

A disoriented homecoming: the scattered identity in Inaam Kachachi's *The American Granddaughter*

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Abstract: The novel challenges the derealization loss in the context of Iraqi war fiction by trying to portray the dark reality of the US invasion. The American granddaughter is not only about war trauma, memories, atrocities, and the huge loss caused by an endless and unjust war waged against a sovereign country. It is about, as the paper argues, a disoriented homecoming and the scattered identity of Zeina, the protagonist, who appears to be a dissociative personality. This paper also explores how the protagonist's dual identity crisis is of a unique type as it is being questioned through three stages. Exile and the coming back on an American military truck as a translator for the invaders' army attacking her origin homeland and finally returning to the United States only to find herself unfit for both homes.

Keywords: scattered identity, homecoming, Iraq war, war fiction, Inaam Kachachi

1. Introduction

After the American invasion in 2003, a powerful wave of fictional war writings emerged in Iraq. They were characterized as well-written, multifaceted narratives. Most of these narratives were novels inspired by the experiences of individuals who were personally involved in the conflict. Some of the most well-known pieces of Iraqi War Fiction are *"Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk"* by Ben Fountain (2012) which offers the opportunity to consider just how hard it is to arrive at the truth in terms of war trauma and the loss of identity. McEwan has written novels which probe into the psyche of the characters so deeply that they resemble psychological case studies. It is here argued that a psychological reading can be done based on the theories of Erik Erikson; namely, identity crisis and identity formation of the characters (Kaiserman, 2020). Moreover, Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds* and Phil Klay's *Redeployment*, for example, expose the traumas that define the United States and its war after 9/11 (Booth, 2019).

There are also other Arab writers who offer unique insights into the Iraq War and its impact on individuals and communities in the region. Their works provide a platform for Arab voices to share their stories and experiences, challenging dominant narratives about the conflict and its aftermath. For example, Webster points out that Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013) mirrors structural elements of biomedical salvation narratives while ultimately destabilizing their logic, exposing the disturbing biosocial realities in post-2003 Iraq and their material consequences. (Webster, 2018). According to Elayyan, the novel is about violent death and fear and it stresses the

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need to acknowledge that no one is free of blame (Elayyan, 2017). Another great novel is Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* (2013). The novel, according to Yebra, bears witness to the atrocities of war and the traumatic effects of destituteness from the perspective of the conquered (Yebra, 2021).

Interestingly, one common theme in Arab literature about the Iraq War is the human toll of the conflict. Many Arab writers have focused on the experiences of civilians caught in the middle of the war, highlighting the trauma and suffering that they have endured. Others have focused on the experiences of soldiers and the emotional and psychological toll that the war has had on them. Arab writers have also explored the political and social ramifications of the Iraq War. Some have critiqued the role of foreign powers in the conflict and the impact of the war on Iraq's political and social structures. Others have examined the sectarian tensions that were inflamed by the war and the ways in which these tensions continue to affect Iraq and the wider Middle East today.

Another theme in Arab literature about the Iraq War is the search for meaning in the aftermath of conflict. Many writers have explored the struggles of individuals and communities to come to terms with the trauma and devastation caused by the war. Some have also examined the ways in which the war has challenged traditional notions of identity, belonging, and cultural heritage. Overall, Arab writers have provided important insights into the Iraq War and its impact on individuals, communities, and the wider Middle East. Through their works, they have highlighted the complexities of the conflict and its lasting effects on the region, while also offering a platform for voices that are often marginalized or ignored in mainstream narratives about the war. One of the distinguishing elements of Iraqi War Fiction is its emphasis on individuals' personal experiences rather than the war's politics or military tactics.

Identity, trauma, belonging, and immigration are themes which travel throughout war literature describing people who have suffered the aftermaths of war and occupation. In the *American Granddaughter*, as the paper argues, the themes of identity and homecoming are deeply intertwined. The protagonist is forced to confront the challenges of living in new reality while trying to maintain a connection to her cultural roots. The narratives capture the complexity and nuance of cultural identity, as the protagonist grapples with questions of belonging and identity.

Other numerous studies have interrogated war trauma of soldiers and identity crisis as well during and after wartimes. For example, Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds* highlights an outstanding chronicle that emphasizes both national mourning and a soldier's individual mourning that characterizes the United States' war (Mann, 2017). However, few scholars followed the tragic identity conflict that normal people suffered in the nations colonized or invaded. The world is an uncertain place (Hogg, 2007). This is how Hogg describes the status quo in today's world as he points out to *uncertainty–identity theory* which he considers as a development of the motivational component of social identity theory.

