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A Comparative Critique of the Controversial Trauma Narratives in Hollywood and Local Films about the Iraq War

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Abstract

Films about the Iraq War created by Hollywood and Middle Eastern filmmakers present notably different trauma narratives. While Hollywood productions tend to highlight the war's impact on soldiers, local films present civilian's collective suffering. This divergence raises the contentious question of whose suffering deserves greater recognition. Using the Hollywood film *American Sniper* and the local film *Turtles Can Fly* as case studies, this paper addresses this debate by applying Edward Said's Orientalism and Michael Walzer's theory of just war. It examines how these films construct opposing trauma narratives and the motivations behind them, ultimately advocating for higher attention to the anti-colonial perspectives expressed in local films.

Key Words: Iraq War films; Hollywood; local films; trauma narratives

1. Introduction

The Iraq War remains one of the most politically and morally divisive conflicts of the 21st century due to its unclear justifications and devastating consequences. Prior to the war, the United States claimed that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction, and had connections to Al-Qaeda, who was deemed as the perpetrator of the 9/11 incident. So the Iraq War was defined by the U.S. as a "preemptive war" (Smith, 2007). However, months after the war's outbreak, there was still no evidence to sustain these claims, calling into question the legitimacy of the U.S. military intervention. This fueled global anti-American sentiment and sparked worldwide anti-war protests in 2003.

Philosophers such as Michael Walzer criticized the war for violating the principles of "jus ad bellum" (justice of war). The conflict resulted in over 200,000 civilian deaths (according to the Iraq Body Count Project) and long-term destabilization that fueled sectarian violence and the rise of ISIS. As America's excuse for invasion happened to be a scandal, the war brought a negative impact on the United States, resulting in "substantial damages to its international reputation and credibility" (Chen, 2012). Hollywood, with its global reach, serves as an important tool for the U.S. to rescue its international image. Binns (2016) notes that Hollywood's depiction of Middle East conflicts has evolved alongside media technology and public perception, creating a "hyper-mediated" reality where the line between reality and simulation blurs.

As Serdouk (2021) observes, film shapes reality and strongly influences emotions, focusing more on formal elements than on real-world images. Thus, films can more effectively shape audience perceptions than actual events. Hollywood's portrayal often glorifies military heroism to support its narrative, while local films highlight civilian suffering—showing stories of orphaned children, destroyed infrastructure, and bodily harm. This contrast reveals a clash of ethical frameworks: duty-bound patriotism versus human rights. Although local films may not always originate from Iraq, together they offer a narrative starkly different from Hollywood's. However, as "Arab cinema remains largely absent from North American screens and film criticism" (Turan, 2019), consequently a large audience tend to be swayed by the narrative of Hollywood while neglecting the trauma of civilians.

Obviously, both Hollywood and local films aim to present themselves as the primary victims of the war, creating a contradiction between the individual suffering of American soldiers and the collective suffering of local civilians. The question of whose suffering merits more attention is central to this discussion. This study focuses on the question: "How do Hollywood and local films construct conflicting trauma narratives about the Iraq War, and what distinct motivations underlie these narratives?" It employs Edward Said's Orientalism and Michael Walzer's theory of just war. Said (1999) argues that the West often depicts Arabs as either mysterious terrorists or helpless victims, perpetuating colonial discourses of "civilization versus barbarism". The local context serves as a contrast to the Western moral framework. Walzer(2008) defines just war by evaluating three phases of war: before war (justifications such as "self-defense or self-preservation"), during war

("proportionality" in war: maximizing the profits and minimizing harm), and after war (post-war responsibilities to prevent ongoing animosity).

Using this framework, the paper first analyzes the portrayal of soldiers' struggles in Hollywood films by examining *American Sniper* (2014)'s "just war" narrative, then explores the collective suffering depicted in the local film *Turtles Can Fly* (2004), and finally critiques the contradiction between imperial discourse and anti-colonial resistance underlying these conflicting trauma narratives. *American Sniper*, directed by Clint Eastwood, is a classic Hollywood war film that achieved major box office success and won multiple awards, focusing on the heroism and psychological trauma of the U.S. sniper Chris Kyle. *Turtles Can Fly*, an Iraq-Iranian co-production by Bahman Ghobadi, gained international recognition at the Berlin International Film Festival. It focuses on the suffering of a group of Kurdish kids under war, encouraging reflection on war's impact on innocent groups. By centering local voices, this study challenges Western dominance in war narratives and advocates for a decolonial discourse in war representation.

