract: *The paper deals with situating women in war trauma in Baghdad Burning Volume 2, a girl's blog from Iraq. In the current study, the researcher attempts to reveal the rising of fundamentalism in Iraq after the war. The objective of this study is to safeguard the rights and honour of women after traumatic experiences. The study explores whether the unlashd media is doing its duties truthfully or it dishonestly manipulates the facts about the Iraqi women's traumatic experiences. The paper exposes the reason behind the hiding of the true identity of the author, pseudo-named Riverbend. The framework for the study has been taken from an article "A Conceptual Framework for the Impact of Traumatic Experiences", written by Eve B Carlson and the co-author Constance Dalenberg. The study unfolds the reality that a traumatic event becomes a nightmare, especially for a woman, and a series of flashbacks to the same traumatic experience becomes recurrent. The paper concludes the living standards, disparities and situation of women in contemporary war-stricken Iraq.*

Key Words: Fundamentalism, Unlashd Media, Traumatic Experiences

Introduction

Learning comes through suffering, and almost every individual gets learning from his or her suffering. Sometimes intense fear, nightmare, and invasive horrors of some event, helplessness and lack of concentration become the symptoms of the traumatic effects. The wars, deaths of loved ones and socio-economic collapse of Iraq have brought with them profound changes in the situation of women in the country. Simultaneously they are not allowed to attend proper school, college and university for their education. This suffering comes from some tragic and traumatic experiences. This traumatic or tragic effect leads to the psychological problems of the individuals. The word "trauma" came from the Greek language that means "wound" or the injury of the body, but now the recurrent use of the word trauma is in the sense of the wound of the mind, not of the body. (Caruth 1996, 3). Either these experiences escort the person from a highly problematic mental disease or the total collapse of the suffering person. Patricia Resick elucidates that the traumatic experience usually entails a hostile episode "accompanied by fear, helplessness, or horror"

(Resick 2001, 28). The trauma originates from experiencing the sudden death of a loved one or any serious injury to someone himself or herself or a relative. For example, if a person loses his or her house in an earthquake or in flood, he or she can face the traumatic effects as Carlson and Dalenberg describe that there are three elements of a traumatic experience that includes: unexpectedness, abruptness and extreme negativity that give so little chance to the conscience to comprehend the situation but some psychologists think that it is essential for a person to see the miserable and death of some loved ones to develop a traumatic impact. (Carlson and Dalenberg 2000, 5). Caruth highlights that the true tragedy is not in the catastrophic event itself, but it is in the recurrent images and nightmares that let the sufferers in a constant trauma. (Caruth 1996, 4) Posttraumatic growth also leads to positive changes in tragedy facing a person. The person develops his or her personality with ruminative thoughts. From a mythological perspective, Greek literature is full of such kinds of miseries that lead to the purgation of individuals.

Suffering was considered an essential process for mental growth. For example, Odysseus sacrificed his youth through a long trip to get a better understanding of life. Similarly, Achilles gave his life to earn everlasting honour and love.

The devastations of the war on Iraq have a long-standing impact on the Iraqi people. The people who were living peacefully under Saddam's liberal regime were suddenly put under American and Persian-modelled theocratic control. Literary works have always been a convincing mean to investigate the traumatic experience and their effect. Socio-political upheavals in Iraq's recent history lead us to constant fear and horror. Iraqi experiences of war, violence, oppression and occupation make the War on Terror a War of Terror.

Roger Luckhurst had a survey that illustrates the inefficient literary and media coverage of the war on Iraq in 2003 in contrast with both the Vietnam War and the 9/11 events. He writes that there is no clear cut literary projection of the invasion, war, occupation and oppression of Iraq (Luckhurst 2012, 713). The media is silent in telling the atrocities American forces are doing in Iraq, especially with the Iraqi women. In many parts of Iraq, there have been reports of assaulting women, honour killing and forcing them for pleasure marriages (Sengupta 2009, 16). The females are facing the real danger for their honour and chastity because the invaders are using them as a hostage and detain them till their loved ones or liberation fighters surrender themselves (Zangana 2013, 26). There are many Iraqi writers and thinkers who have tried to project the true image of the war on Iraq before the world. For example, Anthony Shadid draws the attention of the world to the people of Iraq in the shadow of America's war in his book *Night Draws Near*. *The President's Garden* is a novel written by Muhsin Al-Ramli about the havoc and terror of modern Iraq during the American occupation (Al-Ramli 2016). The story deals with the unfathomable resilience of the Iraqi people against foreign occupation. Shahad Al Rawi's novel, *The Baghdad Clock*, takes its reader beyond the daily news about Iraqi people and reveals the reality of living in a war-stricken area that has been slowly devastated before one's eyes. It tells us a story of two Iraqi girls trapped in a war-torn zone and observing the first-hand traumatic experiences of war (Al Rawi 2018).

