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War literature and the Complexity of Female Soldier Cassandra: An analysis of “Spoils” by Brian Van Reet

A B S T R A C T

The research aimed to explore the effect of the communicative approach on developing Iraqi Learners' English communication skills. Sixty-two Iraqi learners who were studying English language in the 6th preparatory class at Palistain Preparatory School, Anbar at the academic year 2022-2023, were chosen as a sample of the current research. The pre-test and post-test were utilized as an instrument of the study. A pre-test was conducted, and the sample was divided into two groups: the experimental group, which was taught the English language using the communicative approach, and the second group, which was taught the English language using the traditional method. Both groups were taught the contents of grammar for the 6th preparatory school. After the experiment, a post-test was conducted to collect data. The results revealed that the experimental group obtained better marks than the control group in post-tests for communication skills. Therefore, the research recommends that policymakers and English teachers are recommended to use the communicative approach as the best method for teaching communication skills in the new Iraqi curriculum.

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الأدب الحربي ومآزق المجنّدة كاساندرّا: تحليل لرواية "غنائم" للكاتب براين فان ريت

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الملخص

يحلل هذا البحث أدب الحرب، مع التركيز على رواية "غنائم" للكاتب براين فان ريت. إنه يدرس تطور أحد الجنود كشاهد يحاول سرد القصص لجمهور غير مبال. يدرس هذا التحليل أيضًا طبيعة الأدب الحربي الحديث متعدد الألحان وغير الخطي والموجه داخليًا، مع التركيز على مشاعر القارئ وتجربة المعركة. يتم تناول حرب العراق من وجهة نظر كاساندرّا، وتصوير العنف من خلال علاقتها مع الآخرين في وقت الحرب. يحلل البحث أيضًا المجنّدة كاساندرّا ويغريد، وأسرها من قبل المجاهدين، وتكشف عن الخسائر النفسية والعاطفية للقتال. كما أنه يدرس أيديولوجيات الشخصيات الأخرى، والجنس في الجيش، والأخلاق والمثل.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التعقيد، فان ريت، الغنائم، أنثى، جندي، حرب العراق

1. Introduction:

War literature has historically depicted conflict's psychological and emotional effects, allowing people to express their experiences and bridge the gap between battle and home. The novel *Spoils* by Brian Van Reet is a poignant example of war literature, exploring the human cost of conflict. The novel follows a terrible Iraq War adventure, focusing on Cassandra Wigheard, a young female soldier held captive by terrorists. Van Reet expertly portrays the fight and its victims from the perspectives of American soldiers and their captors, revealing the severe mental and emotional effects of war in its rawest form.

The novel also thoughtfully examines wartime identity and morality as American soldiers and insurgents struggle with their ideas, goals, and moral ambiguity. Van Reet skillfully navigates war's moral uncertainty, asking readers to consider the complexity of human experience in combat. The novel's depiction of enemy troops contradicts tropes and humanizes the "Other" in war literature.

Spoils vividly and terrifyingly features a woman's perspective on the issue throughout the tale, portraying Cassandra, an American soldier spoilt by Mujahedeen warriors. An exploration of the psychological and fast-paced desires and discoveries of a generation of young men and women in Iraq, the brutal and ethically complex narrative delves into the human toll of a rapidly escalating war.

3. Literature Review

As long as *Spoils* by Brian Van Reet, published in February 2017, is considered one of the very modern novels about the Iraq war after 2003, there are relatively few studies related to it, but there are articles, essays and notices in well-known international and local newspapers, magazines and websites about it.

An article like *Brian Van Reet's 'Spoils' moves fiction about the Iraq War into new territory* by Benjamin Busch in *the Washington Post* describes the three main characters: Cassandra, a disillusioned U.S. soldier; Abu al-Hool, an insurgent in the Iraqi resistance; and Slead, a young American tank gunner. Another article by Marcel Theroux entitled *Spoils by Brian Van Reet review – essential insights into the Iraq War* published in *The Guardian* provides general hints about the novel.

All previously published articles and research solely offer a depiction of events or individuals without offering a unique personal interpretation. This study paper stands out from earlier ones due to its analysis of the main character, the speaking voice in the narrative, and the sole feminist voice. The study relies on the examination and interpretation of the text in the original work, as well as the incorporation of ideas derived from the whole narrative of the novel's storyline.

The methodology utilized in this document appears to entail a qualitative examination of Cassandra's persona, her encounters as a female soldier in the Iraq War, and the overarching themes and societal critique interwoven within the story. The analysis covers Cassandra's psychological and moral difficulties, her ability to recover from adversity, her contribution to expressing social criticism, and the portrayal of the devastating impact of war on humanity. This study does not expressly follow a particular theoretical framework, but it explores themes and subjects that are pertinent to several theoretical viewpoints in the domains of literature, gender studies, and war narratives.