2. Hollywood's Trauma Narrative--The Soldier's Dilemma

Hollywood's films about the Iraq War, through artistic choices and narrative framing, emphasize aspects that are favorable to American soldiers while obscuring those that are less flattering. They reshape the narrative surrounding the Iraq War, focusing on American soldiers' heroic actions, physical harm and psychological struggles. In this way, they transform the war into a platform that emphasizes the responsibility and morality of American soldiers.

2.1 Individual Psychological Struggles

Hollywood's depiction of the Iraq War consistently follows a highly stylized logic that reduces the war to moral dilemmas confronting individual American soldiers. This approach centers on the protagonist's inner struggles and psychological trauma, transforming systemic violence into personal heroism and avoiding direct scrutiny of the legitimacy of the war. Emmanuel Levinas argues that a true ethical relation requires the recognition of the non-assimilability of the "Other", rather than reducing it to a projection of "the self" (Jiang, 2025). In Hollywood films, this relation is completely dissolved. Iraqi civilians, combatants, and the battlefield in the films exist only as backdrops to the protagonist's moral choices, lacking independent voices.

Clint Eastwood's *American Sniper* is a quintessential example of this paradigm. Based on the memoir of the legendary U.S. sniper Chris Kyle, the film employs a highly selective narrative that transforms an unjust war of aggression into a personal heroic epic. Kyle's central dilemma in the film is framed as the moral paradox of "killing for his country and to protect his comrades." His PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) is not rooted in skepticism about the war itself, but rather in the guilt of "not being able to save more comrades." This narrative portrays U.S. soldiers as dual victims—physically harmed and morally tormented.

The film first showcases Kyle's patriotism. He is proud of being a member of marines because he thinks America is the greatest country in the world. This means that Kyle fully supports his country and is proud that he can sacrifice his life for it. Therefore, when he is on the battlefield, Kyle does not consider what he is doing to be an act of aggression, but rather as a way of serving his country. What he needs to do is trying his best to eliminate any potential dangers for his comrades—even if that means killing civilians. This frames Kyle's violence as an inevitable act of patriotism.

A controversial visual device in the film is the repeated sniper-scope perspective. When Kyle's cross-hairs lock onto an Iraqi child holding a rocket launcher, or a woman carrying a grenade, the camera compels the audience to adopt the shooter's gaze. This reduces the complex ethics of war to a binary choice: "Shoot and become a murderer, or remain passive and allow your comrades to be killed." This technologized moral dilemma makes Kyle passive; in turn, it highlights the kindness and righteousness of Kyle. But it obscures more fundamental questions: Why are American soldiers in Iraq? Why do Iraqi children pick up weapons? And who creates these extreme situations where "killing is a necessity"? According to Michael Walzer, there are two legitimate reasons to engage in war: self-defense and self-preservation. Certainly, Hollywood is not able to answer these questions. From the very beginning, the film avoids providing these basic background explanations. Instead, it portrays all the American soldiers as being in a passive state, saying, "Any male of military age who is still here... is here to kill you", in order to pave the way for their military operations. Then by abstracting their violence into a matter of inevitable choice, Hollywood effectively diverts attention from the structural guilt associated with American military hegemony.

More notably, the film depicts Kyle as a victim of the war by focusing on his PTSD. After his retirement, Kyle suffers from long-term PTSD. Then the narrative ultimately reverts to the conservative theme of "a good soldier alienated by war." He struggles to reintegrate into normal life, reacting with stress whenever he hears sounds resembling gunfire, and erupting in rage to protect his loved ones when they are threatened. These behaviors indicate that years of war have shaped him into a war machine. Moreover, he often feels guilty over his fallen comrades. Kyle can only seek inner peace by assisting disabled

veterans. His death—shot by a fellow veteran also suffering from PTSD—is imbued with a sense of martyrdom. At the film's conclusion, thousands of people line the streets to bid farewell to Kyle's body, mourning him as a national hero. Whereas his death is portrayed as a national tragedy, the casualties among Iraqis are completely neglected in this final narrative. Clearly, the film never allows Iraqis to speak for themselves; their presence serves only to validate the suffering of American soldiers.

