

## **Battling Binaries: The Psychosocial Endurance of Gender Constructs in West Asian War Fiction**

**Manisha Bhadran**

Ph.D. Research Scholar

Department of English

University of Hyderabad

Mail ID: manisha.rbhadran@gmail.com

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**Abstract:** The archetypes of the heroic soldier and the caring mother, which dominate the social imaginary of war, reflect the essentially gendered nature of war discourse. However, violent masculinity and gentle femininity, though essential to the war discourse, are not biological qualities but cultural constructions. The hegemonic “war story,” as Miriam Cooke refers to it, is built on these binaries of masculinity/femininity, civilian/combatant, home/front, etc. However, in postcolonial wars, these binaries are complicated by both the inclusion of women as combatants and the technological advancements that enable the pervasion of war into homes, endangering civilians just as much as combatants. In this article, I will examine how select contemporary West Asian fictional narratives depict the war experience of gendered subjects in occupied or war-torn territories like Iraq and Palestine. Exploring these texts in the light of war studies conducted by Miriam Cooke and Joshua S. Goldstein reveals that, despite the changing face of the new wars and the subversion of gender binaries, psycho-social impacts of conventional gender roles persist. Men depicted in the selected fictional texts continue to bear the pressure to protect and to resist violence using violence. Women’s changing roles in the new wars expose them to similar violence as combatants, but the lack of social recognition metes out a double jeopardy, whereby they are survivors of war’s violence yet are denied the honour or aftercare received by male combatants of war.

**Keywords:** War, Gender, Civilian / Combatant, Home / Front, West Asia

The archetypes of the heroic soldier and the caring mother, which conventionally dominate the cultural narratives on war, exemplify the essentially gendered nature of war discourse. War is the most gender-segregated activity after the biological process of reproduction (Cooke and Woollacott ix). Joshua S. Goldstein, in his work titled *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa*, observes that, notwithstanding the myth of female Amazonian warriors and the rise of female enlistment in some militaries, the connection between war and gender is stable across cultures and through time: men form the bulk of the combatants while women perform varying roles as civilians (Goldstein 9).

The near-universal gender segregation in war, however, does not emanate from an inherent propensity for aggression in males and peaceful co-existence in females. Goldstein, through extensive analysis, ascribes the gendered structure of war partly to the biological differences of size and strength and, more importantly, to the cultural meanings ascribed to masculinity and femininity (406). As Laura Sjoberg writes:

...(M)embership in a biological sex category brings with it a host of social characteristics, constraints and meanings beyond the physical composition of the sexed body... [including] expectations about how people act, what jobs they will hold, what activities they can participate in, what resources they have access to and what roles they will play in war and conflict. (175)

The characteristics associated with masculinity and femininity—such as toughness and bravery for men and gentleness and peacefulness for women—are not inherent qualities but rather are culturally constructed. The construction of masculinity in war requires, as its Other, the idea of femininity (Enloe xiii). Miriam Cooke, in *Women and the War Story*, elaborates on this construction of masculinity in opposition to femininity when she writes, “... (I)t is not that men are [biologically] aggressive, courageous, and heroic... but rather that, if they wish to be clear about an identity that will distance them from the dreaded feminine, they must strive to be aggressive, courageous, and heroic” (295).

The hegemonic and conventional “war story”, as Cooke refers to it, is built on these binaries of masculinity/femininity, civilian/combatant, home/front, etc. However, in the “postcolonial wars” (Cooke 293) or “new wars” (Chinkin and Kaldor 167), these binaries are complicated by both the inclusion of women as combatants and the technological advancements that enable the pervasion of war into homes, endangering civilians just as

much as combatants. While, formerly, women's role was confined to that of the Other, in postcolonial wars, women are combatants, targets, survivors, etc. (Cooke 295).

In these new wars, with the subversion of such dyadic constructions, including masculine and feminine war roles, do the gender identities of individuals continue to inform their individual war stories? In this article, I will examine how contemporary West Asian war fiction depicts the war experience of gendered subjects in occupied or war-torn territories. How is the war story of a character shaped by the constructed meanings of masculinity and femininity? How do these meanings also shape their responses to the conditions of war? How does the breakdown of the everyday code of gendered conduct during war, as depicted in fiction, alter the existing constructions of masculinity and femininity? This article will attempt to answer these questions through a reading of the depiction of war and gender in novels like *The Sirens of Baghdad* by Yasmina Khadra and *Mornings in Jenin* by Susan Abulhawa.