4. An Overview of War Literature

War is one of the most stressful events a person can endure, and writing about it might help them cope the civil life. Every conflict includes fiction, war reports, and soldier memoirs. Because of changes in the world's politics and the experience of war, a new type of writing has grown. Veterans and people who have been directly affected by recent wars are trying to share their stories with a domestic audience that is either not interested or hostile, to close a gap that they often see as unbridgeable. Multiple voices, non-linear plots, and internal motivation are all features of modern war literature. The major focus is on the main characters' inner lives, who can be antagonists or protagonists. Because of this, the authors of these war stories often go against what is expected of them and focus on making an emotional connection with their viewers. Their main goal is to clearly describe their own experiences of the war and, at times, the hard process of adjusting to life as a civilian after it ended. A battle story relies on the veteran to give accurate information, facts that can be checked, and a story that makes sense. The people who are responsible for the huge and terrible social, economic, and human effects of the US war and occupation have not yet been held accountable. At the beginning of the American invasion of Iraq, embedded reportage filled the role of traditional war reporters. It showed battle in a stylized and interesting way, giving readers a glimpse of the "embedded sublime." (Patrick Deer, 2017, p. 317).

war stories and militarized logic are still common in US writing and culture. Representations of the US attack and occupation of Iraq and the world war on terror, which seems to never end, have strengthened US war culture after 9/11 and weakened its limits. They might seem more healing and open to everyone than the US wars in Iraq, but war and recovery stories are often used for nationalist and exclusive reasons. As a result, writers from both the US and Iraq have questioned whether or not therapeutic stories about suffering together or healing from harm can be used for nationalist purposes.

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, 1981-born Van Reet enlisted. He did not embrace George W. Bush's foreign policies or seek revenge. With "real life happening somewhere else; it wasn't happening on a college campus" at the University of Virginia, Reet often failed to study. Reet's insights into war's realities give his simple prose tremendous detail and provide *Spoils* (2017) its hard-hitting punch from the first page. *Spoils* jump between narrators and dates once it starts. Reet plunges into that contested zone in *Spoils*, following three combatants as hostilities began in the spring of 2003. The narrative is presented via the perspectives of a tank gunner, a female soldier named Cassandra, and the weathered rebel who captures her during a nocturnal assault on an American outpost. Cassandra, an American soldier, is taken captive by Abu Al-Hool and his Mujahedeen soldiers for eight weeks. Each views the events differently. *Spoils* is captivating and sharply analyses the battle, as Van Reet's panoptic switching between foreign hostile parties.

The plot skillfully shifts between terrorist Iraqis and Afghans and American soldiers preparing to defend Iraq. The key characters' recollections, political views, life philosophies, and events leading up to the present are introduced gradually. "Spoils is a relentless and morally intricate novel that documents the deeply human toll of warfare." (Peter Molin, 2020, p. 8).

By deftly utilizing his knowledge, Van Reet creates an immersive sensory experience by vividly depicting the desolate wastelands and the sweltering, confined spaces of vehicles, tanks, and concrete dwellings. The novel *Spoils* examines the notion of anticipation, in which sudden and unanticipated events transpire, likening them to combat scenarios, thereby startling individuals. (Benjamin Busch, 2017, p. 5).

A Multifaceted Portraits of Cassandra's Character

In *Spoils*, Reet seems to echo his Iraq service. He and his main character, Cassandra Wigheard, respectively, enrolled as a tank and Humvee gunner in Iraq. Like Reet, young female Specialist Cassandra Wigheard seeks significance outside of America. Ideological Humvee gunner Cassandra is proud of her service at an obscure roadblock near Baghdad. Van Reet's introductory comments set the tone for Cassandra's character throughout the narrative. He writes:

Cassandra is a dangerous and effective soldier, influenced by childhood trauma and fear of death. Her age is a major advantage, as over-30s don't change much from training. However, only megalomaniacs, suicidal individuals in a latent state, or

adolescents would be inclined to take risks in ground wars due to the accumulation of years of disaster and the adult dread of death. (Reet, 2017, p.3).

Most importantly, Van Reet establishes female-character narrative structures from the start. Unlike most female characters, Cassandra is brave, aggressive, and driven to find and kill her opponent. After graduating from high school, Cassandra enlists in the army in search of a fresh start: "To train to fight, to kill, to prove, to defy the meagre domestic compassions of family and friends." Cassandra fights until another soldier pulls her away after being wounded. Reet modifies the hero by making the genre's protagonist female, opening up new roles for female service members. In his essay *Gender, story, and the Problematics of Role*, David R. Maines explains why he chose a female military protagonist: "Storytelling is a social process with multiple models. Women prioritize community and dependency, while men share skills and intelligence. Men's storytelling style draws attention, while women avoid appearing dumb or humiliated" (Maines, 1996, p.103).

