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العدد الثلاثون

## الديمقراطية كمسرح للخداع في رواية "الطيور الصفراء" لكيفن باورز

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### المستخلص:

مقارنةً بالأنظمة الأخرى، يُمكن اعتبار الديمقراطية الحقيقية نظام حكم أفضل. تُبيّن الدراسة الروابط بين العلوم السياسية والروايات الأدبية لدراسة المُثُل الديمقراطية، وتُجري دراسةً نقديةً لتصوير الديمقراطية كمسرحٍ للخداع في رواية "الطيور الصفراء" لكيفن باورز (٢٠١٢) من منظور نظرية ما بعد الاستعمار، وبشكل خاص النظرية "الاستعمار المعاصر" لديرِك غريغوري (٢٠٠٤). ستبحث الدراسة في كيفية تصوير هذه الرواية الحربية الأمريكية المعاصرة لهذا المفهوم، وكيف استُخدم كمسرحٍ لتضليل الرأي العام من خلال قراءةٍ مُثأنيةٍ للنص. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تبحث الدراسة في كيفية تحريف القوات العسكرية الأمريكية للمبادئ الديمقراطية والإنسانية خلال حرب العراق، وذلك من أجل الحفاظ على مصالح أمريكا وطموحاتها الاستعمارية وأجندتها السياسية. علاوةً على ذلك، تهدف الدراسة إلى دعم جميع الأفكار والحجج والنتائج التي تم تحليلها من خلال الإشارة إلى الباحثين والنقاد والباحثين والمقالات العلمية والسياسيين والقادة لإضفاء مزيدٍ من الموثوقية على العمل.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الطيور الصفراء، الاستعمار المعاصر، الديمقراطية، الخداع، روايات الحرب

**Democracy as a Theatre of Deception in Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds***

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### Abstract

In comparison to other systems, a real democracy can be regarded as a better governing system. The study draws connections between political science and fiction to investigate democratic ideals and critically examines the portrayal of democracy as a theatre of deception in Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds* (2012) through the lens of postcolonial theory, particularly Derek Gregory's *The Colonial Present* (2004). The study will examine how this contemporary American war novel depicts the concept and how it has been used as a theatre to mislead the public view through a close reading of the text. Additionally, the study examines how democratic and humanitarian principles have been corrupted during the Iraq War by US military forces for the sake of keeping America's interests, its colonial ambitions, and political agenda. Furthermore, the paper aims to support all the analysed ideas, arguments and findings through reference to scholars, critics, researches, scholarly articles, politicians and leaders to give more reliability to the work.

**Key words:** *The Yellow Birds*, *The Colonial Present*, Democracy, Deception, War fiction, Iraq war.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Democracy can be used as an ideal system, a political model, several political outcomes, or a particular regime (Dahlberg et al., 2017: 3). Societies and countries have historically employed a variety of governing systems. In the present, democracy is the predominant form of government in most nations. "Over recent decades, a growing number of countries have embraced democratic institutions as a result of both domestic and external pressures. A so-called "spirit of democracy" has come to pervade the international community," (Carbone, 2008: 1). However, what is miserable here is the use of democracy as a theatre of deception. With regard to this, recent studies have shown that democracy is being used as a mask by the so-called democratic countries for the purpose of misdirecting the public view and tracing their colonial strategy (Salih & Al-Douri, 2022: 72). In this



study, the researcher aims to investigate Keven Powers *The Yellow Birds* (2012) to demonstrate how democracy has been used as a theatre to deceive the public view for the sake of political agendas and economic interests.

In the aftermath of the American-Iraq War in 2003, a number of fictional works have been written, drawing attention to the portrayal of war and showing its devastation. *The Yellow Birds* (2012) is one of the nuanced literary works written by Kevin Powers. John Bartle (Powers' mouthpiece) recounts his war experience and witness. It is set in Al Tafari in northern Iraq during the invasion of Iraq in 2003, paralleling Powers' time as a soldier. It tells the story of John Bartle and Daniel Murphy as two main characters who take the role of two soldiers, where they find that the cruelty and destruction of war does not end by the human cost, but it is beyond it (Bani-Mfrij, 2021: 510), its story mainly concentrates on the Bartle's broken promise to Murphy's mother and the fake letters that he has sent to her instead of her dead boy (Barbosa, 2015: 6).