*The Sirens in Baghdad*, set in the context of the United States' occupation of Iraq in 2003, portrays a young unnamed Iraqi man's transformation from a timid student to a radical insurgent following the humiliation faced by his family at the hands of the invading soldiers. *Mornings in Jenin* follows the Abulheja family over four generations, tracing their eviction from Palestine in 1948 and the subsequent violence experienced as refugees. Both the novels capture the physical and psychological violence experienced in the backdrop of conflict and occupation in West Asia.

Armed resistance or participation in war has historically largely been a man's domain. Novels like *Mornings in Jenin* and *The Sirens of Baghdad* present an exclusively male population taking part in armed resistance and suffering its violence. Goldstein comments: "(C)ultures mo[u]ld males into warriors by attaching to "manhood" or "masculinity" those qualities that make good warriors" (252). He adds: "Culture after culture features rites of passage from boyhood to manhood. Only select men can achieve "manhood," and it must be won individually... (T)he passages to manhood are surprisingly similar across cultures in terms of passing harsh tests bravely" (264). In the case of male children growing up in occupied Palestine in *Mornings in Jenin*, braving Israeli tanks and bullets by hurling stones at them is a rite they participate in. Abulhawa writes:

But they threw rocks at Israeli tanks anyway, because boys will be boys and the young shall never respect the fragile breath holding them to life. They did it not for the sake of freedom, for such a concept was too precarious. They did it out of peer pressure, for the nature of small boys that attracts them to the adventures and trials of men. (199)

The boys' participation in acts of violence not only marks their attraction to the adventures of men, as Abulhawa describes it, but also becomes part of their accession to manhood. Zorica Mrsevic argues that such encouragement of acts of "aggressive masculinity" in boys in patriarchal societies makes it easier for them to transition to perpetrators of violence, whether within or outside the context of war (44).

In societies where participation in violent forms of resistance is the test of manhood, failing to participate causes social disapprobation. "Shame is the glue that holds the man-making process together," observes Goldstein (269). The process of shaming men who fail to meet the expectations associated with masculinity includes the derogatory use of words like "sissy" and "faggot." Thus, masculinity is not constructed solely in opposition to femininity, but it is also a heterosexual masculinity set in opposition to the homosexual man. Khadra presents as a case in point Omar the Corporal who is shamed for his dual failure to meet the demands of masculinity – by deserting the resistance movement as well as by being a homosexual. Omar serves the Iraqi military as a cook, but the unit which he was a part of deserts in fear of the approaching US troops. Omar is described as a man who "drown(s) his grief and shame in adulterated wine... [having] lost his self-respect" (Khadra 39). Omar is hated by most of the village. His shame becomes complete when he is discovered to be a homosexual, inviting further ridicule from the heteronormative society.

Cooke observes that, in postcolonial wars, technological advancements facilitate the entry of war into the home front. Although in violation of international humanitarian laws, these new wars endanger the civilian as well as the combatant (Chinkin and Kaldor 181). When civilians, including female civilians, become embroiled in war just as much as the male combatants, the conventional gendered roles of man as protector and woman as protected are complicated. As women's role in the war shifts from that of the Other – the archetypal mother who is away from the war zone – into that of equal partners of men in the war experience, the

myth of the archetypal heroic soldier also gets shaken. These archetypes and gender roles are problematized leading to a crisis of gender. Cooke writes:

Postcolonial war space holds increasing numbers of women, as targets of bombs and rapes, as guerrillas, as subjects of debates about the gendering of the military, of combat and of war stories... Their embodied presence complicates the persistence of masculinity-reinforcing speech and behavio(u)rs. As women are compelled to experience war more or less equally with men... [this makes] a mockery of such notions as Defender and Defended. (Cooke, *Women and the War Story* 132)

In other words, as women take up more conventionally masculine roles, the conventional masculine roles are brought to question, engendering a crisis of masculinity. In the ensuing paragraphs, I will examine how the masculine role of defender is depicted in West Asian war fiction – whether it is threatened by the equal participation of women in war or whether the psychosocial pressures of masculinity persist even in the new wars.

