
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Us-Iraq War Trauma: A Study in Roy Scranton's *War Porn*

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| ABSTRACT

The cluster of disastrous wars in twentieth century is basically accountable for the artists' anti-war responses to war whose traumatic experience proves its false sense of patriotism. Hence, US-Iraq war themed writing like Roy Scranton's *War Porn* (2016) enable the world to discover the trauma and aggression of this war whose shock affects the life of the military and the civilian as well. This thematic study is meant to be a critical analysis of the trauma of US-Iraq war as it is represented in Scranton's *War Porn*, the novel that reflects the traumatic experience of three young men who are caught up in US-Iraq war, two are American soldiers (Wilson and Aaron) and the third one is an Iraqi civilian (Qasim). Finally, there is a conclusion which sums up the major findings of the study.

| KEYWORDS

Novel, Roy Scranton's, *War Porn*, US-Iraq war, and trauma.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 01 July 2026

PUBLISHED: 15 August 2026

DOI: 10.32996/ijts.2026.6.4.4

1. Introduction

"Trauma is not what happens to us, but what we hold inside in the absence of an empathetic witness".¹

The word trauma which is derived from the Greek word "traumatikos" means a serious wound to the body. It is also defined as an emotional reaction to a dreadful event. Moreover, it is also interpreted as "disordered psychic or behavioral state resulting from severe mental or emotional stress or physical injury".² Generally, most of psychologists and the psychiatrists agreed upon that trauma has more psychological effects than physical, and its mental threatening may lead to mental or /and physical breakdown if it has not been treated. So, the traumatic events which are external so quickly involved and incorporated into the mind and the psych of the traumatic person.³

In modern times, trauma has gained an independent academic scope and is opened to various association that can be traced to Freud's "traumatic neurosis" in 1980. It is an infant or a new born theory that is first used by the leading pioneer of trauma theory is a research professor of comparative literature, Cathy Caruth in 1990s who concludes that: "trauma is a speechless fright that divides or destroys the identity".⁴

The professor Caruth who studies the concept of trauma in relation to literature, highlights the significance of literary text as a best means to document the nature of trauma as it is revealed by its witnesses. So, Caruth states that trauma theory is an interdisciplinary area of study between psychology and humanities. Such perspective is developed more by Shoshana Felman, a professor of comparative literature at Emory university who stresses the importance of narrative art as a preeminent artistic medium for trauma. According to Felman, trauma becomes a prevalent topic in all forms of literature, but the best genre that can be its quite testimony is a novel which stands as a new genre that is called "trauma novel".

The trauma novel demonstrates how a traumatic events disrupts attachments between self and others by challenging fundamental assumptions about moral and social relationships that are themselves connected to

specific environment. Novels represent this disruption between the self and others by carefully describing the place of trauma because the physical environment offers the opportunity to examine both the personal and cultural histories imbedded in landscapes that define the characters' identity and the meaning of the traumatic experience.⁵

Indeed, in twenty-first century, trauma steps out the boundaries of psychological and psychoanalytic research studies into wide spectrum of literature. It quickly and heavily gains a reading of research attention globally due to its reaction to the profound traumatic suffering brought up by wars. So the interest in the trauma of US-Iraq War by Roy Scranton's *War Porn*(2016) is indeed not an exception.

US-Iraq war (2003-2011) consists of two phases: the first phase dates from March 20,2003 to April 9, 2003 and the second one covers a longer period from April 9,2003 to December 15,2011. These years of occupation witnessed the prevalence of various types of violence and crimes, like kidnapping, killing, raping and abusing detainees in the Abu Ghraib prison. Such scandals revealed the meaning of the power of violence that is well documented in the photographs of the abuse in Abu Ghraib (as it is practiced by Aaron in Scranton's *War Porn*), which shows how media makes an exposure of terror and torture. The media enabled the world to witness the trauma and violence of US-Iraq War.⁶

All sorts of media and art conveyed the events of US-Iraq war and documented its violence in various images that

offer people a perspective on reality, but unless they make an effort to interpret the meaning of these images, this perspective remains invisible. These images may shock and appall, but they also challenge them to interpret their own investments in violence, to give meaning to this violence in the hopes of preventing it.⁷

No doubt, the conflict in Iraq captured the artists'/writers' attention. Such an international interest is confirmed by the critic Michael T. Kent, saying: "Iraq was in the headlines almost every day and artists, writers, film and theatre-makers produced much work about the invasion and its aftermath".⁸

The major genre that tackled the US-Iraq War and had tremendous effect on the recipient (the audience) was drama, but trauma fiction like Roy Scranton's *War porn* also proves its unique ability to convey Gulf War Syndrome and the Post-traumatic stress disorder of US- Iraq War.

