

# Psychological Effects of War on Women in Iraq: An Analysis in the Light of Dunya Mikhail's Poem "The Cup"

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## Abstract

In "The Cup," Dunya Mikhail, the Iraqi- American poet, who is the witness of two wars herself, describes war as its recurring theme as it has touched her life and thematic interests. The poem is about a widow of a soldier who calls his spirit through an Ouija Board with a cup that moves to answer questions, asked by the widow, on behalf of the spirit of the martyred soldier. The aim of the paper is to analyze the effects of war on Iraqi women through analyzing the themes of war in the poem. The paper will also analyze the mental perplexities of those women who lose their loved ones in war and afterward suffer from not only physical but also mental violence, trauma, and exile. The paper will conclude the psychological effects of war on Iraqi women in general and widows in particular in the light of the poem "The Cup."

**Keywords:** Psychological effects, war, women in Iraq, Dunya Mikhail, The Cup,

**CJAR**

Accepted 15 April 2020  
Published 30 April 2020  
DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.3875665



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**Introduction:**

In the poem, "The Cup" widow of a soldier calls his spirit through an Ouija Board using a cup that moves on that board which has various answers and numbers written on it. The cup moves to answer the questions asked by the widow on behalf of the spirit of the martyred soldier. The cup tells the lady that the soldier could not help being killed as he was shot from behind. She desperately asks that what possibly she could do with the loneliness and the cup does not move. This means the spirit either does not want to answer or has no answer to that. The cup further tells that the husband loves her but she cannot keep him there and that their life will change in 1996 but at present, they should escape. The Cup does not answer to the questions regarding where to escape and about possibilities of more catastrophes. The wife asks about his will but the cup does not move again. To this, the lady says goodbye to her husband's spirit. She then calls her son playing outside with a helmet that belonged to his father. The helmet is full of holes.

**Review of Related Literature:**

In psychiatric history, wars have played an important role always. World wars have had such psychological impacts that led to notable works in the field of psychology and psychiatry e.g. suitability for army recruitment. The National Institute of Mental Health in the USA was also set up as a result of the war. Psychological symptoms among officers and soldiers, psychiatric reactions to stress, etc. are visible after wars. Numberless books and other documents have been written on the relationships and effects of war on mental health. Although WW II was the last world war and there have not been any world wars since then, there have been a number of wars and conflicts throughout the last seven or eight decades (Murthy & Lakshminarayana, 2006).

War brings catastrophic effects on the physical health and wellbeing of a nation and affects mental health also. Conflict situations have proved to be more disastrous resulting in mortality and disability than a disease that causes mortality. A nation that experiences war also experiences destructions to its various communities and families (Amir, 2020; Lediaev, n.d.; Hardy, n.d.). A war-stricken nation is damaged with respect to the development of its social and economic fabric apart as war brings physical and psychological harm to nations. Death is not the only result of war but psychosocial illness is also one of the numerous results of war. According to estimation by WHO, in situations of armed conflicts, 10% of people have serious mental health problems as a result of psychological trauma, and another 10% experience inability to function effectively. The most common conditions that result from war or armed conflicts are depression, anxiety, insomnia, back and stomach aches, etc. (Lediaev, n.d.; Murthy & Lakshminarayana, 2006; Puttik, 2015).

Epidemiologic research with respect to the war trauma consequences shows that women have poorer mental health than others in a population. The psychological consequences of war on women are many. In these consequences, some very common are anxiety, depression, unstable emotions, mental disturbance, changes in personality, behavior and sleep pattern, lack of energy, and sexual dysfunction (Holtz, 1998). Women also experience fear, betrayal, and guilt, stresses, racial discrimination, or lack of personal control in the new settings (Amir, 2020, Klaric et al., 2007). It is however different from culture to culture how these symptoms and experiences are interpreted with respect to severity and the coping strategies (Kastrup, 2006; Mckey, 1998). Women during war witness horrible scenes and also experience the situations in which there are direct threats or loss to their or their family members' lives. Such traumatic events affect their interpersonal relationships, and



result in everyday stress, especially if war or armed conflict persists over a longer period of time (Marjorie et al., 2006). Women experience many postwar stressors which include changes in their health, profession, family, and social life. Separation, illness, or death of a dear one in family or friends, and exhausting of the resources together with the feeling of reduced social support also disturb women psychologically (Amir, 2020). Likewise, phobias and depression are the most frequent psychiatric disorders experienced by women (Klaric et al., 2007; Kastrup, 2006; Nadjie, & Pratt, 2006; Nadjie, 2007).

If deeply analyzed, psychological effects of Iraqi war can clearly be noticed through the situations depicted by media who continuously report situations and expressions like “constant fear,” “toll on .. mental health,” “War trauma,” “War is hell,” “War is terrible,” “.. generation .. knowing only war” (Al-Saedi et al., 2020; Murthy & Lakshminarayana, 2006; Nadjie, & Pratt, 2006; Nadjie, 2007). Iraq has been suffering from the wars throughout history<sup>1</sup> that have had tragic impacts in general on the health of the people of Iraq. Studies on the impact on mental health have also reported “depressive morbidity” due to poor social support and deteriorated mental health of the population due to “occupation by foreign forces” and “the occurrence of .. psychological symptoms and syndromes” (Roth, 2005; Bassil, 2012; Mckey, 1998; Al-Saedi et al., 2020).