Represented by *American Sniper*, most Hollywood films about the Iraq War share a common trauma narrative. First, they replace political discourse with emotional appeal by fostering a strong sense of empathy between the audience and the protagonists. Second, they personalize responsibility by breaking down the violence of war into numerous individual choices of last resort, thereby dissolving national guilt into personal tragedies. Third, they complete the narrative loop by depicting soldiers as post-war victims, showing how they ultimately fail to reintegrate into normal life. This structure ultimately reinforces the perception of war as "painful but necessary."

Phelan (2011) reveals that the essence of this strategy is "the emotional hijacking of ethical judgment". When the audience is moved by Kyle's sacrifice, they unconsciously accept the presupposition that "war is an eternal dilemma." The true voices that are silenced are those of the Iraqi civilians who exist outside the Hollywood lens, as "the voices of the subjugated are systematically excluded by the apparatus of imperial discourse" (Chen, 2018).

2.2 Dehumanization and Erasure of Local Suffering

In order to emphasize the righteousness of American soldiers, Hollywood films often undergo artistic selection and processing. These films typically focus on scenes depicting the U.S. military confronting dangers, being compelled to fight back, and making sacrifices. Meanwhile, they tend to overlook the suffering endured by local civilians or resistance forces, and frequently employ dehumanizing rhetoric to portray the local population in a negative light.

While *American Sniper* glorifies Kyle as an American hero, it systematically dehumanizes Iraqis and erases the suffering of local civilians caught in the conflict. The narrative frames the war through an exclusively American lens, reducing Iraqis to either faceless enemies or passive victims, thereby reinforcing orientalist stereotypes and justifying U.S. military actions. One of the most striking aspects of *American Sniper* is its depiction of Iraqis without any backgrounds or depth. The film's antagonists, such as the sniper Mustafa and the brutal "Butcher", are portrayed as one-dimensional villains devoid of humanity. Mustafa is an Olympic marksman who turned insurgent. But he is given no backstory or motivation beyond his role as Kyle' s rival. In the film, Mustafa's killing of American soldiers is consistently depicted as evil and abominable, while Kyle's killing of Iraqi militants is depicted as gratifying and admirable. So actually, his presence serves only to validate Kyle's skill and moral superiority, reinforcing the binary of American heroism versus Iraqi barbarism.

Moreover, the film frequently employs visual and narrative techniques that strip Iraqis of their individuality. As the film says, "there's evil everywhere". The film's portrayal of all the Iraqi images reinforces this statement. Crowds of Iraqi civilians are often shown in chaotic and blurred masses, while insurgents are depicted as barbarians who only charge forward and then die. Even women and children are portrayed as threats that cannot be ignored. Additionally, most of the enemies are portrayed wearing turbans and covering their faces, rendering them devoid of identity, not to mention personality. As the enemies are depicted as emotionless war machines lacking any individuality, their deaths become insignificant. Thus, when these enemies emerge one after another and are killed by the U.S. military, the scenes resemble a "shooting video game", where they vanish right away after being hit and then another group show up. This video game-like portrayal, without any focus on the deceased Iraqi, effectively diminishes the horrors of war, dissolving the violence of the U.S. military.

Even in scenes where Iraqi civilians are present, their suffering is secondary to Kyle's personal struggles. For instance, when Kyle hesitates before shooting a child who might be carrying a grenade, the tension revolves around his moral dilemma rather than the child's humanity. The film never explores the broader consequences of such actions on Iraqi families, effectively erasing their pain. And Iraqi militants' death will never be focused in the film. They are shot and fall, only to be quickly replaced by another wave of enemies. In starkly contrast, when American soldiers are shot, the camera centers on their pain and the sadness of their teammates. And there are many instances where US soldiers think of their families when on the verge of death. Apparently, this narrative leaves the audience no time to empathize with the Iraqis as they quickly show up and then disappear, but it intentionally infused the audience's compassion into the trauma faced by U.S. soldiers.