The facilities enjoyed by the Iraqi women were more than any of other Middle Eastern females in the pre-war times. Since the Iraqi women played an integral role in the development of the country and the Iraqi government had passed the employment and labour law to secure and protect the females from harassment and torture in the work-places, but after and during the war, they were being exploited and raped in the factories and work-places. The history of raps in wartime is not recent, but it is centuries old, and there is an abundance of examples of massive rapes. Japanese raped 20,000 Chinese women in 1937. During the partition of Pakistan in 1971, a number of west Pakistani women were raped by the West Pakistani soldiers. In the former Yugoslavia, many Bosnian women were raped by the Serbs (Wilbers 1994). The current study shows the struggle of an Iraqi blogger girl who wants to explain to the world the real image of Iraq during and after the American occupation. The females are normally considered as peaceful, vulnerable, and beautiful and are responsible for giving birth and raising children, but their role as a blogger is ignored. The impact of traumatic events on infants and children cannot be comprehended in the isolation of women. They are the responsible caregivers of the children, and their physical and psychological growth is taken by the females. They help the children and their men in early healing from the war trauma. So, if they themselves suffer in a traumatic state of mind, it is very hard to safeguard the coming generations from socio-political paranoia.

Methodology

The present study is a qualitative analysis of a published book of Riverbend, a female blogger of Iraq. The researcher has used the critical lens of Eve B Carlson and Constance Dalenberg given in the article "A Conceptual Framework for the Impact of Traumatic Experiences" to analyze the primary text for situating women in the trauma of war on Iraq. The study attempts to highlight the sudden, negative and unmanageable impacts of war on Iraqi individuals, especially females. The primary text for the analysis is taken from Baghdad Burning Volume 2, written by Riverbend (pseudonym of an Iraqi girl during the war). The research sheds light on the causes and effects of war and trauma through the data analysis. The study tells us that the symptoms of trauma still exist after the

traumatic event. The textual analysis shows the suffering of Iraqi women after the American invasion and migration to the nearby countries. The research explores the silent role of media in the projection of the true picture of post-war Iraq through different textual examples.

Discussion

The current paper deals with the situation of women in the trauma of war in Iraq since the American invasion in 2003. The focus of the study is on women in the conflict zone of Iraq. The researcher has taken *Baghdad Burning*, a blog of an Iraqi woman, as the primary text for the research. The writer of this text is an Iraqi blogger woman who has used her pseudonym as Riverbend to hide her identity that shows the conditions of a woman in Iraq who are not allowed to write or express their feelings and expressions. Riverbend took the responsibility to draw the true picture of Iraq and Iraqi women before the world to make them aware of the atrocities of the war on terror. Although she was not personally involved in the combats with the American military, she defended her country by her finger by writing blogs. She is an educated Iraqi female who has first-hand experience of war. She has also highlighted the consciously silent media in her book. The book looks behind the so-called American-funded media and tells the true and self-experienced narrative to the world until silent about the war.

In contrary to the puppet corporate American media that is propagating that they are bringing democracy and liberation for the people of Iraq, the book has thoroughly documented the dangers of war and unfolds the reality behind the faceless and aimless wars America has waged for so many years. Riverbend believes that it does not matter who is sitting in the White House; the role of America remains the same because its role was “assigned”, and there was no reason to invade Iraq (Riverbend 2006, 19-20). She tells the world that this was being revealed when “BBC and Euro News were busily covering the wedding between Prince Charles and the dreadful Camila” and CNN was covering Pope’s death, hundreds and thousands of Iraqis gathered in Baghdad, Mosul and Anbar (Riverbend 2006, 100). While the world, especially the Middle Eastern countries, were enjoying the Oscar ceremony, Iraqis were being attacked and raided in the houses. She writes that while “MBC and

One TV (a channel from the Emirates) have been promising us live Oscar coverage” (Riverbend 2006, 227), the Iraqi men were caught and slaughtered by the forces and “the typical Iraqi dream has become to find some safe haven abroad” (Riverbend 2006, 235).

She personally observes with her family the bombshells, shrapnel, rockets and missiles falling on their houses, listens to the shrieks and cries of the children and women alike that fade away in the valley of death. She writes about one attack on “September 30, explosions kill more than 40 people, most of them children” (Riverbend, 2006, p. 5). She talks about the atrocities putting on Iraqis, like “hitting prisoners, making a group of nude prisoners form a human pyramid”, and many others (Riverbend 2006, 6). The people watched their homeland reduced to rubble, and their government became a puppet in foreign hands that had no connection with the people of Iraq as they were living their lives under the gun. The mothers prayed for their sons to be dead rather than to be captured by the American forces or Iraqi National Guard (Riverbend 2006, 174).

