



War, Memory and Narrative: Literary Representations of Geopolitical Trauma in the Age of American Empire

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Abstract: This article investigates how contemporary literature engages with geopolitical trauma in a number of key post-Second World War conflicts — namely the Korean, Vietnam and Iraq wars — while paying particular attention to the rise and imprinting sequence of American imperialism. Focusing on the current devastation in Gaza (2023–present), it also contends with literary responses to the Vietnam War, the Iran–Iraq War, American invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The emphasis on Gaza recognizes the magnitude and ferocity of the violence, given that military and diplomatic support has allowed for an unparalleled level of destruction. Combining trauma theory and memory studies, the paper claims that literary narratives from these sites reveal a persistent pattern: U.S. intervention—whether by invasion, regime change or economic sanctions—produces deep human suffering while remaining unaccountable. From the napalm of Vietnam to drone warfare in Afghanistan and the bombardment of Gaza, literature operates as a counter-archive of empire, collecting what dominant political narratives attempt to expunge.

Keywords: war literature, trauma narrative, American imperialism, Gaza, memory reconstruction, genocide.

Introduction

The end of war does not come with the last crack of a gun. Its aftershocks ripple through bodies, languages, cities and

generations, reconstituting what it means to remember and to be human. From direct invasions and proxy wars to covert regime changes and crippling blockades, the United States has been since 1945 the principal mastermind of global conflict throughout Asia, the Middle East, Latin America — indeed almost all over the world. All of these conflicts — the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Iran-Iraq War, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, Ukraine destabilized by NATO's expansion eastward, interventions in Libya and Syria, an unsuccessful coup against Venezuela's sitting president, a decades-long blockade on Cuba and now Gaza witnessing an ongoing genocide — have yielded different literary responses. But they all have the same thread running through them: the difficulty of speaking trauma inflicted by the machinery of American empire.

This literature tracking geopolitical trauma across these time frames is organized across five temporal phases: pre-war anticipation; wartime experience; post-war reconstruction; intergenerational transmission; and narrative evolution. Per cent internationally that devotes considerable attention to Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan and Ukraine, the analysis focuses on Gaza because (not only) it is the latest disaster but also closely related to when both — finally! — american empire appeared in all its nakedness. The U.S. may not pull triggers directly in Gaza, but it provides the weapons, the intelligence, the diplomatic cover and the moral reason to wage a campaign that has so far killed more than 50,000 Palestinians, displaced almost 2 million people and left 70 percent of housing infrastructure obliterated. This is empire by proxy: destruction contracted out, responsibility denied.

Far from seeing American imperialism as an exception, the paper depicts it as structurally embedded in post-1945 global order. The U.S. dropped more bombs in Vietnam than it did during all of World War II. In Iraq and Libya, it wrecked states in the name of democracy. The end of 20 years of

occupation in Afghanistan was abandonment. In Syria, it fed a proxy war that shattered a country. American arms prolong a war in Ukraine that threatens to escalate into nuclear battle. In Venezuela, it arrested a sitting president to effect regime change. In Cuba, it sustained a blockade for more than six decades, asphyxiating an entire people. And in Gaza, American power conducts a genocide while posing as the defender of human rights. Literature produced by these wars also reveals this hypocrisy, testifying to what power wants and therefore can never erase.

Pre-War Memory and Anticipation

Before the bombs drop, memory has already borne its burden of expectation. Prewar literature in Vietnam captured the fear of colonial return, national division. The fragility of peace after French withdrawal was documented, for example, by writers like Nguyen Thi Mai and Duong Thu Huong — foreshadowing the devastation wrought by American intervention. The American response, cloaked in the language of anti-communism containment, sought to ignore the nationalist aspirations of Vietnamese people and check their aspirations for sovereignty by transforming a civil conflict into a proxy war — seeing who could do imperialism better.