Cassandra's unique mind shows what it is like to be in a dark cell with armed Jihadists, the lone woman for miles, and survival instincts on high alert. Cassandra's account is given in the third person, unlike the American soldiers and Abu al-Hool. It shows Reet's first attempt to write from a woman's point of view: "I had previously attempted to create a character resembling Abu al-Hool and could have understood the reasons behind a 20-year-old male enlisting in a foreign conflict." I felt closer to this character than a woman joining the army. (Lea, 2017, p. 2).

In his portrayal of the soldier protagonist Cassandra recollects a few lines of jogging cadence sung during early-morning physical training sessions at Fort Hood before their deployment “Line a hundred Iraqis against a wall, bet a hundred dollar I couldn't eliminate them all” (Reet, 2017, p.10). Hence, Reet depicts the ambiguity of the U.S. military experience during the Iraq War. Cassandra also says that the soldiers were "told over and over, to the point of indoctrination, that one half of their mission was to free this country and that they would go down in history as the great liberators of the Iraqi people” (p.17). Cassandra sees that her presence on the front lines in Iraq hurts her a lot.

Van Reet's adept portrayal of the sensory experiences of warfare, including the sounds, scents, and physical suffering, creates a strong sense of immersion for readers, making them feel as if they are personally confined within the tank or underground jail cell alongside the fictional characters. Cassandra's perspective provides readers with a glimpse into the wretchedness of soldiers' daily existence. Cassandra consumes Hydroxycut as a means of coping with the stress and unfavorable circumstances she experiences in the military. "It aids in her wakefulness," but, she regrets not ceasing consumption after around two pills. (Reet, 2017, p.10). She holds the belief that time gradually becomes more scarce, losing its fundamental characteristic of moving forward, akin to a delicate strand of gold spun so finely that it loses its distinct hue and becomes transparent. Although the background commotion is intolerable, her thoughts are racing and she has not slept

more than a few hours in the past three days. Despite her best efforts, she is unable to close her eyes or go to sleep. The person's heart is overloaded, similar to a malfunctioning pump that propels blood via fleshy valves. (Reet,2017, p.10).

As she debates the validity of conflict with her Crump friend, Cassandra experiences a void in her heart. The army was able to conquer and eliminate her subtlety and tact. Her previous possession of both, according to her evaluation, was substantial. The harsh conditions of military life have eroded his most admirable traits, bringing out their worst manifestations. To wipe out the enemy is the ultimate goal of any conflict. Van Reet gives a succinct description of Crump's character and his opinions about the Iraqi people during a conversation between Cassandra and Crump. Crump says: Not kidding. Disregard this rubbish heap and its wind and rain. Avoid the dirt kid, Humvee, and moo-juh-huh-deen gibberish. These hajjis must be shown their place. Blow up the World Trade Centre? Nope. Nuke yourself. Please hint. You must punch harder to win a fight. (Reet, 2017, p.12).

Crump remains closed-minded when presented with new ideas. Abu Al-Hool kills him for his erroneous thinking. Cassandra tells him, "It is not a real war. This mess must be different (p12). However, Cassandra understands his perspective. In the lead-up to the invasion, they were often given the impression that half of their goal was to free Iraq and that they would be remembered as the great liberators of Iraqis. However, they got ready to free them by running to cute songs about killing. As a way to calm Crump down, Cassandra gives him Hydroxycut and a horse pill. "Crump

puts a horse pill in his hand." When a sound like a sledgehammer hitting a faraway railway spike comes over, she gives it to him. (Reet, 2017, p.14).

Cassandra, a prominent figure in "Spoils" by Brian Van Reet, personifies the sense of disappointment and ethical intricacies that some soldiers encountered during the Iraq War. Below is a comprehensive analysis of Cassandra's character

Cassandra begins the novel as a committed and idealistic soldier, driven by a sense of duty and patriotism: "She works equally well on most personality types. The main thing, that makes Cassandra good at soldering, is simply her age" (Reet, 2017, p.3).

However, as the narrative progresses, she becomes increasingly disillusioned with the mission and the conduct of the war. She witnesses atrocities committed by both sides, grapples with the loss of innocent lives, and confronts the moral ambiguity of her actions. This disillusionment reflects a broader critique of the Iraq War and the challenges faced by soldiers tasked with carrying out questionable orders in a morally ambiguous environment.