The pre and post-war migration to the comparatively peaceful areas add to the plight of the Iraqi people. Talking about Fallujah, the highly war-stricken city, Riverbend writes, “much of the city is badly damaged, and an estimated one-third of the population flees before or during the fighting” (Riverbend 2006, 8).

The study reveals that being in a war zone is like being in a nightmare, as Riverbend herself reveals the intensity of her psychological disorder with a nightmare within a nightmare and staring at the pile of burnt dead bodies. She accepts that it was very much difficult for her to watch “people drag their loved ones from under the bricks and steel of what was once a home (Riverbend 2006, 11)”. She smells the horror of war at her own door to have the first-hand experience of terror and horror. This horror of war haunts the writer for his life, and she tries to shut off this dreadfulness by writing a blog.

Riverbend admits that the people of Iraq started to use valium to be relaxed from the anxieties and tragedies of war because the bombing and shelling had increased, and their eating and sleeping schedules were heavily disturbed, so with the addiction of valium, they felt relieved (Riverbend 2006, 15). An elderly aunt of Riverbend who was terribly afraid of bombing, in a state of hysteria, started cursing Bush,

Blair and other rulers to calm herself, but it was always a dose of valium that gave her calm, and she suddenly became sane. The women are more in number to use this valium because they are more susceptible to the trauma of war. (Riverbend 2006, 16). Riverbend finds it hard to sleep at night (Riverbend 2006, 22) and looks at herself as “a deer caught in headlights” (Riverbend 2006, 24) as the women were caught in the houses and they “had to be smuggled out” to a safer area. (Riverbend 2006, 25). They had the responsibility to look after the children because most of the men were killed or captured as terrorists in Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo Bay. Riverbend tells the horror of the war by narrating a story of a woman who had lost her family in a missile attack; when she looked in her eyes, “the horror of the war came back to me” that is a feeling of complete restlessness, helplessness and agitation. The stories of deaths of loved ones whisper in the mind of the woman (Riverbend, 2006, p. 27).

As Eve B Carlson and Constance Dalenberg say that the impact of traumatic experiences is negative and sudden, the reaction of Riverbend shows negativity and suddenness. While visiting the Ministry of Higher Education in Baghdad, she was received by a bearded man who scolded her for her inappropriate dress. Her reaction was so sudden and negative that she and her friend hardly avoided the trouble because, in the contemporary theocratic society, it was like a “death wish” to answer back any bearded man (Riverbend, 2006, p. 72). So one can imagine that such as the circumstances in Baghdad, what would be the condition of the women in other cities and provinces. In a liberal state under a dictator, women enjoyed greater freedom than in the American funded democratic government. There had been constant pressure on the colleges to segregate females from males. The women started to completely cover themselves in order to avoid a clash with any male (Riverbend 2006, 77).

Riverbend describes that there were “clerics and men who believe women shouldn’t be able to work” or suitable for certain jobs and “study in the specific field”, and they specified the election forms with the gender of the voters (Riverbend 2006, 78). She laments that they were not so free to express their feelings publically. She found a way to write all her expressions in her blog and hid her true identity in the pseudonym Riverbend. The women are considered responsible for the household and the family planning

in militarized Iraq. They collected water for drinking and washing purposes because the water was so scarce in wartime that they had to wait for hours at the public water plants. Before the occupation, the women were enjoying more freedom in the reign of dictator Saddam. Riverbend expresses her reservations that the coming era is going to be the era of repression and exploitation for the women of Iraq where they were enjoying more rights than any other Islamic country, and their male counter-part are happy with the new development that leads to more suffering and confusion for Iraqi women. The women do not hesitate to have hijab over their heads, but the rage came from the ‘necessity’ of hijab rather its ‘preference’. The education and job of the females are decided by their males rather than by themselves. Riverbend believes that Islam does not reduce the rights of women; rather, it protects them from the male patriarchy. She says that in an Islamic government, women can get more rights than any of other types of governments, but there should be some restrictions in the way they dress but “mixing politics and religion” it becomes more personal (Riverbend 2006, 214).