In the Middle East, anticipation ahead of war was informed by the cold calculus of American strategy. In the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88), the U.S. leaned toward Saddam Hussein, sharing intelligence and dual-use technology even as Iraq deployed chemical weapons against Iranian troops and Kurdish civilians. Iraqi literature from this period, including the early work of Sinan Antoon, evoked the suffocating environment of a militarized society under foreign power. The war has killed more than a million people, but American participation in that organizing remained primarily hidden from view, cloaked under the cover of neutrality.

The run-up to the 2003 Iraq War was a literature of siege. American-led sanctions after the Gulf War and into the 1990s killed hundreds of thousands of Iraqi children, an atrocity reported by both journalists and writers. Sinan Antoon's *I'jaam* (2004) portrays the gradual strangulation of Iraqi society before the invasion had even started. The American rationale — weapons of mass destruction — was a lie, but the literature of anticipation had known better: this was about oil and hegemony, restructuring the Middle East to suit American needs.

The literature of pre-2001 Afghanistan reflected decades of Soviet occupation and civil war, but the American invasion unleashed a different kind of promise — liberation curling up into occupation within months. Qais Akbar Omar's *A Fort of Nine Towers* (2013) remembers the possibility that accompanied the fall of the Taliban, a possibility betrayed by twenty years of drone strikes, night raids and corruption.

In Ukraine, Serhii Zhadan's *Orphanage* (2017) captures the charged atmosphere of the Donbas conflict post-2014, encoding what scholar Tetiana Zaharchenko describes as “triggered mourning”—is a psychological state in which past trauma pre-disposes communities for future violence (Zaharchenko 682). But even in that post–Cold War world, American engagement hovered: NATO expansion, military assistance and the positioning of Ukraine as a front-line state in a new Cold War.

For Palestinians, anticipation is structural. The 2023 Gaza war does not exist in a vacuum; it is the most recent chapter in seventy-five years of dispossession that dates back to the 1948 Nakba. Palestinian writing before the war took catastrophe as a given, as a way of life after sixteen years of Israeli-Egyptian siege. But this anticipation is tempered with the awareness that American power lies behind the violence. The U.S. gives Israel \$3.8 billion in annual military aid, diplomatic cover at

the United Nations and the bombs themselves.” Just as American intervention in Vietnam transformed a civil conflict into a proxy cataclysm, U.S. involvement in Gaza converts some arguable struggle for liberation into an arena of imperial consolidation. The literature of anticipation in these pages is not merely about dread; it’s a certainty that America will avert its gaze, or worse still, facilitate destruction.

This pattern of expectation extends to other theaters of American empire. In Libya and Syria, literalists recorded the gradual fragmentation of society as it marched toward intervention’s specter, revealing as they did so that American blueprints for liberation come equipped with disaster. For generations of writers in Cuba, the American blockade loomed large and literature became a response to scarcity and isolation. In Venezuela, the surprise arrest of its president by American authorities marked a new phase of direct imperial coercion, shrouding a country in crisis even more known for uncertainty brought on by economic warfare. In every case, the literature notes not just the fear of war but the fatigue of living in the crosshairs of American power.

War-Time Experience and Immediate Trauma

When war arrives, language fractures. Trauma theory states that a traumatic violence is inherently beyond representation, and generates not narrative but silence and fragmentation (Caruth 4). This pattern is repeated throughout every conflict where American power has had its impact.

In Vietnam, literature bore witness to the surreal horror of napalm, defoliation and mass death. Bao Ninh’s *The Sorrow of War* (1993) depicts the psychological unravelling of a soldier in the cacophony of American bombing. The amount of bombs the U.S. dropped on Vietnam was greater than all bombs dropped during World War II combined, but the official

narrative portrayed this as a necessary sacrifice. Literature spoke the truth: this was slaughter, not salvation.

In the Iran-Iraq War, trauma was compounded by silence abroad. From poetry to prose, Iran's literature of the war, recorded horrors of chemical attacks made possible by Western complicity. Writers such as Hassan Blasim later sought to express the legacy that would haunt Iraq after this violence — a society brutalized by decades of war, sanctions and occupation.