Dunya Mikhail has broadly written on experiences of Iraqi women related to war. This is although a deviation from the Iraqi war literature which mostly focuses on the depiction of “the stereotypical Iraqi,” who is superhumanly patriotic and faithful to his country. The traditional Iraqi war literature according to Mikhail was mostly published inside Iraq. This literature which was especially published during the war between Iran and Iraq depicted an Iraqi soldier as “superman.” According to her, limited literature is found that considers and depicts an Iraqi soldier as human. The perceiving of war according to her, by women, is very different from men principally because of male Iraqi writers which also had been on the battlefield. Therefore, for them, war meant to be killed or kill other men instead (Montagne, 2013; Cooke, 1994).

On the other hand like a lady, she observed war in streets and in weeping mothers and frightened bird holes in walls and helmets of soldiers. Women experience war as civilians. Mikhail abandons and deviates from the genre of war poetry which takes war as an affair of masculinity where men are heroes or soldiers and they fight and ultimately die as protectors or defenders. She explains that women are also indulged in war as they strive to survive and struggle against the torments of separation from their loved ones. Women are engaged in efforts of survival on the home front and trying to recover to normalcy despite the war losses fragmentations. Mikhail’s women actively collect the bones of their martyred loved ones, try to deal with the separation from family members or friends, and find a means for their families which could help them to survive against the war. In Mikhail’s poems, the women are not merely the bystanders, but function as equals to the men. They are not merely as passive beings awaiting to be rescued (Amir, 2020; Montagne, 2013; Cooke, 1994).

Furthermore, Mikhail has given Iraqi women a voice through her poetry by protesting their limited role in Iraqi war literature. When she depicts women who criticize the war, defragment war destructions, and recollect the fragmentation produced by war, she is set apart from other female Iraqi authors or poets. She protests war and allows her women to recollect the pieces of a fragmented life wither by men or by their wars (Mikhail, 2013; Montagne, 2013).

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<sup>1</sup> a series of coups in the 1960s, the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), the anti-Kurdish Al-Anfal campaign within the country (1986-1989), the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait resulting in the Gulf war (1991), and the conflict starting in 2003.



Her poems portray protesting mothers, lovers, sisters, and daughters. These women protest the brutality of war and its injustice. Some of the women protest the war, directly or indirectly, by criticizing and condemning the institutions and the leaders who promote war e.g. in “Bag of Bones,” “The War Works Hard,” “Inanna,” “An Urgent Call,” and “To Any Other Place.” Other women recollect the fragmentation which is resulted from the war such as in “Bag of Bones,” “The Prisoner,” “Inanna,” and “To Any Other Place” through mental and physical recollection. In this way, they are protesting the destructions caused by the war thus refusing its power over them and their loved ones. Women also protest the destruction of war through the recollection of their fragmented memories and lives. In this way, they manage to survive and try to find a spark of optimism when it is dark everywhere around unleashed by war. They have the ability to survive and re-establish their lives despite the presence of war (Lamees, 2008). On the other hand, literature of previous decades has demonstrated that women are increasingly dependable when handling such circumstances (Dar & Bhatt, 2020).

### **Major Psychological impacts depicted in “The Cup”:**

The poem can rightly be said one of Dunia Mikhail’s that poems which have depicted many psychological effects that the Iraq war left on the women. “They say you survive the war but the war also survives is your memory. It is the true survivor amongst you.” Says Dunya Mikhail in an interview and describes many themes as they haunt women suffering from the casualties of war in the poem “The Cup.” It is also among those poems of Mikhail which protest against the war in the form of women’s refusal to accept the fragmentation caused by the war. The Cup indicates that because women cannot physically protest the war, therefore they mentally defragment the changes which have been inflicted on them by the war. There may be a refusal to the mere comprehension of war and its losses. The separation between them and their men is denied through “The Cup” lady (Lamees, 2008) because she simply and completely refuses to accept that her husband has been martyred in the war.

The lady in the poem uses a coffee cup on a Ouija board to communicate with the spirit of her dead husband, despite knowing that her husband is dead. She asks him, “Are you truly my husband, the martyr?” This means that she persists in questioning the spirit of why he had left her so early. Questions about his death and escape show that this lady is trying to make herself actually believe and convince herself about the death of her husband. She is, in fact, unable to accept her death and this is a sign of her inability to accept the war which led to his martyrdom (Lamees, 2008).

However, despite the answers from her husband’s spirit which are related to how he was killed, she asks whether she can make him stay with her or she can go with him. She does not understand why she has to be separated from her husband. Through these questions, it is evident that the woman refuses war-led separation between her and her beloved husband. She is although asking futile questions but her insistence shows that she is either unable or does not want to recognize this separation. However, the only option left to her to connect to her husband is a belief in supernaturalism escaping from the hard realities that war has brought to her. “Are you the spirit of my husband?”