To conclude, by dehumanizing Iraqis and erasing their suffering, *American Sniper* discourages audiences from questioning the true costs of war. It achieves this by demonizing the Iraqi people as a whole or depriving them of individuality, thereby downplaying the violence of the US military. The absence of Iraqi voices and the victimization of American soldiers perpetuate a narrative that prioritizes American trauma over Iraqis suffering.

3. Local Cinema's Counter Narrative: Civilian Survival as Resistance

While Hollywood's portrayal of the Iraq War emphasizes the physical suffering and psychological struggles faced by American soldiers, local films focus on the collective trauma experienced by civilians during the conflict, exposing their dire living conditions. Local films here are not limited to those made by Iraqi directors, but also by directors from neighbor countries such as Iran, Turkey and Lebanon, etc, since they belong to a Islamic community. Besides, whereas Hollywood movies often structure their timelines around a soldier's mission, local films underscore the long-term consequences of the war to tell that the damage caused by war is eternal. This fundamentally challenges Hollywood's attempt to promote the ideology that "America aims to bring peace and a better life to the Iraqi people" and undermines its intention to create a just image.

3.1 Collective Suffering Over Individual Heroism

Turtles Can Fly is filmed by Iranian director Bahman Ghobadi. In an interview, he stated, "two weeks after the war had started, I went to Iraq with a DV camera. I visited the Iran-Iraq border, which is the location seen in the film...I found children in dire circumstances all over Kurdistan, they were easy to find" (Hamid& Ghobadi, 2005). But why, as an Iranian director, Ghobadi was willing to present the suffering of Iraqi children to the world? Hamid (2006) offers insight into Iranian cinema beyond its border, stating, "although we often think of Iran as being completely closed to the rest of the world, its filmmakers have begun to show an increasingly broad outlook. This regionalist cinema is fueled by the seemingly contradictory impulses of promoting a humanist critique of the prejudices and abuses of Islamic fundamentalism and the feeling of religious and cultural solidarity". In other words, when Ghobadi made this film, he did not limit himself to the identity of an Iranian; instead, he positioned himself as a member of the Islamic community, speaking on behalf of the entire Islamic group. Therefore, the definition of a local film about the Iraq War is not confined to the Iraqi region, as the suffering endured by the Iraqi people is part of a collective trauma experienced by the Islamic community.

The main part of *Turtles Can Fly* takes place in a refugee camp just days before America's invasion into Iraq. It centers on a Kurdish refugee community situated along the border between Iran and Iraq, who were all victims of Saddam regime's atrocities. One of the main characters, "Satellite," is a boy around thirteen years old who harbors an American Dream, yet he is the leader of a group of orphans because he organizes them to work, including digging up landmines and loading dismantled shells. Some of these children are disabled as a result of the domestic conflict and their landmine-digging activities. For these kids, their living is depending on these dangerous activities that can take away their lives at any moment. Another protagonist, Agrin, is only twelve years old but possesses the maturity and sorrow of an adult. This is because of her traumatic past of having been sexually assaulted by Saddam soldiers, which led to her giving birth to a blind child at such a young age. She attempts to abandon the child but is continuously prevented by her brother. Ultimately, overwhelmed by her shattered life, she drowns the child in a river and then commits suicide by jumping off a cliff. Her brother, Hengov, is also a tragic figure. He lost both of his hands due to the domestic turmoil and must use his mouth to dig landmines for a living. The director grants him the ability to foresee impending disasters. Yet tragically, he is powerless to prevent them from happening, including the death of his nephew and his sister. These three characters are forced to assume adult responsibilities, taking care of the children and seeking ways to survive themselves. This incredible reality is as absurd as the name of the movie "*Turtles Can Fly*".