The United States invasion of Iraq in 2003 released a different kind of trauma: the chaos that attends regime change. Haifa Zangana's *Women on a Journey: Between Baghdad and London* (2006) and Hassan Blasim's *The Iraq War Stories* (2007) bear witness to the disintegration of civilian life: museum looting, militia saturations, weddings gone under drone attack. The U.S. said it would bring democracy; literature showed what occupation meant. The same played out in Libya and Syria, where American-backed interventions splintered states and set off civil wars that continue to bleed their peoples.

In Afghanistan, the trauma was of never-ending war. Qais Akbar Omar's *A Fort of Nine Towers* (2013) and Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* (2014) document the experience on the ground of drone strikes, night raids and broken promises. The two decades of occupation killed tens of thousands of civilians, and yet the U.S. exited in a rush, leaving behind a humanitarian disaster.

In Ukraine, much of the new wartime writing since 2022 carries trauma markers widely recognized from past wars: bodily injury, psychological disorder, fractured speech. Serhii Zhadan's poetry from Kharkiv reflects surreal horror of everyday life under fire: "We drink coffee while rockets fall / We argue about grammar while buildings collapse" (Zhadan 78). But even here, the impact of American arms cannot be

overlooked. Blind U.S. support increases length of war, guaranteeing that killing will continue as diplomacy remains out of reach.

But it is in Gaza where the full horror of American-enabled trauma can best be seen. The 2023–2025 Israeli assault, with American weapons and diplomatic cover, killed more than 50,000 Palestinians, displaced almost 2 million people and destroyed 70 percent of Gaza’s housing. Writers grappling with this disaster come up against what Belal Hamamra describes as the limits of representation — how does one narrate genocide when language itself feels insufficient (Hamamra et al. 7). Gaza war diaries trash conventional narrative in favor of collage of testimony: “Day 47: No water. My neighbor’s children died tonight. I cannot write more.” They are not mere records of suffering but indictments of the American complicity that enables such suffering.

Ghazals from Gaza: Palestinian poetry encodes trauma through rupture. There are no tragic heroes, observers note, and the genocide continues uninterrupted. Poems become memorials for the dead, lists of names, snippets of conversation overheard in bomb shelters. The Israeli narrative of dehumanization — simplifying Palestinians down to “human animals,” some government officials insisted — is intensified by the silence of American media. But literature demands specificity: naming the dead, telling us their routines, keeping them human in the face of erasure (Hamamra et al. 9).

The unifying theme is American culpability. In Vietnam, the method was direct bombardment. In Iraq, Libya and Syria, it meant regime change. In Afghanistan, it was occupation. In Ukraine, it is proxy war. In Venezuela, it was the raw show of power — the arrest of a head of state. In Cuba, that violence was the slow violence of blockade. In Gaza it is enablement:

the flow of bombs, the vetoes on cease-fires, the moral cover. This is not neutrality; it is empire through other means.

Post-War Memory Reconstruction

War is over, but work of memory begins. The Achilles heel of post-war literature is that it can be their document of atrocity, and at the same time their enabler for a collective healing. In Vietnam, literature post-1975 struggled with the tug of war between official stories of victory and the lived experience of loss, Agent Orange and re-education camps. And after the U.S. withdrawal, it left a terrain of unexploded ordnance and birth defects, but its literature of memory was still mostly navel-gazing, centered on American soldiers not Vietnamese victims.

In Iraq, post-2003 literacy documented the disintegration of society: the pillaging of museums, militiaization, brain drain. Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* (2013) speaks to the fatigue of a country that has lived only through war for four decades. And then the U.S., having broken the state, got up and walked away, leaving Iraqis to clean up the mess. Similar stories of abandonment and fragmentation came from Libya and Syria, where American interventions created power vacuums occupied by warlords and extremists.