Iraqi fiction

Iraq War Fiction is a genre of literature that explores the human experiences of those who have been impacted by the Iraq War. The war, which began in 2003 and lasted until 2011, had a profound effect on the world and left a lasting impact on the people who were involved. This genre of fiction delves into the emotional, psychological, and physical toll that the war has had on soldiers, civilians, and their families. It explores the complexities of war and the difficult choices that people are forced to make in times of conflict. Iraqi War Fiction offers a unique perspective on the war and provides insight into the personal stories of those affected by it. Through these stories, readers can gain a

deeper understanding of the human cost of war and the lasting impact it can have on individuals and communities.

One of the defining features of Iraqi War Fiction is its focus on the personal experiences of individuals rather than the politics or military tactics of the war. The stories are often told from the perspective of soldiers, but also include civilians and families affected by the conflict. The genre explores themes such as trauma, loss, and the search for meaning in the aftermath of war. Iraqi War Fiction also offers a unique insight into the cultural and social landscape of Iraq and the Middle East. Many authors draw on their own experiences serving in Iraq or speaking with Iraqis to create nuanced and complex portrayals of the country and its people. This can help readers to understand the complexities of the conflict beyond the headlines and political rhetoric.

Overall, Iraqi War Fiction is a powerful and thought-provoking genre that offers a glimpse into the human cost of war. It sheds light on the struggles and challenges faced by those who have been impacted by the Iraq War and provides a deeper understanding of the complexities of conflict and its lasting effects on individuals and communities.

Identity crisis in world literature

Identity crisis is a common theme in world literature, and many novels explore the complexities of individual identity. The concept of identity crisis was first introduced by psychologist Erik Erikson in his book "Identity: Youth and Crisis" (1968). Erikson is noted for his attention to the process of identity resolution which becomes central in the adolescent years (Widick et al., 1978). Erikson argued that individuals go through a process of identity formation in which they struggle to establish a sense of self (Erikson, E. H. 1968). This struggle can lead to feelings of confusion, anxiety, and doubt, which are often reflected in literature.

One novel that explores the theme of identity crisis is "The Catcher in the Rye" by J.D. Salinger. The novel follows the story of Holden Caulfield, a teenage boy who is struggling to find his place in the world. It depicts his protagonist's quest for identity in a postmodern society (ACHOUR & RAHMANI, 2020). Other outstanding works succeeded in depicting how the atrocities of war stripped individuals of their identities and sense of self. For example, Eric Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) explores how the protagonist faced shocking and traumatic incidents and is haunted by the horror of extreme violence which lead to his disillusionment and loss of identity (Douglas, 2020)

McEwan has written novels which probe into the psyche of the characters so deeply that they resemble psychological case studies. It is here argued that a psychological reading can be done based on the theories of Erik Erikson; namely, identity crisis and identity formation of the characters. Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* depicts the impact of war on individual identities. The characters in the novel navigate the complexities of their subaltern identities and work to resist the structures of oppression they encounter (Ghilzai et al., 2023).

The loss of identity and finding no home

"The American Granddaughter" by Inaam Kachachi is a novel that explores themes of identity, homecoming, and the lasting impact of war on individuals and families. The protagonist, Zeina, is a young Iraqi woman who was born and raised in the United States but returns to her ancestral homeland in the aftermath of the 2003 Iraq War. Throughout the novel, Zeina grapples with

questions of identity and belonging as she tries to come to terms with her family's past and her own place in the world.

One of the keyways in which Zeina's identity is explored in the novel is through her experiences of being a "third culture kid". People of this category as Kwon (2019) points out, tend to maintain nomadic lives, which may have been impacted by dual cultures. They appear to be confronted with challenges of identity because of the experiences they develop through mobile upbringings. The themes of identity and homecoming are central to many war novels, and "*The American Granddaughter*" is no exception. As literary critic Susan Stanford Friedman notes, "Homecoming, as a trope of postwar literature, raises questions about identity, origins, and the meaning of one's place in the world" (Friedman, 1998). Through Zeina's experiences, the novel explores the challenges of trying to come home to a place that is both familiar and unfamiliar, as well as the lasting impact that war can have on individual and collective identities.