She depicts that women experience uncertainty about the future and doubts in relationships as a result of the war. Through its salient features of bombings, shootings, mass graves, and combats, the war is ‘intricately linked’ with violence which as the central activity of war, ‘connected with loss and destruction.’ This makes the future unpredictable and uncertain. Despite knowing that her husband is dead, she includes him in her future. She asks the spirit, “Will our lives change?”, “Where is to escape?”, “Will we know more catastrophes?” this clearly shows that physical, psychological, and biological damages which are done by



Iraqi war have resulted in a sense of futility and hopelessness in Iraqi women's mind. War has interrupted their basic human need of having their loved ones around. The Lady's capacity of imagining prosperity or a better future is also destroyed. She is concerned with a matter of mere survival and does not contemplate anything else.

The spirit ceases to answer after a number of questions. When the lady finds this she surrenders to the silence of the spirit and calls her son who is playing in the garden holding his father's helmet. He is catching insects with that helmet while the helmet full of 40 holes. Through the image of the helmet full of holes in the last line of the poem, it is obvious that the husband is dead. His death is certain and undeniable. Her son is catching insects in his father's helmet, and the helmet has bullet holes, this is tangible evidence of the death. The possession of helmet by the family also confirms that the wife knows about his death and the conversation with the spirit only reflects her refusal to accept this reality.

The lady in "The Cup" is a depiction of loss which was endured by the Iraqi mothers and wives during and after the war. Their trauma is depicted by asking too many questions and leaving the conversation abruptly. 'If the definition of violence is force wielded to cause injury, the poem defines trauma as clearly identified injury made by violence.' Trauma in 'The Cup' is depicted through the guilt and memories of violence that haunts the lady just as it haunts 'soldiers, exiles, and civilians.' The traumatic experiences depicted in the poem are well understood through uncertainty present is the questions like, "Will our lives change?", "Where is to escape?", "Will we know more catastrophes?", "Are you tired of my questions?" and "Do you love me?" etc. and after all these questions abruptly ending the conversation turning the cup upside down and blowing off the candle and calling the spirit 'go in peace' as if the one who has left for abode is in peace and the left behind are in traumatic trouble. Additionally, she does not care or even pays heed to the cup when it makes movements to the left. She refuses the negative indication of her question "Can I come with you?" This shows that the lady is faced with the loss, but, according to her, if she does not accept the reality she would be able to remain in contact with her husband. Here in this way, she is rendering war's powers futile.

Answers to all these questions show that either there is no reply to such traumatic questions or a long-awaited time is yet to come. The poem is purposefully abstract on several levels. It speaks to collective trauma and suffering rather than dealing with individual cases such as questions of more catastrophes and changes in the situation are relevant to not only an individual family but are deeply connected to the Iraqi nation as a whole. 'The Cup' hints at the trauma but does not delve deeper into a description of it. It presents its case in a fragmentary way, piecing together several grievances in an attempt to highlight how trauma continues to exist. The trauma is suffered both at the individual as well as collective levels e.g. playing with father's helmet also depicts a traumatic childhood where toys for children are the only leftovers of war or things of associations of their loved ones. In this way, the only child portrayed in the poem and his actions is a picture of most of the children at that time.

The lady in "The Cup" is in a state of exile. She is 'living in a state of nostalgia, a state of unfulfilled desire for past, for a home that cannot be reclaimed.' As in exile, one cannot go back to the homeland but one can neither go back to past or desires nor integrate into the present moment. The element of exile present in the poem is also depicted by the concept of escape which is either is to save life or to avoid unwanted circumstances of violence in a war. The martyred could not escape but advises his wife to escape anyhow. The child is collecting insects in the garden in his father's helmet although he knows the helmet has holes and it is not possible to keep insect captured for a long time. This picture also depicts escape as it





indicates that life can escape even through a small hole, if given a chance, and it should be given every chance to escape death a.k.a. war.

### Conclusion:

Ironically, Dunya Mikhail uses 'Love and War' is this poem - War which destroys love and has an only one-word difference in Dunya's mother language (Hubb -Hurb). For the one left behind after losing a dear one, the killer is inhuman as he loses humanity just like the one who lost his life. The poem indicates that War has caused numerous psychological effects on Iraqi women, such as trauma, denial, desire to escape from a war-stricken country, and so on. Women are concerned with a matter of mere survival and do not contemplate anything else. Moreover, Mikhail's breaks the traditional, stereotypical image of the Iraqi woman through her illustrations, the women. This indicates that she is capable of deviating from the path of her passive predecessors.

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### Cite this article:

**Author(s)**, SHAMAILA AMIR, (2020). "Psychological Effects of War on Women in Iraq: An Analysis in the Light of Dunya Mikhail's Poem "The Cup" ". Name of the Journal: Commonwealth Journal of Academic Research, (CJAR.EU), P, 65- 72. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3875665> , Issue: 1, Vol.: 1, Article: 4, Month: April, Year: 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.cjar.eu/all-issues/>

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