The author, who was a machine gunner during the war, has mainly written this work for two reasons. Firstly, he typically states in his interviews that he wrote the novel as a response to those who often pose unanswerable questions about the portrayal of the war (De Loof, 2016:32). Secondly, he aims to use his writing as a therapeutic tool for addressing the trauma and psychological issues that he and his fellow soldiers faced during and after the war, as writing serves as a powerful form of therapy for human psychology (Lefkir, 2024: IV). The title has been derived from a military song in the U.S. Army and it is also used as a prelude to the novel. In the song, the war has been personified as if it were a person that lures soldiers with promises, only to harm them mentally, physically, and emotionally (Raihanah and Alosman, 2022: 192).

Its style is highly acclaimed for the lyrical quality of the prose (Precup, 2017:174). There have been used many literary and narrative techniques, to mention some, symbolism (Al-Janabi, and Chen, 2019:480-486), imagery (De Loof, 2016: 33), nonlinearity, personification, metaphorical language (Al Khazraji, 2024:1091-1098), stream of consciousness and fragmentation (Sagar and Shehadah, 2002: 6665), and so



on. The novel is semi-biographic as it deals with war brutality and destruction that the author has personally experienced during the war (Al-Hasson and Abdul Aali, 2022: 46). It is also realistic since it deals with the daily issues of life caused by the war (Majeed and Abdullah, 2020: 940). This novel was highly welcomed by the public and received wide popularity upon its publication. Besides being a finalist for the National Book Award and winning the Guardian First Book Award, it was listed as one of the ten best books of 2012 by the editors of *The New York Times* (Lefkir, 2024: 32 – 33).

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The post-9/11 era has been marked by great arguments about the role of democracy in justifying military involvements, mostly in the Middle East. Derek Gregory (2004) has discussed that Westerners have applied democracy as a means to legitimize war for masking neo-colonial ambitions. In his seminal work, *The Colonial Present: Afghanistan, Palestine, and Iraq* (2004), Gregory critiques the ways in which democratic ideals are weaponized to sustain military occupations and geopolitical dominance. Derek Gregory (2004) basically portrays how the ‘war on terrorism’ has been used as a guise by the U.S. and Westerners to trace their colonial ambitions. There are studies that have used Gregory’s seminal work (2004) as a theoretical framework to document their arguments. For instance, Fraser (2007), in an article titled ‘Land Reform in South Africa and the Colonial Present’ portrays how Gregory’s idea of the “colonial present” in rural South Africa has conditioned land reform outcomes and how the colonial power structures and attitudes still persist in modern times that has shaped the results of land reform there. Similarly, Alosman (2024) in a study entitled ‘The Colonial Present in Ben Fountain’s *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*’ uses Gregory’s theory (2004) to uncover Western imaginative geographies, their colonial practices and their political agenda for their imperial ambitions.

Democracy as a theme occupies a great gap in the body of literature, but what is miserable here is the use of democracy as a theatre of deception. The recent studies have shown that democracy is being used as a mask by



the so called democratic countries for misdirecting the public and trace their colonial strategy. Salih & Al-Douri (2022: 72), in a study entitled 'American's Real Propaganda of Democracy and Freedom in George Packer's *Betrayed*' have revealed how America's false allegations of democracy and freedom turn Iraqis dreams and hopes into disillusionment due to America's betrayal. Similarly, Alosman & Hashim (2023) in a study named 'Roy Scranton's *War Porn: An American Postcolonial Narrative of the Iraq War*', have explored America's invasion Iraq in 2003 and the negative colonial influence on the colonized people and show how Scranton mocks the Iraqis who believe in the U.S.'s propaganda for building a democratic and peaceful country.

In terms of *The Yellow Birds* (2012), it depicts the contradictions between the democratic values promoted by the United States and the brutal realities of war. There have been academic studies about the novel, including the themes of trauma, heroism, colonialism, ideological representations, and so on. For example, Sagar & Shehadah (2020) in a study entitled 'Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in *The Yellow Birds*: A Case Study in the Light of Psychoanalytical Theories' investigate PTSD in the novel to illustrate how the characters experience suffering and grief during and after the war. Furthermore, Raihanah & Alosman (2022), in their article entitled 'Post-Heroic Portrayal of War in Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds*', have found that Powers condemns war and mocks heroism of the battlefield and portrays the war destructions. There is also a study by Majeed & Abdullah (2020) entitled 'The Myth of Empty Iraq in Kevin Powers's *The Yellow Birds*' that investigates the colonial tools and has revealed that there is not any reasonable claim for American justifications of invading Iraq, but the hegemonic powers usually try to picture an imaginative image of their superiority over the colonised people. Despite of the above reviewed studies, there are also extra studies that investigate *The Yellow Birds*. For example, Abdul Aali & Al-Hasson (2022) in their study 'Ideological Representations of the Iraqi and American Societies in Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds*: A Critical Stylistic Analysis', they have depicted Power's ideology that Iraq lacks improvement and needs to learn how to live a progressive life and the



invasion has brought civilization and modernity to a primitive land, but they have completely rejected his ideology because Iraq owns a rich history of civilisation, scientific and cultural wealth, but it is America that is destroying the nation.