Hasan and Dalia in *Mornings in Jenin* are parents to two boys at the time of their forced eviction from their land by the Israeli army, during which the younger of the boys, Ismael, is stolen by a childless Israeli soldier. While Dalia is consumed by agony, Hasan is haunted by inadequacy. Abulhawa writes: “But not even sleep could assuage the inadequacy he [Hasan] felt. He had failed to protect his family. He could not provide assurance, nor could he bring Ismael back” (33). Although it was from Dalia’s arms that Ismael was wrenched away by the soldier, the guilt for the inability to protect Ismael is borne by Hasan, for it is the culturally ascribed role of a man to protect the women and children in his family. Contrary to Cooke’s argument that the equal and embodied presence of women shouldering war’s horrors with men causes men to question their conventional role as “defender”, it may be observed that, in Hasan’s case, the psychosocial pressures to protect persist. The crisis of masculinity engendered here is not from a problematization of gendered dyads owing to the presence of women, as proposed by Cooke, but from the inability to uphold his conventional role as man, an idea which persists in spite of women sharing in the war experience. Even the shared experience of a traumatic incident such as the loss of a son is, as seen, gendered and different for both the parents.

Before Hasan's death, he entrusts his older son Yousef with the responsibility of taking care of Amal, his sister, who was born in the refugee camp. In the throes of Israeli occupation, Yousef laments his inability to shoulder the responsibility. He writes to Amal:

...Baba made me promise to take care of you if anything ever happened to him.

... I don't know how to keep my promise to him. If I stay here, these Israelis will eventually kill me.

...

It breaks my heart that I cannot make for you the life Baba wanted us to have.  
(Abulhawa 99)

That Yousef's torment and guilt emanate from the responsibility to take care of his family bequeathed to him as a man makes it a quintessentially gendered experience.

*The Sirens of Baghdad* also presents evidence of the psychological pressure on men to defend their families from the precarity engendered by occupation, war and genocide. When the occupying American forces barge into the protagonist's house, the protagonist unwittingly witnesses the nudity of his father. The protagonist says: "I found myself hating my arms, which seemed grotesque, translucent, ugly, the symbols of my *impotence*; hating my eyes, which refused to turn away and pleaded for blindness; hating my mother's screams, which discredited me" (Khadra 102, emphasis added). The word "impotence" is an indication of the affront to his masculinity caused by the dishonour of his family to which he is a powerless witness.

Owing to the hierarchy and reverence embedded in the structure of the Bedouin society, the father realizes the impact of his own humiliation on the son. The protagonist says: "At that very instant, we [the father and the protagonist] already knew that we were looking at each other for the last time," evidencing that the father instantly recognizes his son's need to avenge his dishonour (Khadra 102). Similarly, the protagonist's sister Bahia also accepts his sense of responsibility to uphold the honour of the family and does not dissuade him from leaving to join the resistance. He says, "Bahia was a daughter of her tribe. In the ancestral tradition, hono(u)r was supposed to be the domain of men, but even so, she knew how to recognize it and require it" (Khadra 108). The existing patriarchal familial structure of occupied societies, along with its gender roles and the meanings ascribed to gendered entities,

therefore affects the very experience of violence and violations and bequeath the responsibility for retaliation to men. Discussing the changing role of women in the new wars, Cooke says:

In nuclear age wars the women and the children—whom the [hegemonic] War Story had described as at home and safe because defended by their men at the front—are increasingly acknowledged to be attractive military targets. They are not being protected. Their men cannot protect them. (*Women and the War Story* 38)

Although the male characters depicted in West Asian war fiction continue to bear the pressure to uphold the traditional role of the defender, they find themselves unable to protect their families once the war infiltrates their homes. Contrary to theorists' claims that men in new wars are unsure of their roles, the novels depict a different experience. These men face a double bind: they continue to believe it is their duty to protect, yet they are unable to do so when the war reaches their homes, engendering the crisis of masculinity as discussed.