Humans normally control their environment for their own survival, and many pieces of research show that both humans and animals show frustration when they cannot control their environment, particularly when what is happening is a painful incident. Eve B Carlson and Constance Dalenberg are on the view that the person suffering in a traumatic event loses self-control and consciousness, and the flow of time looks exotic to him or her, and it becomes uncontrollable (Carlson and Dalenberg 2000). The same is the case with Riverbend, who “lose track of the days” and “track of time” because of the highly traumatic experience of American air raids. She started “to measure time with the number of bombs that fell” and “the number of minutes the terror lasted”. The situation became so worse that she also lost controllability of her heart and mind. The Iraqi people started to remember things and events with reference to some air raid, car bombs, tanks rolling into Baghdad, some school or masque attacks, etc. (Riverbend 2006, 90). During a raid of Iraqi forces, Riverbend faced so much fear that she lost the flow of time in a way “the minutes we sat in the living room” during the raid “seemed to last forever” (Riverbend 2006, 221) she was lost completely. Her feelings and

emotions were so uncontrollable that she could not stop herself from looking into the eyes of “the man with the weapon” During this raid, Riverbend says that the hours have remained no longer sacred and a private sphere, it was difficult to sleep and live in these houses. She lamented that if one is not safe in his or her own house, there would be no other haven for his or her safety in the world_(Riverbend 2006, 221) living without a man in a home was a common phenomenon in Iraq. The females had to face all the troubles by themselves because there were places where there was not “a single house with a male under the age of 50 (Riverbend 2006, 222). The females at home did not only have the risk from the occupying forces, but the Iraqi security force was doing the same as Americans did (Riverbend, 2006, p. 226). Sudden negative impact sprang from the blogger girl’s reaction that the event became recurrent in her later life, and she continuously became depressed and traumatized by these events. She writes it was such a nightmare that one does not realize that it was a nightmare while experiencing it_(Riverbend 2006, 227) “nightmares of bombings and of shock and awe have evolved into another sort of nightmares”_(Riverbend 2006, 235) in which the Iraqis were unable to differentiate which year or month was most deadly and bloodthirsty. There was “grief, horror, resignation an anxious look of combined dread and anticipation”, and the eyes of the Iraqis were “wide and bloodshot”_(Riverbend 2006, 239). The situation, particularly for the females, had become worse. The scene of a wailing mother on the brutal killing of her son made the blogger girl full of grief, anger and frustration (Riverbend, 2006, p. 240).

Riverbend recalls her childhood movie in which she watched a small girl running to save her life from Nazis who let three furious black dogs follow and catch her. The girl was caught and eaten by the dogs. That scene of the movie remained in her mind for years to haunt her in solitude and put a negative impact on her personality_(Riverbend 2006, 173). The criterion to analyze the character’s mental growth is too weak if the character does not feel helpless and fear_(Briere 1996). The lack of control over what is happening, the negativity of the event that is happening, and the abruptness and suddenness of the happening make the event a traumatic event.

Baghdad Burning reveals that Iraq was a religiously peaceful country where both the major sects of Islam

lived with peace and harmony before the American invasion, particularly in the city of Median; Sunnis and Shia lived together in harmony, but after the war, they have started to fight each other because the traumatic experiences of war let them in complete illusion (Riverbend 2006, 102).

In September 2005, the situation became so worse in Baghdad that the people could not visit hospitals to see their relatives who were in very serious conditions “among the most affected people are the women (especially pregnant women), children and elderly” _(Riverbend 2006, 127). The American occupation army and Iraqi National Guard proved their courage by raids and mass detentions. They raided in the areas where they could steal money and harass females in the household. In that month, there was talk of a new constitution for the country, but the rights for women in this constitution were quite gloomy. The women were attached with some relative to get the benefits from the constitution_(Riverbend 2006, 148) and Article 47 of the new constitution said: “it isn’t mandatory to have 25 percent, women, on the council”_(Riverbend 2006, 150). The time came when Shia political party won the elections and “there were no females in the audience” as “they had absolutely no representation”_(Riverbend 2006, 212).

Riverbend expresses her hatred towards America and the west in *Baghdad Burning* by writing that the Iraqis were not a threat for America and the west before the invasion, but they are going to be a greater threat after the American invasion. She shows her powerful feelings that come from continuous traumatic experiences of war and the brutalities of war (Riverbend 2006, 50). Once on the birthday of one of her cousins, her cousin’s father gave his daughter the most precious and valuable gift, which was a dagger that could be used during a night raid. Her father said to her that she “can carry it around in your bag for the protection when you go places”_(Riverbend 2006, 215). Despite these traumatic and terrifying experiences, she does not simply turn into a female terrorist despite seeing her loved ones dying, experiencing refugee camps and having hatred and anger for the invaders; rather, she chooses the other way; starts writing a blog. She tells the world through her blogs that the females of Iraq have to be mothers, sisters and daughters during the war.

Conclusion

After the above discussion, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- The blogger girl Riverbend is the representative of the contemporary Iraqi women who faced traumatic experiences in the war after 9/11.
- The trauma of war lets its sufferer re-experience the traumatic events throughout his or her life as Iraqi women are facing identity and psychological crisis in the book *Baghdad Burning* volume 2.

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