As the US claimed to bring Iraqi freedom and peace on the broadcast, these kids once expected the arrival of U.S. military. However, their fate did not improve after the outbreak of the Iraq War. The arrival of U.S. troops at the end of the film marked merely the beginning of further turbulence for these children, suggesting the continuity of their suffering. The US declaration of "liberating the Iraqi people" turned out to be an illusion. This "continuity" indicates that even with a change of regime, civilians remain the primary victims of power struggle. In this desperate ending, Agrin and the blind infant died; Hengov weeps in despair because he lost all his family members and becomes alone; "Satellite"'s American dream is shattered and his leg is blown off by a landmine; children with families seek refuge elsewhere, while orphans continue to wander and struggle to survive amid the continuing war. Throughout the entire film, there is no appearance of a savior to these kids, imbued with a profound sense of depression and despair.

Ghobadi chose children as the subject to illustrate the cruelty of war, which actually alludes to the even more profound suffering of adults under war. As he said, "I think that the adults are far more damaged than the children. They are thinking about how to put food on the table. They are extremely poor; they have families to take care of and no means to take care of them. They can think only about surviving from day to day. They've had a lifetime of dealing with a harsh reality and they have no hope. They treat the kids that way because they have reached a point in their lives where nothing else matters but survival" (Hamid&Ghobadi, 2005). So by depicting children who must assume adult responsibilities to survive and the adults' indifference towards them, the film conveys to the audience the even greater helplessness and despair experienced by the adults. When they struggle to ensure the survival of their own families and themselves, it is impossible for them to pay

attention to these displaced children who are engaged in dangerous work. Thus, this is the collective suffering of an entire community.

Through the representation of the collective suffering of ordinary people, Ghobadi expressed that *Turtles Can Fly* "offers an opportunity for Western viewers to see what is left behind by foreign wars and the impact they have on ordinary people" (Hamid&Ghobadi, 2005). But the collective suffering of civilians is precisely what is often concealed in Hollywood's portrayal of the Iraq War. By obscuring civilian suffering, the narrative of *American Sniper* can focus solely on the battlefield, thereby demonizing all Iraqis and framing Kyle's killing as reluctant heroic deeds. Similarly, by concealing civilian suffering, the violence of the US military can be downplayed. In this disguised manner, American soldiers are portrayed as the primary victims of the war. So local films' focus on collective suffering directly deconstruct this illusion. It directly tells the audience how widespread and severe the suffering of civilians was behind the Hollywood war narratives.

3.2 Long-Term Consequences vs. Hollywood's Mission-Based Timeline

"Why can you enjoy the Alps in Europe, but not the beautiful hills here? It is because this place has been used as a pawn by the superpowers for their advantage. They have taken out all the resources and left destruction, fields of landmines, artillery shells, and discarded weapons. This is how they have left these people to live," stated by Ghobadi angrily in the interview (Hamid&Ghobadi, 2005). Yes, the mines buried everywhere are just like the impact of war on local civilians, which persists even after the war was over. When Hollywood movies use the missions of American soldiers as the timeline and ends with their return to the United States to reunite with their families, they create a closed loop of depicting heroism. This misleads the audience into believing that the war is over with a happy ending, while completely forgetting about the local civilians who have been profoundly and enduringly harmed by the war.

American Sniper follows a linear, goal-oriented structure: Chris Kyle enlists, completes missions, faces moral dilemmas, and returns home. The war is framed as a series of missions, such as "taking out the Butcher," "stopping Mustafa", simplifying the complex conflict into a soldier's execution time. And the films end with Kyle returning home to accommodate the normal life, as if the war were over and everything were going toward better. But it completely ignores the continuous instability and suffering caused by the US invasion. This structure reinforces the myth that war is a finite endeavor with a clear resolution, rather than a prolonged catastrophe for those who live through it. It actually evades the discussion on post-war responsibilities, without which animosity and indignation will persist according to Michael Walzer.