The female characters in the war zone are shown to evolve from the conventional role of the defended to take up the challenges posed by the new wars that invade their spaces. In *Mornings in Jenin*, there is a visible difference in the role of women in the presence of menfolk and in their absence during war. During the early years of Israeli occupation, when the refugee camps are marked by relative peace as they lie in wait for international deliberations, the woman's role is largely conventional and gendered. Virginia Woolf's observation that men fought the world's battles and brought home victories and accomplishments while women have "borne and bred and washed and taught" is underscored here (Woolf 121). Hanna Diamond, in her study of gender roles during the Second World War, quotes one of her interviewees who said:

In my parents' house my father was an official Communist Resistance worker. ...But it cannot be said that my mother was not involved in Resistance activities. Who used to get up in the morning to take care of the Resistance worker who was to leave before sunrise? Who used to darn socks and do the washing for the Resistance worker who was sleeping? ... And who would be at home when the police called during an alert? I think my mother was as involved in Resistance activities as my father. (qtd. in Diamond 98)

Abulhawa, in *Mornings in Jenin*, portrays how the women scrub and clean so that the men may make history. Yehya, the patriarch of the Abulheja family, ousted from their ancestral home and condemned to live in the refugee camps, decides to embark on a defiant journey to set foot on his land that he has been exiled from. Before the journey, he requests his daughter-in-law to whiten his clothes for him:

One early November morning in 1953, he handed some clothes to Dalia.

“*Ya binti* [“my daughter”],” Yehya said, “will you make these as white as they can be?”

Dalia took the clothes and pushed them in the soapy water. Leaning into the wash bucket to scrub, she lifted her head, a few strands of hair escaping from her scarf, and watched her father-in-law walk away. (Abulhawa 39)

Wearing the clothes scrubbed clean by Dalia, Yehya defies fear and the armed Israeli soldiers, makes a victorious journey to his land and his home, and returns a hero with olives from his orchards. Here, the act of resistance, the making of history, is the task of the man, while the woman, as Woolf states, simply facilitates the same. However, in the absence of the woman who cooks, cleans and takes care of the young ones, men’s acts of resistance would be weighed down by the hurdles of household chores.

If, as Cooke argues, women are claiming their right to describe the variety of roles they have donned during war as “combat,” can Dalia’s scrubbing of Yehya’s clothes for his defiant journey be a mark of her resistance against Israeli occupation? Cooke’s argument is mirrored in Abulhawa’s description of Dalia as “a stout woman, imposing and severe, who *soldiered* all day at cleaning, cooking, baking, and embroidering thobes” (Abulhawa 49, emphasis added). While examining Dalia’s spirit of anti-colonial resistance and her contribution to the resistance movement in invisible ways, it must also be observed that she was confined by the modes of conduct prescribed for women by the Palestinian society, which prevented her from engaging in a socially visible form of resistance.

In the absence of men, however, the role played by women like Dalia stretches far beyond household chores. As Beverly Allen observes in the context of the then-ongoing Bosnian war: “The war is providing occasions for increased numbers of women to take on more traditionally masculine roles...” (27). In *Mornings in Jenin*, when the men in Dalia’s family arm themselves and set out to engage in combat with the Israeli forces, the women



who are left behind must make strategic moves to defend themselves and their children. The first time this happens, Abulhawa says: “Mama [Dalia], an experienced victim of war, is gathering supplies and mapping out hiding places with other women” (83). Dalia guides her daughter Amal and her friend Huda into a hole in the kitchen floor and covers them with a lid to protect them from the incessant bombing (Abulhawa 58). After the war, Amal says:

Mama’s *bravery* during the war would later be invoked as the essence of a fellaha’s [“peasant woman’s”] *fortitude*. She refused to flee... Everyone agreed that when it mattered, she showed herself to be truly *courageous*. “A lot of us just talked big, but we ran for our lives while Um Yousef [Dalia] was true to her word. She said she would not let the Jews take away the only home her daughter knew,” is what people said about Mama after the war.

Mama had stayed for me...

... I saw her as the woman who had risked her life to *protect* me from what she had once endured. (Abulhawa 72, emphasis added)

When read in the light of Cooke’s rejection of the binaries of home and the front, civilian and combatant, and men’s and women’s spaces, this episode of Dalia’s bravery exemplifies such a blurring of boundaries. Bombs rain on civilian housing areas, bringing the war front to the home, and female civilians like Dalia exude a male combatant’s celebrated qualities of courage, fortitude, proactivity and a commitment to protect one’s dependents at the cost of his own life. Even in her non-violent resistance and resilience, the female civilian adopts the characteristics of a conventionally male combatant.