Literature after 2021 in Afghanistan reflects the trauma of abandonment. "Writers who worked with U.S. forces were left behind in the messy pullout, their lives sacrificed to the very entity that purport- ed to liberate them." This is fine to say of Afghanistan, you know, under Taliban leadership but the nationalist and resistance streams of post-war Afghan literature are those of betrayal, not liberation.

After 2014, and more recently after February 2022, literature in Ukraine has been playing a curative role; it helps create spaces of dialogue and resilience (Hundorova 34). Sofia

Andruxhovykh's *Amadoka* (2020) excavates mass graves from various historical eras to reveal how unprocessed memory poisons the present. This failed multidirectionality—where competing past traumas illuminate rather than overshadow one another—is itself then a model for healing (Rothberg 3). But even in this case, the role of American arms in extending the war adds a complex layer to the story of liberation.

And in Gaza, memories of war are existential. The destruction was so complete that even the usual sites of memory — homes, schools, mosques — no longer exist. Palestinian writers answer with portable memory: texts that contain place in them when the physical places have been erased. Diaries, digital testimonies and poetry become transcribed archives of diminished geographies: “This is where the bakery stood. This is where my daughter took her first steps. “This is where we buried our neighbors.” As is common in the archives, the act of naming and describing serves as an act of resistance to what Hamamra calls *memoricide*—the systematic erasure of sites of Palestinian memory (Hamamra et al. 11).

But this memory work happens in the shadow of American indifference. The U.S. vetoes United Nations cease-fires, blocks arms embargoes and sends weapons even as hospitals and schools are rubble. This is not neutrality; this is complicity.” American literature is full of its own victims, but such silence gilds the mine more than it can ever fill. Gaza calls for a different kind of memory: the kind that identifies the enable who pulls not only the trigger but also the retreat button. The same silence blankets the memories of Cuba, under blockade that chokes a population, and Venezuela, whose president's seizure is a stark symbol of imperial overreach.

Intergenerational Trauma and Memory Transmission

Trauma knows no generational boundaries. Kids take on their parents' nightmares; whole communities pass unprocessed pain through behavior, silence and story. In Vietnam, the effects of Agent Orange have contributed to birth defects decades beyond the war. The U.S. denied for years that it bore any responsibility but literature kept the memory alive, forcing a reckoning with the long tail of imperial violence.

Children born in Iraq after 2003 are left with a landscape of depleted uranium, broken infrastructure and sectarian violence. The U.S. invasion has not ended in 2011, and its repercussions are felt in every generation. In Afghanistan, one generation has been raised knowing only war, displacement and poverty. The U.S. occupation did not deliver freedom; it delivered endless violence. In Libya and Syria, children are emerging from the ruins of states whose fortunes were destroyed by intervention, their fates mortgaged in pursuit of the geopolitical dreams of remote powers.

In Ukraine, literature is turning toward the ways in which trauma from the Soviet era continues to shape responses to Russian aggression. The protagonist's generation inherited a broken country and unprocessed grief in Serhii Zhadan's *Orphanage*, which connects 2014–2022 war trauma to the Soviet collapse (Zhadan 134). But NATO expansion and American militarization's role in instigating this conflict should not be ignored. Empire generates the conditions for its own wars, then claims moral innocence.

If anything, Palestinian intergenerational trauma is more evident. The Nakba of 1948 has produced a refugee collective consciousness that periodizes Palestinian identity through generations. Day 7: Grandparents who lost Jaffa and Haifa tell stories to grandchildren who have never seen these cities;

memory becomes substitute for homeland Adding another layer to the 2023–2025 Gaza war: Children who survived, themselves facing bombardment and trauma, then inherit not only their grandparents' dispossession, but acute trauma of their own (Naworska 18). Recent studies show alarming rates of PTSD among Palestinian youth, manifesting in altered parenting, epigenetic changes and cultural narratives that transmit trauma intergenerationally (Veronese et al. 5).