Drawing upon the previous studies about *The Yellow Birds*, it shows that scholars have widely investigated the novel in terms of trauma, heroism, colonialism, ideological representations, and so on. However, there remains a gap in examining how this novel critiques democracy as a performative act through the lens of postcolonial theory, particularly Derek Gregory's *The Colonial Present* (2004), so this study aims to examine this novel from a different angle to discuss the theme of democracy as a theatre of deception so as to unveil how the United States of America has corrupted the principles of democracy and humanitarianism, to what extent US had used the Iraq War as a way to distort the public view for its political agenda and colonial ambition under the name of Iraqi liberation and show how the moral and ethical considerations have been spoiled in Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds* (2012). Thus, the study will investigate the novel to find the devastating impacts of war on soldiers' lives and the violated principles of democracy to reveal how democracy has been used as a theatre of deception. Interestingly, this study will adopt a qualitative approach that focuses on a close reading and textual analysis of Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds* (2012). The primary data sources of the thesis will be the texts of the selected novel. The current study will apply the neo-colonial theory, focusing on Derek Gregory's *The Colonial Present* (2004). which offers an analysis of the economic, political and militaristic forces in the modern Middle East.

### 3. DISCUSSION

#### 3.0 Overview

This section is made of two subsections. The first one discusses the devastating impacts of war on soldiers' lives in two parts: the physical dangers during the war and psychological trauma after the war. The second subsection investigates the violated principles of democracy as the focal part of the current study.

#### 3.1 The Devastating Impacts of War on Soldiers' Lives:



The Bush Administration in 2003 used motives such as WMDs, the linkage with Al Qaeda, the war on terror, spreading democracy, prosperity for Iraqis, and the promotion of human rights for waging the Iraq War (De Loof, 2016: 27). These excuses have also been supported by Gregory (2004: 180–181). During the war, there were physical and psychological impacts on the soldiers. These devastating impacts have been mirrored in *The Yellow Birds*. In the following subsections, the study investigates both physical dangers and psychological trauma in the soldiers' lives.

### 3.1.1 Physical Dangers during the War

In the pretext of war, physical dangers refer to any risk or harmful body conditions that face the soldiers during the war, to name some: death, injury, broken bodies, atmospheric conditions, and daily suffering. In *The Yellow Birds*, Powers portrays the absurdity of war and depicts it as nothing apart from an evil force that kills human-beings. He also shows that there is no achievement in war but pain and destruction (Al-Janabi and Chen, 2019: 486). *The Yellow Birds* is a painful image of how war destroys the soldiers' lives. Death is a theme that occupies a big gap in its story where soldiers are being killed or facing the fear of death during the combats by bullets, mortars, bombs, and explosions, the IED, and bombardments. In this regard, John Bartle narrates, "There were no bullets with my name on them, or with Murph's, for that matter. There were no bombs made just for us. Any of them would have killed us" (Powers, 2012: 13-14). This quote portrays death as the only truth of war, so anyone who participates in war, it is exposed to being killed. "We only pay attention to rare things, and death was not rare. Rare was the bullet with your name on it, the IED buried just for you" (Powers, 2012: 11-12). However, every soldier is at the risk of tasting death; soldiers' death is not something rare because despite their fear of death, finally, it is their fate. This depicts a portrayal as if the soldiers are waiting at the queue of their death and it has devastating impacts on their lives. The soldiers have faced different forms of death and it has destructive impacts on their lives due to the brutality of war during the combats, "Most of us had seen death in many forms: the slick mess after a suicide bomber, headless bodies gathered in a ditch like a collection of broken dolls on a child's shelf"



(Powers, 2012: 206). This illuminates that Powers shoots the picture of the soldiers while suffering during the war. For instance, headless bodies gathered in a ditch have been compared to a collection of broken dolls on a child's shelf to show how the dead bodies are gathered in a ditch, much like broken dolls that a child might carelessly place on a shelf.

