

**De-Stereotyping Iraq in Brian Turner's *Leaves That the  
Wind Drives Earthward* and *Ajal***

إزالة الصورة النمطية عن العراق في قصيدتي براين تيرنر "أوراق الشجر التي تدفعها الرياح نحو  
الأرض" و "الأجل"

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Received: 07-09-2022

Accepted:29-11-2022

Published: 28-12-2022

Doi: 10.37654/aujll.2022.179858

### Abstract

War against Iraq in 2003 was launched under certain disinformative propaganda, which claimed that Iraq owned mass destruction weapons. In addition, this propaganda stereotyped Iraqis as barbaric and savage people, exploiting the stereotyping strategy to legitimize this war. Many journalists and writers escorted the American forces to document the liberation of Iraqis in order to civilize and de-brutalize them as they propagated. Brian Turner was an eye witness as he was a soldier with the American forces invaded Iraq. However, Turner was shocked to see the atrocities committed by the American forces and the disinformation circulated by the media to stereotype

Iraqis as the 'uncivilized'. Thus, he wrote poems to unmask these atrocities committed under false propaganda. As such, this article examines Turner's strategy of de-stereotyping Iraqis in two of his poems, namely, "Leaves That the Wind Drives Earthward" and "Ajal". The study follows a textual analysis of the selected poems to clear the misconceptions and disinformation used to invade the country of Iraq. The study concludes that Turner's realizations pushed him to write poems that de-stereotype Iraqis and liberate them from the labels of 'uncivilized' and 'savages' through highlighting their great culture and heritage.

**Keywords:** Brian Turner, Ajal, mass destruction weapons, stereotype.

المستخلص: اندلعت الحرب ضد العراق عام 2003 بموجب دعاية مضللة زعمت أن العراق يمتلك أسلحة دمار شامل. إضافة إلى ذلك، صورت هذه الدعاية العراقيين على أنهم شعب همجي ووحشي، مستغلة مفهوم "التصوير النمطي" لإضفاء الشرعية على هذه الحرب. ولقد رافق العديد من الصحفيين والكتاب القوات الأمريكية لتوثيق تحرير العراقيين من أجل تثقيفهم والتخلص من الوحشية كما روجوا لذلك. فكان براين تيرنر شاهد عيان لأنه كان جندياً مع القوات الأمريكية التي غزت العراق. إلا أن تيرنر أصيب بالصدمة لرؤية الفظائع التي ارتكبتها القوات الأمريكية والمعلومات المضللة التي تداولتها وسائل الإعلام لتصوير العراقيين على أنهم "الغير متحضرين". وهكذا كتب تيرنر قصائد لكشف هذه الفظائع التي ارتكبت تحت دعاية كاذبة. وعلى هذا النحو، يبحث هذا المقال في استراتيجية تيرنر لإزالة الصورة النمطية عن العراق والعراقيين في قصيدتين من قصائده، وهما "أوراق الشجر التي تدفعها الرياح نحو الأرض" و "الأجل". اتبعت هذه الدراسة التحليل النصي لإظهار إدراك تيرنر للمفاهيم الخاطئة والمعلومات المضللة المستخدمة لغزو البلاد. وخلصت الدراسة إلى أن إدراك تيرنر لفظائع الحرب دفعه إلى كتابة قصائد تزيل عن العراقيين هذه الصورة النمطية وتحررهم من تسميات "الغير متحضرين" و "المتوحشين" من خلال إبراز ثقافتهم وتراثهم العظيم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: براين تيرنر ، الأجل ، أسلحة الدمار الشامل ، الصورة النمطية.

## I- Introduction

People of the east are stereotyped and marginalized by the western people of Europe. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Karel Marx stated that "They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented" (1852, p.62). The western view towards the eastern people is so dark. According to Aimé Césaire's "Discourse on Colonialism" (1972), western people saw eastern people as naïve. The west has an image toward the east that they are second-hand people and always the west is inventing a pretext to have the justification for interfering their affairs for many aims. And this is what happened when the United States of America invented the pretext of the weapons of mass destruction to invade Iraq in the name of saving Iraqis and the rest of the world from the dictating regime who owns these weapons. This war led to the destruction of the country in the name of freedom. A lot of studies dealt with the atrocities and damages caused by the American invasion of Iraq. One example is done by Salih who examined Judith Thompson's *Palace of the End* (2007) to show that this play is the dramatist's "straight and authentic record of what actually happened in this war, away from the falsified narratives presented by American policy." (2018, 288)