In the case of Dalia, the trauma she undergoes through the days of shelling in and around the refugee camp is akin to the shell shock commonly experienced by combatants on the war front. Towards the end of the war, when Amal climbs out of the hole in the kitchen, she says: “I saw Mama [Dalia]. She was sitting on the ground, her eyes distant and uninhabited. She seemed not to notice when soldiers pulled up in their trucks” (Abulhawa 71). Soon after, Dalia and the children are taken to a treatment tent, where, Amal says:

She [Dalia] sat motionless in a corner, just as I had seen her sitting on the ground when I had stood up in the kitchen hole. I stopped. Her spacious empty eyes did not see me standing before her. She seemed to see nothing.

“Mama.” I touched her lightly, but she did not respond. I put my face in front of hers, but her eyes looked through me. (Abulhawa 73)

Dalia’s blank, unfocused, and unseeing gaze can be equated with “the thousand yard stare” characteristic of combatants in shell shock, a form of post-traumatic stress disorder caused by war. She soon descends irrecoverably into the abyss of her own mind and remains a shadow of herself until her release in the form of death. Dalia’s experience of and participation in war from within the four walls of her home is, therefore, in spirit and in impact, similar to that of a combatant on the battlefield.

Another example of gendered trauma in *Mornings in Jenin* can be found in separate incidents involving two gunshots, one that hits Amal as she runs homeward through occupied Palestine and the other that hits Yousef as he tries to rescue a wounded comrade while taking part in armed resistance against the Israeli army. While both their experiences are part of the extreme corporeal vulnerability caused by occupation and war, respectively, participation in war is an act that willfully heightens that vulnerability for a political cause and Yousef is hailed as a hero for the same. Amal says: “That story, witnessed by Yousef’s subsequent limp, became legend in Jenin, where I was still recovering from my own bullet wound” (Abulhawa 101). No heroic value is ascribed to the wounds that Amal bears on her body as a non-combatant. After the incident, Amal loses confidence in herself owing to the scars and disfiguration caused by the bullet injury. Amal says:

I was closing in on fourteen with a disfigured body...

...

... At night, for self punishment and to sustain the momentum of my scholastic solitude, I fingered the rutted flesh of my abdomen, a reminder that I was damaged goods no boy would want. (Abulhawa 104)

In spite of women’s direct involvement in wars, the mapping of escape routes, the experience of shell-shock and bullet injuries, their status is not acknowledged as similar to combatants. Mickiela Montoya, a female US war veteran, says: “I was in Iraq getting bombed and shot at, but people won’t even listen when I say I was at war because I’m a female” (qtd. in Benedict). In the above examples, the lack of recognition of women as even survivors of the first-hand violence of war condemns Dalia and Amal to further suffering. Dalia receives no medical attention for shell-shock and continues to wither away until her death, as she is not

recognized as a survivor of war. Amal believes her bullet wounds render her unwanted as, unlike the injuries of men, her scars are not celebrated as trophies of her bravery. Even in the new wars, with the blurring of binaries like combatant/civilian, home/front, etc., the privileging of the discourse of “men as warrior” (Ryan 5) persists and women’s experiences of war lack adequate recognition. This leads to women being doubly oppressed – by the violence of war borne on their bodies as bullet wounds and shell shocks, and also by the ensuing lack of recognition and attention as survivors of the violence of war.

In spite of the changing face of the new wars, psycho-social impacts of conventional gender roles persist. Men depicted in the selected fictional texts continue to bear the pressure to protect, to uphold the honour of their families, and to resist violence using violence. Women’s changing roles in the new wars expose them to similar violence as male combatants, but the lack of social recognition causes a form of double jeopardy, whereby women are survivors of violence yet are denied the honour or aftercare received by male survivors of war.

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**Bionote:** Manisha Bhadran is a Ph.D. student at the Department of English, University of Hyderabad, studying human rights questions in contemporary West Asian war fiction. Previously, she worked as Assistant Professor of English at Rajagiri School of Engineering and Technology, Kochi. She completed her postgraduate studies at the English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, and also earned an MPhil for her research on gendered bodies and the Indian Penal Code. She has presented her research findings at institutes of international repute including the University of Oxford and the University of George Washington. Her research interests include women's studies, human rights, and Indian criminal law.