Scranton's *War Porn* is classified as a trauma fiction that offers important insights into human responses to stress. This novel and most other literary trauma writings " substantiates that trauma is often evidence of forms of domination and misuses of human power, and underscores that people generally try to evade the psychological consequences of objectifying individuals".⁹

The scope of Iraq war is so wide, broad, and complex that no text can possibly cover its details and no author can introduce " an overarching perspective". But, Scranton's soldiering experience in Us-Iraq War enabled him to document the trauma of Iraq war in his trauma novel *War Porn* which shows how the narrative style is an essential tool for the wittiness of trauma who wants to create an authentic version for his own traumatic memory of war which is described by Scranton as:

War is socially organized political violence. war is a thing humans do, not a "force" that happens to them... War is, for me, endlessly fascinating and horrifying: there is no greater testament to human ingenuity than our genius for violence, and no greater testament to human stupidity than our enthusiasm for war.¹⁰

Scranton's War Porn is a trio of traumatic parts which expose the scandals of US-Iraq War. Each one represents a distinct perspective on the reality of war. It is embodied in the stories of three young men who are caught up in the trauma of US-Iraq war, two are American soldiers (Wilson and Aaron) who participated in the war and the third one is an Iraqi mathematician (Qasim) whose life is torn apart by war.

The first part which is entitled "Strange Hells" that describe the cells of Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. This part is opened with the disrupting of a hostile visitor named Aaron into a gathering of youngish group of men and women at barbecue in Utah. Aaron, the angry young veteran of US-Iraq war shakes their meeting with extremely shocking revelations of his traumatic experience in Iraq. centers around Aaron, an American veteran who has just returned from Iraq war. Aaron has verbally attacked by Mel, one of the attendant who question Aaron for the real reasons behind his going and participating in Us-Iraq war.¹¹

Aaron who " stared with eyes so fierce" cannot find a convincing answer for his going in such war whose truth has not been understood yet. Aaron serves as a guard at Abu Ghraib prison and grants himself the right to be the unofficial photographer who documents everything happens there. But so soon he becomes a victim for his double experience at Abu Ghraib prison whose images of torture stick in his memory. Consequently, Aaron is prisoned in Gulf War Syndrome.¹²

Gulf War Syndrome (GWS) or what is called Gulf War Illnesses (GWI). "It is a chronic and multi-symptomatic disorder affecting returning military veterans and civilian workers of Gulf War".¹³ This term is used after the report of unusual symptoms that are claimed and proved by US and British soldiers on their way home from the Gulf War in Iraq. Their suffering was undeniable, as it included 53 different symptoms of psychological distress and physical ill health. According to a study by European Molecular Biology Organization, which focuses on the treatment of these symptoms as far as diagnosing the suspected reasons:

Many suspect were linked to exposure to depleted uranium, pesticides, vaccines, particulate matter and gases from burning oil wells, biological and chemical weapons, and the anti-nerve-gas drug pyridostigmine bromide.¹⁴

The cluster of symptoms whether they are related to the Operation of Desert Storm (January 16, 1991) or the Operation of Iraqi Freedom (March 20, 2003) came to be known as the Gulf War Syndrome. This syndrome is the prime medical scandal in American history. Though it has not been given its right spot in American media, it is well spread all over the world to show how the Gulf Wars (I and II) violated all values of humanity.¹⁵

Aaron, who undergoes The Gulf War Syndrome, creates a kind of shocking moral dilemma out of his distinctive experience at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq that is supposed to be fully realized by the readers as it is by Aaron.

Aaron's photos of Iraqi prisoners symbolize the ugly side of the United States' occupation of Iraq and at the same time shocks the world that discovers more later about Abu Ghraib prison scandals practiced by Aaron and other American soldiers.

"We really fucked that puck up.... It's a weird thrill having that much physical control over somebody, knowing what you're doing."¹⁶

Abu Ghraib's abuses received widespread condemnation all over the world. The power of media highlights the truth of the American troops' brutal treatment of detaining sites in Iraq, though the administration of Bush tries to describe the Abu Ghraib abuses as isolated incidents and not as a mark of US policy.¹⁷ The American claim contrasts with the reports of some human organizations, like Red Cross, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch. These organizations proved that such abuse is part of a wider pattern of torture that existed after the invasion of Iraq in 2003 by US as an occupying force, which had undertaken everything under the pretext of "nationality" and "national duty".¹⁸ The national duty of American soldier in this war is heavily questioned, and Aaron says that:

"We'd prepared our whole lives for this. Bombed little brown people, helicopters swooping low, the familiar sigh of American machinery carving death from a Third World wasteland. We expected nothing less than shell shock and trauma, we lusted for thousand-yard stares—lifelong connoisseurs of hallucinatory violence, we already knew everything, felt everything. We saw it through a blood-spattered lens, handheld tracking shot pitting figure against ground. We were the camera, we were the audience, we were the actors and film and screen: cowboys and killer angels, the lost patrol, the cavalry charge, America's proud and bloody soldier boys.... we are heroes in error"¹⁹

"we are heroes in error", Aaron's statement shakes the chivalric image of war and explains it as nothing more than an awful experience that has no real sense of patriotism. Aaron tries to show the truth of war, its collateral damage and its cost for American soldier who is not a "war hero", but as it is described by Scranton, as "trauma hero". The latter refers to "the sensitive buffeted by service and combat during the failed invasion of Iraq", like Wilson who occupies the second part of the novel.²⁰

The second part of *War Porn* which is entitled "Your leader will Control Your Fire" brings to reader's mind Shakespearean plays that highlighted the responsibility of the leaders in the calculation of the losses of war which is a mere "manslaughter and robbery" as in his *Richard III*(1592), *Henry VI*(1597), *Macbeth*(1606), and others. This part is devoted to narrate the story of Specialist Wilson, An American soldier who serves as a Humvee driver in Iraq during Us-Iraq war.

The young Wilson who imagines himself as a poet and so obsessed with sex, found himself in cruel confusion whenever he compares his life in and out the army. At the beginning, he feels with great excitement when he finds his name enlisted with those who has to go and serve in Iraq during the war, but such excitement is demolished when he discovers himself as a part of vast machine of killing that makes him a victim of Post- Traumatic Stress Disorder which is defined by Susan Pease Banitt as "a whole –body tragedy, and an integral human events of enormous proportions with massive repercussions".²¹

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is a term, which was originally called "shell shock" or "war neurosis" in the First World War. It describes the psychological traumas of those who serve in the war key fronts whether as veterans (soldiers) or civilians. In brief, "Shell shock is a mental disorder that follows an occurrence of extreme psychological stress such as that encountered in war or resulting from violence, childhood abuse, or serious incident."²²

The representation of PTSD is particularly reflected in "Home-Front War text", which is of an anti-war stand and this type highlights the psychological and emotional suffering of soldiers, like Wilson, who finds himself between the sand and pain.

"I'd never done anything but drive down this highway forever, the road eternity itself, punishment for an abandoned dream's half-imagined sins. This was all I'd ever done, all I'd ever do: drive in the heat through the sand and the pain and stink in the unceasing noise."²³

The common result of PTSD is the collapse of the soldier's value system in relation to the meaning of life, patriotism and heroism. The shocked character finds no freedom from the ghosts of the past that haunt his mind and spirit as in Wilson.

Wilson couldn't escape from Us-Iraq war trauma, he came back to his own home at America with bleak memory whose violent stories of killing and bombing narrated so many times:

Sure, our soldiers and bombs may have killed tens of thousands and our soldiers may be dead or fucked up in body and/or soul, but at least...(fill in the blank with any word of your choice).²⁴

One of the stories that he couldn't forget and retold it many times was the attack on their patrol when they were going back to camp and how such attack made their commander lose his sidearm.

"I unloaded my rifle, stripped my battle rattle, and bummed a smoke from Healds. We had little to say. The whole thing was just too dumb.... the shooting got louder and louder until we swam in the noise of it...I waited for the first rounds to puncture the windshield or the canvas roof...the sky raucous with metal."²⁵

Wilson is looking for a beautiful woman in skirt whose hands meet his own and listening to his reading of Whitman's lines or that of Joyce. Such moment of contemplation is discontinued by the shoot of fire on a passing civilian, Hadji for the sake of salvation. This shoot tore his own self, so he is unable to rediscover his former self before his service in the Humvee.²⁶

"I seemed to be walking through a dream. I felt too relaxed. Everyone else was depressed and hateful, just like I remembered, but the difference was me: I was okay. I could see our frustrated rage, our barely checked aggression, our loneliness, our desperation, and for the first time ever, I could see it without belonging to it. If I can just hang on to this, I thought, I'll get through. Everything'll be fine."²⁷

Wilson is traumatized person who "chronically feels unsafe inside his body: The past is alive in the form of gnawing interior discomfort".²⁸ He is a trauma hero who is unable to know whether he is fine or not, since he failed to find a reconciliation and an agreement between the past and the present. He is captivated by the traumatic memory of brutal scene of war. He is highly affected by war trauma which is explained by Danielle Bernock as:

"Trauma is personal. It does not disappear if it is not validated. When it is ignored or invalidated the silent screams continue internally heard only by the one held captive. When someone enters the pain and hears the screams healing can begin."²⁹

Through the employment of expressive language and skillful method of characterization, Scranton emphasizes that military service is not compulsory, but the necessity of living stimulates most of the Americans to join the army and victims. Generally, American soldiers cannot show any protest to the army service, since it is the source of their living and shelter, like Wilson who tries to avoid the embarrassing question of his inner voice: "What U.S. soldiers were fighting for?" Wilson still upholds his own false patriotism, since he is an American, who has to prop his country in its war against terrorism.