The valence of identity depends on the meaning attached to the symbols of patriotism (Huddy, 2001). In this sense, wars have an impact not just on individuals, but also on the communal narrative of their environs, history, culture, and identity. As a result, intentional devastation of cultural resources becomes a feature of each political conflict (Bleibleh & Awad, 2020)

The fragmentation of Zeina's identity evidences a hard struggle to reconstruct the image of war. In this context, Bartle, in Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds*, suffered a similar dilemma as he was apparently overcome by sadness, guilt and sorrow over his friend Murphy's tragic death. It was obvious that his sense of connection to humanity had begun to fragment. The killing and the atrocities around him have shattered any subscription that he may have once held to the concept of an inherently shared humanity (O'Gorman, 2015)

Zeina experiences a loss of identity as she is torn by her divided loyalties between her Iraqi roots and her American citizenship. She feels kinship with the American soldiers, but she also falls in love with Muhaymen, a militant in 'Al Mehdi Army'. She faces the disapproval of her grandmother, Rahma, who is fiercely nationalistic and anti-American. Zeina also suffers from a sense of alienation and guilt as she witnesses the violence and suffering of her homeland. She questions her values and her role in society as she tries to find her true self.

The following lines from the novel illustrate Zeina's loss of identity.

"I was born here. I am Iraqi. But I am also American. I have two passports. I have two homes. I have two names. I am Zeina Behnam. I am Jennifer Lewis." (p. 11)

"I was not one of them. Nor was I one of these. I was not even one person." (p. 33)

"I felt like a traitor every time I translated for them. And every time I didn't." (p. 58)

"I loved him [Muhaymen] more than anything in the world. But he was my enemy." (p. 123)

"I don't belong here anymore. I don't belong anywhere." (Kajah'jī, 2010)p. 178)

One event that shows Zeina's loss of identity is when she accompanies the American soldiers on a raid of her grandmother's house, where she is staying. She has to wear a bulletproof vest and a helmet, and she has to translate the orders and threats of the soldiers to her terrified relatives. She feels ashamed and humiliated, as well as fearful for her grandmother's safety. She realizes that she is seen as an enemy by both sides, and that she has betrayed her family and her country. A quote from the novel text that illustrates this event is:

"I was standing in front of my grandmother's house, wearing a helmet and a bulletproof vest, holding a gun in one hand and a walkie-talkie in the other. I was shouting at my cousins to get down on the

floor, to put their hands behind their heads, to shut up. I was translating the curses and insults of the soldiers who were kicking down the doors and smashing the windows. I was watching my grandmother's face as she looked at me with horror and disgust. I was wishing I could disappear." (p. 76)

Another event that illustrates Zeina's loss of identity is when she visits the grave of her father, who died in exile in Detroit. She feels a deep sorrow and regret for not being able to attend his funeral or mourn him properly. She also feels a disconnect from her father's culture and legacy, as she remembers how he taught her Arabic poetry and Iraqi history. She wonders if he would approve of her choices and actions, or if he would be disappointed in her. A quote from the novel text that depicts this event is:

"I knelt down beside his grave and touched the cold stone. I read his name and his dates of birth and death. I tried to remember his voice, his smile, his stories. I tried to imagine what he would say to me if he could see me now. Would he be proud of me for serving my country? Or would he be angry at me for betraying his country? Would he understand my reasons? Or would he disown me?" (p. 103)

A third event that demonstrates Zeina's loss of identity is when she breaks up with Muhaymen, her Iraqi lover, who is a member of a Shiite militia group. She loves him deeply, but she also knows that he is involved in violent attacks against the Americans. She tries to convince him to leave the country with her, but he refuses, saying that he has a duty to fight for his people and his faith. She realizes that they have irreconcilable differences, and that she can never belong to his world or share his beliefs. A quote from the novel text that conveys this event is:

"He looked at me with sadness and pity. He said he loved me more than anything in the world. But he said he couldn't leave Iraq. He said it was his home, his land, his cause. He said he had to fight for his people, for his religion, for his honor. He said he couldn't abandon them for a selfish dream. He said I was asking him to give up everything that made him who he was." (p. 167)

In the novel, Zeina can be said to have a shattered personality, as she suffers from the effects of complex trauma and dissociation. She has two names, two passports, two homes, and two loyalties. She feels disconnected from her body, her emotions, her memories, and her surroundings. She experiences gaps in her personal history and everyday events. She has difficulty integrating and assimilating the different aspects of her identity, which become fragmented over time.