After invasion, the American troops spread over the whole land of Iraq and this caused direct contact between people and these troops in many Iraqi cities. They considered their military operation as a:

liberation, a construction that was repeated and used many times during the American invasion of Iraq by the Bush administration. The premise was that since the Iraqis (Orientals) are ignorant of self-government and are lack liberty, it is best

that they are invaded for their own good. (Salih, et al, 2016, p.60)

In this respect, an American soldier and poet Brian Turner was recruited to serve in Iraq as he was brainwashed by the American government's propaganda of Iraq's Mass Destruction Weapons. Experiencing the atrocities of war and the false claims of his government, he dedicated his poetry to unmask the truth and fight back the propaganda. He started writing poems describing his admiration of Iraqi culture as if he is part of this culture. He wrote poems that de-stereotype the Iraqi citizens through celebrating their cultural heritage and past. Turner wrote his *Here, Bullet* (2005), *Phantom Noise* (2010), and *My Life as a Foreign Country* (2014), in which he traced:

the physical and psychological damage wrought against American soldiers and Iraqi civilians, but also Iraqi insurgents. Turner served a year as infantry team leader of the 3rd Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division, in Iraq, and scholars of Turner's poetry have wielded two contradictory opinions, holding to the hegemonic privilege that underscores Turner's whiteness, but also highlighting how Turner's work seeks to camouflage that fact by concentrating on the narratives and customs of everyday Iraqi civilians. (Petrovic, 2018, p.4)

Most of the past studies conducted on the poetry of Brian Turner approached his traumatic experience due to the outcome of the American invasion of Iraq. For example, Samina Najmi focuses on the conflict between Turner, the

white American soldier who fights a quasi-imperial war, and Turner, the poet who identifies with the subject of his poem; the Iraqi people in this case. She writes:

Much has been written, especially from postcolonial perspectives, about the power dynamics inherent in such writings: the power of the white, Western subject to gaze upon and represent an objectified and frequently Orientalized other, and to package and market this other for mainstream consumption at home. My reading of Turner's poems asserts that even in the extraordinary setting of a military invasion, the speaker of *Here, Bullet* resists the impulse of the white Western gaze and, thereby, the rote performances of whiteness at the nexus of racial-national difference. (2011, p.57)

The two poems under study are selected from Brian Turner's *Here, Bullet*, and *Phantom Noise* which talk about his time as an American infantry team leader in Iraq. Turner shows interest in what poetry offers for communicating about traumatic experience across his publications and in his public comments (Dale, 2021, 109). He finds in his poems a release for the conflicting emotions raised by his direct engagement in the battlefield. However, this current study approaches two of Turner's poems, namely, *Leaves That the Wind Drives Earthward* and *Ajal* to unleash his discourse of exposing the atrocities of the American war against Iraq, which is a counter-discourse to the false propaganda circulated by the American government

and its mass media that Iraq and Iraqis represent a threat to the global peace through their possession of mass destruction weapons.

## II- De-Stereotyping in Turner's *Leaves That the Wind Drives Earthward and Ajal*

Though Brian Turner, an American army leader and a poet, was brainwashed by the propaganda of the American war against Iraq, his indulgence in the battlefield opened his eyes to the false claims of his government's invasion of Iraq, which led to the destruction of this country and the murder of thousands of innocent people. Thus, Turner wrote poems that present his counter-discourse to the false propaganda of his government. He published his volumes of poetry, *Here, Bullet* (2005) and *Phantom Noise* (2010), which talk about his experiences as a soldier of the American Army in Iraq. In these volumes, he "writes about the Iraqi landscapes, daily life for soldiers and civilians, and a high level of violence concomitant with war". (Swirsky, 2015, p.15)

Turner's poem "Leaves That the Wind Drives Earthward" affects the reader with an immediate response as this poem celebrates the beauties of Iraqi culture and people. The poem is written about the everyday life of Iraqis as a means of highlighting the magnificence of this country as the Americans lack every single positive information about Iraq. Reese says that "Turner's aesthetic encompasses a world about which most Americans choose to remain oblivious" (2010).