Set in a Kurdish refugee camp on the Iraq-Turkey border just before the 2003 U.S. invasion, *Turtles Can Fly* depicts war not as a series of missions but as an endless cycle of sufferings. The main characters of the film are children who scavenge for landmines to sell for livings, highlighting how war's remnants dictate their daily survival. Unlike *American Sniper*, there is no "before" or "after" war for those children—only its perpetual existence. Although there is not scene of fighting in the film, every element inside implies the long term consequence of war. First, the war left behind a large number of orphans. In *Turtles Can Fly*, the children all need to support themselves after losing their parents. Children around ten years old have to take on adult responsibilities, while adults show indifference towards the children's lives. This was a sign of disruption of the Iraqi social structure. Second, the landmines and bombs left over from the war still pose a constant threat to everyone's life, just like the bullets that were flying around during the war. The war forces these children to survive by picking up landmines, but ironically, these landmines that sustain their livelihoods can also take away parts of their bodies or even their lives at any moment. Third, the trauma left by the war in children can never be erased. The film repeatedly focuses on Agrin's gloomy expression and the child she is carrying. It is a repeated mention of her tragic experience during the war. This experience has been haunting her like a demon, tormenting her soul, without any solution to cure it. It eventually drives her to death. The film also repeatedly focuses on Satellite's lame assistant. He lost a leg in the war and has to walk with a stick. However, he seems very optimistic and often makes funny gestures with his amputated leg to amuse people. But his optimism does not make the audience think of his strength; instead, it keeps reminding the brutal war that has devastated a child's entire life. Last, the film ends with the invasion of the US military. The U.S. forces, who were once the saviors the children had expected, now become another invading force in reality. This implies the continuation of the war and the continuation of hopelessness. For these children, war always exists; they have no memory of peace. The fairy tale in Hollywood that war could have a happy ending is an illusion in local films.

4. The Root of the Narrative Conflict: Imperial Narrative and Anti-Colonial Resistance

The comparison above clearly shows that Hollywood's trauma narrative, which positions soldiers as the main victims, conflicts with the collective suffering depicted in local films. What, then, contributes to this conflict?

The trauma narrative in Hollywood war films is not accidental; it is deeply embedded in the imperial discourse of the United States. The United States has consistently positioned itself as the "global sheriff ", and the seemingly reluctant violence of its

soldiers actually obscures the aggressive acts of the U.S. in this role. Films such as *American Sniper* serve a core function in constructing the myth of "just war." By emphasizing the sacrifices and struggles of individual soldiers, these films recast the U.S. military intervention as a moral necessity to combat evil, rather than an extension of political and economic interests. In doing so, they obscure discussions about the purposes of war, which are supposed to be considered when determining whether a war is just or not according to Michael Walzer. This narrative strategy is highly isomorphic with the logic of American Exceptionalism, namely "the United States was chosen by God and serves as the guiding light of the world. In terms of morality, the United States is superior to other countries and was selected by God to play the role of promoting world progress" (Li, 2022).

The American soldiers depicted in these films are often endowed with complex human characteristics, while the enemies are reduced to the label of "terrorists". This binary encoding resonates with Orientalist discourse, which constructs the Middle East as a barbaric space in need of Western military discipline. According to Said (1999), the West has long believed that the East is not yet ready (or simply lacks the capability) to manage itself, and only under the guidance and assistance of the West can the East be governed. It actually exemplifies the "white savior" ideology of the West (Yang, 2014). Through this ideology, the West "has carried out conquest and governance over the East under the guise of saving the East" (Xu, 2020). Thus Hollywood portrays the United States' presence in Iraq as a just act because America is cast as the savior. However, in *Turtles Can Fly*, the United States appears as a new invading force, inflicting further suffering on civilians rather than providing salvation. This directly undermines the savior narrative prevalent in Hollywood films.

With technological rationality, Hollywood further sanitizes violence. Through the precise targeting of a sniper scope, Hollywood presents warfare as a technical and specialized activity, thereby obscuring the brutal nature of violence itself. Baudrillard (2003), in *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, pointed out that the media-driven narrative of war turns killing into "clean, bloodless symbols", with cinema acting as a visual accomplice in this process. Furthermore, by focusing on the psychological trauma of soldiers, when audiences lament the PTSD of soldiers, their emotions are channeled towards a macro perspective of the "brutality of war", rather than a critique of specific acts of aggression. Slavoj Žižek distinguishes between "subjective violence" (direct, visible violence) and "systemic violence" (structural violence embedded in capitalism, ideology, etc.) (Ding, 2020). He points out that people often focus on emotional outrage over subjective violence while ignoring the more hidden systemic violence. This kind of emotional consumption becomes an ethical trap, making people mistake sympathy for actions. Hence, the conflict between the narrative of individual trauma and that of collective trauma exposes the elements often obscured by Hollywood films, deconstructing the false logic of justice portrayed in Hollywood movies.