One event that shows Zeina's dilemma of homecoming is when she arrives in Baghdad for the first time after 20 years. She feels a mix of excitement, nostalgia, fear, and curiosity as she sees the familiar and unfamiliar sights of her birthplace. She is eager to reconnect with her grandmother and her cousins, but she is also aware of the danger and hostility that surrounds her as an American soldier. She wonders if she can still call Iraq her home, or if she has become a stranger in her own land. A quote from the novel text that illustrates this event is:

"I looked out of the window and saw the city I had left behind. The city I had dreamed of. The city I had hated. The city I had loved. It was still there, but it was different. It was scarred by war, by bombs, by bullets, by fire. It was crowded by checkpoints, by tanks, by Humvees, by helicopters. It was alive with people, with noise, with smoke, with dust. It was my city. It was not my city." (p. 27)

Another event that depicts Zeina's dilemma of homecoming is when she visits her grandmother's house, where she used to spend her summers as a child. She feels a surge of emotion as she embraces her grandmother, Rahma, who welcomes her warmly despite her disapproval of Zeina's role in the

occupation. She also feels a sense of familiarity and comfort as she sees the old furniture, the photos, the books, and the garden that remind her of her happy memories. However, she also feels a sense of distance and alienation as she realizes how much has changed since she left Iraq. She notices the signs of poverty, decay, and fear that have affected her relatives and their neighborhood. She also faces the resentment and suspicion of some of her cousins, who accuse her of being a spy or a collaborator. A quote from the novel text that portrays this event is:

"I walked into the house and felt a wave of nostalgia wash over me. Everything was as I remembered it. The sofa with the floral cushions, the coffee table with the brass tray, the bookcase with the leather-bound volumes, the fireplace with the framed photos. I smelled the jasmine from the garden, the cardamom from the coffee, the rosewater from the sweets. I heard my grandmother's voice calling me by my pet name, Zizi. I ran to her and hugged her tight. She kissed me all over my face and said: 'My Zizi has come back to me.' I cried and said: 'I missed you so much.' But then I looked around and saw what I had not noticed before. The cracks on the walls, the stains on the carpet, the dust on the shelves. The fear in their eyes, the anger in their voices, the pain in their hearts. They were not happy to see me. They were not proud of me. They were ashamed of me." (p. 45)

A third event that demonstrates Zeina's dilemma of homecoming is when she decides to leave Iraq for good after completing her contract with the US Army. She feels a sense of relief and liberation as she boards the plane that will take her back to America. She also feels a sense of hope and optimism as she plans to start a new life with Muhaymen, who has agreed to join her after escaping from prison. However, she also feels a sense of loss and regret as she bids farewell to her grandmother, who has fallen ill and may not survive much longer. She also feels a sense of guilt and responsibility as she leaves behind a country that is still in turmoil and chaos. She wonders if she has done anything good or useful during her time in Iraq, or if she has only contributed to its destruction. A quote from the novel text that conveys this event is:

"I got on the plane and felt a weight lift off my shoulders. I was free. I was going home. I was going to be with him [Muhaymen]. He had called me last night and told me he had made it out of Iraq. He had crossed the border into Jordan with fake papers. He had found a safe place to stay until I could join him. He had said he loved me and he couldn't wait to see me. I smiled and said: 'Me too.' But..

2. Conclusion

In conclusion, *The American Granddaughter* is a novel that explores the theme of loss of identity through the protagonist, Zeina, who returns to Iraq as an interpreter for the US Army. Zeina faces a dilemma of homecoming, as she is torn by her divided loyalties, her conflicting emotions, and her shattered personality. She struggles to reconcile her Iraqi roots and her American citizenship, her love for Muhaymen and her kinship with the soldiers, her nostalgia for her childhood and her guilt for homeland. She ultimately realizes that she does not belong to either world, and that she must find her own way of being and living. The novel is a powerful and poignant portrayal of the human cost of war and occupation, as well as a reflection of the complex and diverse reality of Iraq and its people.

This article explores the devastating consequences of a failure to reconcile a fatal fragmented identity. It showed how the protagonist is in deep anguish and confusion as she severely suffered from the conflict of her two nationalities. She then ends up drifting into sadness and an identity crisis as the nation she has grown up in no longer exists, and neither does the romanticized homeland of her parents.

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