In his poem, Turner shows his admiration for the Iraqi culture right from the beginning of the poem, saying:

There is a man in a barber's chair in Mosul,  
 a professor of civil engineering at the local university,  
 and he commends Nancy Ajram, who sings "Akhasmak  
 Ah," (1-3)

In the above lines, Turner mentioned 'Mosul' the city in the north of Iraq and how does the 'professor of civil engineering at the local university' entertain his time with Nancy Ajram's song "Akhasmak Ah". Then, he referred to the memory of this 'professor' in one of the happiest moments in his life when he used 'the parachute'. The description of the professor's reaction to the singer, 'She also knows how to play the oud', given by Turner gives an impression that he is so familiar with that song. 'Mosul' is not the place of terror as it is presented in the mass media. Contrarily, it is the place of poetry and music. Swirsky says that Turner wants to represent the Iraqi people at war, who undoubtedly look to the American soldiers with the same suspicion and caution. He continues saying that Turner's poetry "desperately attempts to prove to us that there are people, not monsters, on the other end of the gun barrels. His collections of poems find their origin in the fighting and move towards subjects like people's lives affected by war, and his own intertwined history with war." (2015, p.15)

Turner moves on in a panoramic view to another place, Baghdad; the capital of Iraq, in one of the famous markets to show the Iraqi act of generosity:

..... and their mother,  
 just returned from the Shorja market, counts them,  
 not consciously, but with her eyes touching the slicked-  
 backed hair  
 of each, ever so briefly, before touching the next; (14-17)

In the above lines, Turner is in the 'Shorja market' where a mother with her children tries to ensure their food and welcome any other child if he is in need '*there's always room for one more*'. Actually, the poet is praising the Iraqi community throughout these lines by describing another side of admiration for the Iraqi act of generosity.

and in the secondhand shops of Basra, the tailor  
folds the cuff tight, the needle's eye  
held in his lips, marking chalk tucked behind his ear  
as the young man about to be married  
stares at the people in the street, how *they hurry*  
he thinks, but to *where*— (18-23)

In the above lines, Turner now turned to Basra in the south of Iraq. The image given here represents life and hope, when he mentioned "the young man about to be married" waiting for "the tailor" to complete his clothes to be a beautiful bride. The poet described the tailor with all the tiny details "folds the cuff tight", "the needle's eye held in his lips", "marking chalk tucked behind his ear". Throughout these details the poet gave us a message of his gazing on the Iraqi culture even to that much. In this poem; Turner traced Iraq from the north to the south showing his keen co-existence with traditions, places, people and even religious rituals.

You have to study the Iraqis to know them ... and another  
says—  
It's impossible to change us  
with the barrel of a tank ... (33-35)

The above stanza considered to be the most outstanding one and carried the gist of the message to be conveyed by Turner. After giving many images and

situations in many places in Iraq from the North till the South, the poet reached to a certain truth that the Iraqi culture is strong, civilized, pure, and has deep rooted history cannot easily be changed though the invasion wants to destroy this history:

in all these places, and moments, and lives,  
I'm wondering, what purpose  
does the bomb serve? What possible good  
the bullet, or the blade? (53-56)

The poet concludes his poem after having visited "all these places", felt "moments", and lived "lives" by asking an important question; "what *purpose* does the *bomb* serve?"; and "What possible good the bullet, or the blade?". If anyone thinks that the poet has left these questions without answers, he is mistaken and wrongly led by this thought. Because the answer is implicated in the poem throughout the admirable images given by the poet to Iraqi culture. So these questions are absurd ones, the poet wants through them to tell the reader that the Iraqis have their strong deep rooted history and culture cannot be changed with '*bomb*' or '*bullet*', but can be considered as rival to other cultures. Turner is extensively identified with the Other 'Iraqis', which is reflected in:

his propensity to borrow words and phrases of  
Arabic as subtitles to his poems, to frequently  
allude to Iraqi and Arab cultural figures and  
poetry, and to tag sections of his books with lines  
of Iraqi poetry. In all these, it becomes obvious  
that this is a man who has immersed himself in  
the culture of the Other. (Bollinger, 2014, p.11)

In his poem "Ajal", Turner talks about an Iraqi person mourning his son, named Abd Allah, who was killed by some kind of explosive blast. The epigraph starts as follows:

*The appointed time of death that Muslims  
believe God has determined for every individual;  
it cannot be delayed or hastened. (opening)*

Turner used the title literally and then gave the explanation of this word in English. Choosing such title is unique since it is referring to the Islamic culture because this word is mentioned in the Holy Qura'an and the above lines quoted from this poem are the interpretation of this word. Turner wants to draw the attention of his people "the westerners" to show them that they "east" are not aliens and that they are civilized too as our people. This strategy of naming and entitling his poems with Arabic names helps in de-stereotyping all negative labels and stigmas attributed to the Iraqi people.