The transmission politics are a stark contrast. Ukrainian writers fighting for a place in European memory culture. Palestinian writers challenge a global grief hierarchy that marginalizes their trauma. This dismissal isn't accidental; it is produced by American media ecosystems that dehumanize Palestinians and justify their destruction. As one young Gaza writer said, they seek to erase Palestinians in two ways — their bodies and then their stories. Writing is the refusal of both erasures. And at the heart of this disappearance looms American power, providing the bombs and the silence. The same holds true for Cuba, where generations have grown up under blockade and the imminent threat of further military intervention hangs over every child's future in Venezuela.

Narrative Reconstruction Over Time

Accounts of war change with distance, and politics. Early narratives of heroism in Vietnam surrendered to critiques of imperial arrogance. In Iraq, early hopes for liberation soured into stories of betrayal. In Afghanistan, the story of liberation was revealed as a false one. In Ukraine, narratives are being rewritten in real time, but the role of American weapons in extending the war is under growing examination.

The inhabiting of narrative in Gaza is forged from the absence of resolution. Where other conflicts eventually came to some kind of halt, Gaza is met with relentless devastation. The literature here is not post-war; it's mid-apocalypse. And over

this apocalypse looms the threat of another war enabled by the Americans: heightened aggression toward Iran.

After years of sanctions, sabotage and the assassination of Iranian scientists, both the United States and Israel have stepped up talk about military strikes to try to put a halt to Iran's nuclear program. This is reminiscent of the lies advanced to justify the Iraq War — cooked intelligence, exaggerated threats, the dehumanization of an entire people. If war erupts, it would unleash devastating turmoil throughout the Middle East, dragging in proxies and shutting down strategic waterways. Previous struggles remind us: imperial wars are marketed as essential, but they result in nothing but devastation.

The American imperialism that links these conflicts. In Vietnam, it was straight-up occupation. During the Iran-Iraq War, it was cynical manipulation. In Iraq, Libya and Syria, regime change under the cover of democracy. In Ukraine, it is proxy war. In Gaza, it is passive violence through proxy war. In Venezuela, it was the audacious seizure of a president. In Cuba, it was the gradual strangulation of blockade. And now, directed at Iran, it is the drumbeat of another preventive war. In each case, the human toll is borne by civilians; in each, literature bears witness to what power refuses.

Conclusion

War breaks bodies, cities and languages — but narrative survives. Literature has already recorded the human toll of imperial violence, from Vietnam to Gaza, from Iraq to Ukraine, from Libya to Syria. Invariant writers in Vietnam such as Bao Ninh laid bare the horror of American bombardment. Writers in Iraq such as Sinan Antoon wrote about the lies of regime change. Afghan writers like Qais Akbar Omar showed the betrayal of occupation. Ukrainian writers like Zhadan and Andriukhovich have linked

contemporary trauma with historical wounds. And Palestinian writers in Gaza have used diaries and poetry to testify to genocide, affirming humanity against systemic dehumanization (Hamamra et al. 13).

Memory, in all these dimensions, is layered, contested and ongoing. There is no tidy ending; trauma's work doesn't stop after the cease-fires. Literature, in fact, evolves: early narratives emphasize heroism; later work machines complexity and critique. Yet one thing still holds: literature as resistance. Trauma cannot win its final victory as long as writers document, name and narrate.

But this resistance needs to speak the name of the enabler. American imperialism is not a passive observer of these conflicts; it is the mastermind. In Vietnam, it dropped more bombs than during all of World War II. It smashed states in Iraq, Libya and Syria, then walked away. In Afghanistan, it invaded for twenty years and left carnage. In Ukraine, it is fueling a war that risks nuclear escalation. In Venezuela, it arrested a president to impose its will. In Cuba it held a blockade for more than sixty years. It provide the bombs, and the diplomatic cover for a genocide, in Gaza. And now, it risks yet another war with Iran.

The wars are not over. The threat grows. American imperialism adapts but does not wane. Without such narratives, there is no justice, no memory and no future. What writing is, then, is the last bastion — and the only hope.”

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