The novel explores the psychological damage and personal growth of Cassandra as she grapples with the emotional consequences of war and the traumatic experiences she endures in combat. She experiences feelings of guilt, nightmares, and survivor's guilt, as she wrestles with the burden of her acts and the senselessness of the fight: "Hold your fire. Don't shoot the kid. It's not a good sign, he was able to sneak through their lines in the first place" (Reet, 2017, p.9). Despite the difficulties she faces, Cassandra experiences substantial personal development, ultimately facing

her moral principles and discovering a feeling of redemption via acts of kindness and resistance against the dehumanizing consequences of war. Cassandra exhibits extraordinary resilience and unwavering will to endure and survive, even in the face of daunting challenges and profound trauma. Her adeptness at acclimating to difficult conditions, forming partnerships with unforeseen collaborators, and persisting amid hardship demonstrates the inherent resilience and determination of the human spirit, even in the most desperate circumstances.

Cassandra struggled with concerns of gender and identity in addition to the challenges she faced as a female soldier serving in a predominately male environment. However, although she is subjected to harassment and discrimination at the hands of her male peers, she refuses to be defined by conventional gender norms or expectations: “They dragged me off to one side. Galvan the other. I sat with my head in my hands, nose snotty and bloody, and all that mixing with the tears” (171). Through her tenacity and commitment, Cassandra challenges the prejudices that exist around women serving in the military and brings to light the varied experiences that soldiers have while serving on the front lines. Cassandra experiences a profound process of self-discovery and personal growth throughout the novel. By engaging in various experiences and engaging with different individuals, she acquires a more profound comprehension of her own identity, her principles, and her role in the world. The transformation of Cassandra, from an enthusiastic soldier to a

disillusioned survivor, underscores the enormous influence of war on individual identity.

Cassandra exhibits complexity and ambiguity, making it challenging to categorize her as either a hero or an anti-hero due to her multi-dimensional nature. She wrestles with contradictory emotions, impulses, and loyalties, leading to morally ambiguous choices that mirror the intricacies of human behaviour during times of conflict:

By then everyone in it was dead. The woman we'd seen. The little girl she'd been carrying, who looked too skinny, like she'd been about to die of starvation before we killed her. The man driving was still buckled into the front seat. (170)

Van Reet skillfully depicts Cassandra with both compassion and subtlety, enabling readers to understand and relate to her challenges, while also seeing her imperfections and inconsistencies.

The narrative perspective and voice of Cassandra provide readers with a unique viewpoint through which they may witness the harsh realities of war. This perspective offers valuable insights into the physical and psychological hardships that troops suffer while on the battlefield. Van Reet skillfully portrays Cassandra's voice with genuineness and profound emotional complexity, effectively conveying the intense rawness of her encounters and internal conflicts.

Cassandra's character serves as a means to express social commentary and criticize the institutional structures present in the military. The author's encounters shed light

on matters such as the depersonalizing consequences of military instruction, the widespread occurrence of sexual harassment and bias, and the obstacles encountered by women in combat positions. Van Reet illuminates deeper structural flaws within the military and society as a whole by presenting them from Cassandra's point of view:

man-hours and untold millions of dollars and matériel to the cause: they barge into homes, stores, and mosques, harassing travellers on the roads, disrupting traffic into kilometres of angry gridlock. (Reet, 2017, p.178)

Cassandra's character engages in a deep examination of moral principles and personal sense of right and wrong throughout the story. She grapples with the ethical ramifications of her acts in combat, striving to harmonize her feeling of obligation with her moral principles. The internal turmoil experienced by Cassandra mirrors the overarching themes of moral ambiguity and the gradual loss of moral clarity within the setting of warfare, "Forget camping by this trash heap all fucking night in the wind and rain. We got to start showing these hajjis who's boss" (P.12)

Overall, the figure of Cassandra in "Spoils" is a nuanced and diverse representation of the psychological, moral, and existential difficulties encountered by soldiers throughout the Iraq War. Van Reet's narrative delves into themes of disillusionment, perseverance, morality, and identity, providing readers with a

thought-provoking examination of the tremendous human toll of war and the continuing strength of the human spirit.

5. Conclusion

Ultimately, the examination of Cassandra's persona in "Spoils" by Brian Van Reet offers a deep investigation of the intricacies of warfare, ethics, and individual development. The story provides unique insights into the psychological and moral issues encountered by soldiers during the Iraq War, as depicted via Cassandra's experiences. Cassandra's character functions as a tool for the author to analyse institutional frameworks, examine the influence of war on personal identity, and illuminate the challenges encountered by female troops in a largely male setting. Van Reet adeptly depicts Cassandra's capacity for endurance, ethical ambivalence, and individual development, so constructing a nuanced and intellectually stimulating portrayal of the profound impact of warfare on humanity and the enduring fortitude of the human psyche. This study is a comprehensive exploration of the complex and diverse aspects of war and its significant effects on humans.

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