In addition, the U.S. Department of Defense has long intervened in the production of war films by providing military equipment, advisory support, and other means in exchange for the promotion of a positive image of the U.S. military (such as series of *Transformers*). A report of 2022 revealed that the Pentagon and the Central Intelligence Agency had exercised script-editing control over more than 2,500 film and television productions, based on documents from the U.S. Department of Defense. The control includes the removal of topics that are deemed disgraceful or controversial—such as war crimes, torture, veteran suicides, etc (Matthew & Tom, 2017). Films that refuse such military intervention may not even get the chance to be released. Consequently, the relationship between Hollywood and the U.S. government appears to be close. This collusive relationship naturally inclines Hollywood's narratives towards an imperial perspective.

In contrast, local films like *Turtles Can Fly* present starkly different war scenes. Through survival narratives from a civilian perspective, these films reveal the central contradiction: whose suffering is more worthy of being noticed?

Hollywood favors the depiction of individual physical and psychological trauma while neglecting the broader impact on local civilians. This creates the illusion that the substantive harm of war is borne by the U.S. military. On the contrary, local films present the structural trauma of the entire society. Ghobadi employs the innocent perspective of children to expose the pervasive alienation of everyday life caused by war, as these innocent children are forced to take on adult responsibilities, with mine clearance serving as their only means of survival. While Hollywood equates justice with "eliminating threats," local films lament that it poses more threats to local civilians, directly pointing to the fundamental contradiction of imperialism: violence carried out in the name of "liberation".

However, under the dominance of global cultural hegemony, local films cannot escape the intervention of cultural hegemony if they manage to gain dissemination. Since "Arab cinema remains largely absent from North American screens and film criticism" (Turan, 2019), it is evident that the narratives of local films are not allowed to appear in North America. Consequently, local narratives often can only achieve limited dissemination through European film festivals, resulting in a kind of "otherized" resistance--challenging Western hegemony while being compelled to conform to the Western portrayal of "war victims." Thus, the civilian trauma depicted in local films is already castrated, yet it represents the most significant form of resistance that those affected can muster. As for the question "whose suffering is more worthy of being seen", the

answer cannot be dictated by cultural hegemony; rather, it should center on the collective trauma of civilians that most accurately reflects the brutality of war.

Emmanuel Levinas emphasizes the ethical call of the "face of the Other." He asserts that the "face" as the manifestation of the "Other" is the starting point of the ethical relationship. It is not only the visual representation of the Other but also an inescapable ethical appeal, a demand for the subject's responsibility (Jiang, 2025). Therefore, when audiences confront the characters on screen, they are inevitably moved by this ethical call, fostering a sense of responsibility toward the "Other." However, in Hollywood films, Iraqis are always depicted as "faceless" threats or mere background elements, effectively blocking the ethical appeal of civilians. In contrast, local films place the desperate expressions of children and adults in direct confrontation with the audience. This approach successfully positions viewers at the center of the ethical call, appealing to pay more attention to the collective trauma that local civilians suffer.

5. Conclusion

The conflict of trauma narratives between Hollywood and local films lies in the clash between the individual trauma of soldiers and the collective trauma of civilians. Hollywood tends to emphasize the personal struggles of American soldiers, portraying the reluctant violence of the U.S. military while avoiding discussions about the underlying purposes of war and post-war responsibilities. This approach ultimately seeks to justify the imperialist rationale behind military operations in Iraq. In contrast, local films reconstruct the ethical dimensions of war by focusing on the collective trauma of civilians. By highlighting the long-term suffering and permanent disabilities of civilians as symbols of resistance, these films deconstruct Hollywood's trauma narratives and appeal for the attentions on collective trauma that is attempted to be obscured.

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