Aaron and Wilson are the soldiers who fall in the cage of trauma, but the major fall that occupies the third part of the novel which is entitled "The Fall" is dedicated to the story of an Iraqi Us Army interpreter named Qasim al-Zabadi who is a Ph D student in Baghdad struggling over the decision to stay and work on his dissertation, or return to his family that live in another city. This part, as it is stated by Michiko Kakutani, is written to show "how Iraqis' ordinary dreams of a career, of building a family or earning a degree are exploded by the war and how the daily (or nightly) bombing raids terrorize Baghdad residents."³⁰

As a fact, after 2003, many Iraqis worked as interpreters for the US army. This job was the first bridge that was established between US military groups and Iraqi local community. Such kind of exchange between two cultures was not respected by the majority of Iraqi people, since they viewed such a job as a kind of help for the occupiers. Here-upon, the interpreters were considered traitors, but Qasim is an exception. He is a victim of the penalties of thoughtlessly trusting Americans.

Qasim as an educated person who loves art and religion at the same time, like other people in his mind who are "religious but not always devout". Some are intelligent and in certain situations they show their ignorance. Such ideas affect his attitudes towards the war and frame his relation with American soldiers who were "frenemies". The latter is defined in Wiktionary, the free

dictionary as "Someone who pretends to be your friend, but is really your enemy". Qasim in his treatment with American soldiers, remembers the phrase "the other" that is attached to Arab in foreign countries as in his short stay in Scotland as a student. He never hates American soldiers since he finds soldiering is a kind of job, and those soldiers are not responsible for war's atrocities.³¹

"A soldier isn't responsible for the war being waged, or for the atrocities of that war, though it is his job to carry them out. For many of them, soldiering is a grownup cowboys-and-Indians scenario to live out they torture bugs, and frequently express the wish to kill, to fire their weapons."³²

As far as the contradictions found within Qasim's character is concerned, "the split character" and the ambivalence of attitudes towards war and his clear decision who is the victim in US-Iraq war? Qasim suffers from such conflict, and finally he utters Scranton's notion that: "war traumatizes all its participants". Qasim is another trauma hero in that situation which wipes away the real victims of war violence.

Significantly, the presentation of these two contradictory viewpoints is something related to Scranton's narrative style that is developed to put the reader against seeing anything positive, and to detach them from any sort of identification with the character, even with Iraqi young interpreter Qasim.

Qasim is a complex character, whose role develops in relation to other characters. He is a two dimensional character: Ph D student who is related to simple Iraqi life in all its cultural detail in the past and the interpreter of American soldiers in relation to the present. He is the character who tries to link two civilizations and two cultures through language, he also tries to link the present with the past through his traumatic memory with its various feelings of regret, grief, frustration, and sensitivity.

The existence of Qasim who decides at the end to leave everything and go to his wife and mother, in the novel is so essential, since he is the character that helps Scranton to tackle the trauma of US-Iraq war in Iraqi cultural climate beside the American. The understanding of US-Iraq war trauma is left to the reader's assessment of *War Porn* that is closed with unpunctuated sentences scattered over the last page:

"I begin to
Feel
Of holes"³³

In brief, *War Porn* is constructed to show how the American military veterans are victimized in US-Iraq war, that's why this novel that was written in 2006 found no publisher till 2016. In the metaphorical representation of Wilson and Aaron, Scranton builds these two characters in the light of his actual experience in Iraq in 2006 with some of the Iraq war veterans who began speaking out against war. They had been sent to fight in US-Iraq war, but later became its most vocal critics. They became anti-war advocates.

Scranton uses his pen to criticize US-Iraq war, launched by Bush and his administration. His response to this war is quite obvious in the following lines which quite reflect his fury at the disastrous consequences of a misguided and pointless war: "the politicians who ran the war had shown no higher ideals than robbery and plunder, and I'd been nothing but their thug".³⁴

Sure now the readers begin to
Feel
Of holes

2. Conclusion

Roy Scranton's *War Porn* is an anti-war trauma novel that shows the effects of US-Iraq War on its victims and the victors, as well. Scranton emphasizes the violent trauma of the self that is incarnated in the soldiers (Aaron and Wilson) as well as the civilian (Qasim).