Turner dealt with the impact of war in his poems in a different way. Instead of talking directly about the atrocities of war and the crimes committed against civilians, he came to celebrate the victims via highlighting their culture, language and heritage. He is just like a student, who absorbs:

the hard lessons of combat duty, but also the language, history, and culture of Iraq. He also absorbs the strange nature of a war that began with a miraculously rapid invasion before developing into a grinding counter insurgency, a transition that was already underway when Turner and his unit reported to Iraq for duty in 2003. (Shaffer, 2012, p.3-4)

In the opening lines of the poem, Turner wants to show his anti-discourse of war against Iraqis through the allusion to ‘names of God’. He says:

There are ninety-nine special names for God,  
my son, and not so long ago, I held you,  
newly born, under the light of a crescent moon,  
and gave you the name which means *servant*  
*of God*, and I did not speak of war,  
though tanks rolled in a mechanical thunder  
of iron, and helicopters fired missiles  
over the rooftops of our city— (1-8)

Turner wants to condemn the war on Iraq, he referred to the "ninety-nine special names" of God and spoke to his coming generation about living in peace with others even when if they are eastern people because this war is unfair “I did not speak of war”. As if he is the one who wants to confess his sins and purify himself by referring to “servant of God” not the invaders who destroyed everything by their “tanks”, “helicopters” and “fired missiles”.

Turner skillfully uploads his thoughts in the minds of his readers by choosing concrete examples from the womb of suffering. In the following lines quoted from his poem “Ajaj”, Turner takes us to a dead person "Abd Allah". Actually "Abd Allah" represents every man died in Iraq because of the war.

.....—I whispered  
the call to prayer in your right ear,  
the summons to prayer in your left.  
It should not be like this. Abd Allah,  
many, many years from now, your own children

should wash your body three times  
after your death. (9-14)

We notice that Turner summons eastern Islamic rituals and he proves to be acquainted with them rather than many Muslims themselves. He intentionally mentions “your own children” to evoke sympathy of the world to what is happening to Iraq and the Iraqis because of this ugly war.

In tracing the mentioned Iraqi places "Tower of Samarra, the Ziggurat in Ur" "Babylon" and the sacred place "Mecca", then the way that Muslims follow in burying their dead, "seal your mouth with cotton", "a perfume of lemons and jasmine on your skin." This is direct proof of the poet's co-existence with the Arab Iraqi culture and his admiration of the witchcraft of the east.

.....And go with your mother now,  
who lies buried here beside you—  
she will know the way. (30-32)

Finally, the image of the dead mother is referring to the dead homeland because of the war, "she will know the way." Swirsky says that “All of the victims share their suffering. They understand the loss of children and the lack of fulfillment, and though they are separated by physical distance, age, personal experiences, and the moments of their lives that contributed to their loss, they all greet one another in the ruined aftermath” (2015, p. 50). This country gives and keep giving his people for the sake of war. Turner concludes this poem with a sharp image also to show his sympathy with Iraqi people who were victims of this ugly war. His allusions to the Iraqi cultural places and the use of the Arabic language are his strategy of de-stereotyping the western negative associations of the Iraqi people as the uncivilized easterners. Thus, he succeeds in de-falsifying the American

narratives of war launched against Iraq, which led to the murder of thousands of innocent people.

### III- Conclusion

The current study examines two selected poems of Brian Turner in order to explore his strategy of de-stereotyping Iraq and Iraqis. In his poem “Leaves That the Wind Drives Earthward”, Turner celebrates the great history of Iraqi culture and people through representing the everyday life of Iraqis as the Americans lack every single positive information about Iraq. Moreover, in his “Ajal”, the poet engages the readers with the suffering experienced by Iraqis, especially, losing the beloveds. He aims at de-stereotyping the Iraqis to his readers via invoking their sympathy to the murder of an Iraqi son. Finally, the study concludes that Turner’s celebration of the glorious past of Iraq is an intended strategy to create his counter-discourse to the stereotyped images presented against Iraq by the propaganda of the American government.

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