US-Iraq War unleashed the inner dark instincts of violence that can kill high moral values and caused physical and psychic pain to all military participants who suffer from Gulf War Syndrome and expect dark future that sure will be haunted by Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder out of the tragic memories of war.

In *War Porn*, Scranton invites the audience to enter the world of US military troops who realize the false idealized heroism. So, the resultant knowledge of Aaron's and Wilson's military experiences is that they are trauma heroes who find war as the greatest trauma in human history.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Publisher's Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors, and the reviewers

Notes

¹Peter A. Levine , The Absence of an Empathetic Witness, www.uua.org/worship/words/quote/absence-empathetic-witness, accessed on 2-9-2020.

² DeJonghe E. S. et al. Women survivors of intimate partner violence and post-traumatic stress disorder :Prediction and prevention. Bioline International. (N.p. Oct, 2008), 294.

³ Bloom, Sandra L., and M.D. Trauma Theory Abbreviated. Department of Human Services, Victoria ,Australia. (N.p. 1999),2.

⁴Ibid, 12.

⁵ Balaev, Michelle. "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory". Questia: Trusted online research. (Mosaic Winnipeg). V 41.No. 2. June 2008. 4.

⁶ Kelly Oliver, *Women as Weapons of War: Iraq, Sex, and the Media*.(New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 153.

⁷Ibid, 161.

⁸Michael T. Kent, "Oil and Empire: Rethinking the War with Iraq" in *Current History: A Journal of Contemporary World Affairs*, vol.102, issue 662, March , 2003, 102.

⁹Quoted in Laurie Vickory, *Reading Trauma Narrative: The Contemporary Novel and the Psychology of Oppression*.(University of Virginia press, 2015), p34

¹⁰ Quoted in Olivia Garard, "Not Safe for War: Reviewing *War Porn* " in Book Review, July24,2017, 4

¹¹Michiko Kakutani, "Review: 'War Porn' Widens the Field of Vision About the Costs in Iraq" in August8,2016, 2.

¹²Ibid,3.

¹³Dr.Gray Null, "Gulf War Syndrome: US Veterans Suffering from Multiple Debilitating Symptoms" in *Global Research*, February 19, 2016.2

¹⁴ Ibid. 2.

¹⁵Ibid.3.

¹⁶ Roy Scranton, *War Porn* (New York: Soho Press, Inc., 2016): 54-55

All the textual references to this novel within the body of the study are related to this version.

¹⁷Cited in Ron Synovitz, "Icons of the Iraq War: Abu Ghraib's Lynndie England and Prisoner Abuse", RFE/RL's Radio Free Iraq Report in *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty* : An International News and Broadcast Organization Providing Alternative Points of ViewMarch17,2013.

¹⁸Quoted by David Dadge, *The War in Iraq and Why the Media Failed Us*, (London, Praeger Publishers, 2006),28.

¹⁹Scranton, 70.

²⁰ Garard,4.

²¹Susan Pease Banitt in *Good Reads*,www.goodreads.com/quotes/563244

Accessed on 2-9-2020

²²Quoted in Hana Khaleif Ghani, "War Is Never Over Not Inside Those Who Killed!: Healing Through Remembering in Eugene O'Neill's Shell Shock" in *Al-Ameed Quarterly Adjudicated Journal*, Shaaban 1436, June 2015. 21.

²³Scranton, 89.

²⁴Ibid, 91.

²⁵Ibid, 66.

²⁶John R. Coats, "The War, Not That War: War Porn by Roy Scranton" in *Consequence Magazine* in August31, 2016, 13

²⁷Scranton, 47.

²⁸ Bessel van der Kolk, TRAUMA AND ITS IMPACT (2) in *Sharing Culture*, <http://sharingculture.info/trauma-and-its-impact-2.html> accessed on 2-10-2020.

²⁹ Danielle Bernock, *Emerging With Wings: A True Story of Lies, Pain, And The LOVE that Heals* 2nd Edition, in *4F Media*; 2nd edition (October 22, 2014), 54.

³⁰ Michiko Kakutani, " Iraq veteran questions the 'trauma hero myth' put forward in war literature", in *New York Times*, Aug. 19, 2016.2.

³¹Garard,5.

³²Scranton, 62.

³³Ibid,57.

³⁴ Roy Scranton, *We're Doomed. Now What?: Essays on War and Climate Change*, (Soho Press, 2018), 203.

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