Through *The Yellow Birds*, the soldiers constantly face death, but one of the most shocking images is the death of Murphy as Bartle shows how Sterling and Bartle decided to throw his tortured body into the river to spare his mother from the pain of seeing him in such a condition. Regarding his disfigured body, Bartle says, "He was broken and bruised [...] his eyes had been gouged out [...]. His throat had been cut nearly through, [...]. His ears were cut off. His nose cut off, too. He had been imprecisely castrated" (Powers, 2012: 205-206).

In addition to death, soldiers suffer serious physical injuries that has even devastating impacts on the rest of the soldiers such as open wounds, bleeding bodies, losing body parts and so on. In this regard, John Bartle recounts, "The chopper landed and the crew chief and the medics dragged a boy off the metal floor of the cabin, and he wailed in pantomime beneath the staccato beat of the spinning blades" (Powers, 2012: 163). The battlefield is depicted as a place where the injured soldiers cry out and the medics try to save their lives while bullets still fly over their heads, so the fear of being wounded, or seeing others being wounded is an extra difficulty the soldiers face during the war, as the Powers writes, "even our own boys sometimes, bleeding and crying as it became apparent that the sound of a casevac was thirty seconds too far in the distance" (Powers, 2012: 206).

Additionally, there are atmospheric conditions that have disturbing impacts on the soldiers' lives throughout the war. In this concern, Bartle narrates, "It was heating up in Al Tifar then, and we'd be out on patrol hour after hour, so hot that it seemed that the dust gave off its own light even after the sun went down, so fucking hot" (Powers, 2012: 154). The soldiers hardly adapt to the atmospheric conditions and the hot sun follows them everywhere like their shadow or a snake that twists around their necks as Bartle recounts, "The sun gathered itself behind us, rising in the east,



warming the collar of my blouse, baking in the salt that clotted in hard lines and snaked around our necks and arms,” (Powers, 2012: 18).

The soldiers also face unhealthy issues and dirty living conditions such as living in filth, lack of showering, the smell of blood, being surrounded by flies and so on, so Powers has pictured all the soldiers’ poor health conditions in *The Yellow Birds* to refuse the glorification of war. Concerning this, Bartle recounts, “Other boys ignored the rain and washed the dust and salt out of their clothes in red plastic buckets full of water gone brown and dingy with their filth” (Powers, 2012: 152–153). He also describes how the flies were dancing around Murph’s dead body, which demonstrates the extent of the soldiers’ suffering from the poor health conditions during the war, as Bartle states, “We picked Murph up and brushed the dancing flies from his skin (Powers, 2012: 209).

In the light of the above discussion, it is obvious that death, serious injury, losing body parts, poor health conditions, exhaustion, and so on, are the major physical dangers American soldiers faced during the war that have devastating impacts on their lives.

### 3.1.2 Post-War Psychological Trauma

Psychological trauma is a battle that American soldiers faced after the Iraq War in 2003. According to Corsini (2002: 1019), the term trauma can be defined as the result of a painful event, physical or mental state that causes sudden harm to the body or mind due to rejection, divorce, war, disasters, or discrimination, and it often leads to emotional or physical effects. Anxiety, fear, sadness and depression are among the psychological factors of trauma, coming from the negative experience of past events due to mental disorders (Satriawan, 2020: 1). Through a close reading of *The Yellow Birds*, it appears that it is a rich novel with the illustrations of psychological trauma that John Bartle and other characters face in the aftermath of war, starting with experiencing and witnessing the brutal and horrible events of the Iraq War in 2003. Murphy’s tragic death has psychological impacts on Bartle’s condition due to his inability to keep his promise as he had promised Murphy’s mother to take him back home alive. As he narrates,



*He was broken and bruised and cut and still pale except for his face and hands, and now his eyes had been gouged out, the two hollow sockets looking like red angry passages to his mind. His throat had been cut nearly through, his head hung limply and lolled from side to side, attached only by the barely intact vertebrae. We dragged him like a shot deer out of a wood line, trying but failing to keep his naked body from banging against the hard ground and bouncing in a way that would be forever burned into our memories. His ears were cut off. His nose cut off, too. He had been imprecisely castrated (Powers, 2012: 205-206).*

The above extract gives the picture of Murphy's tragic death as his dead tortured body has been found by Bartle and Sterling. This unexpected condition is tragic for them. They cannot believe in such an abnormal death. Then more tragic than that is the throwing of his body to the river to prevent his mother beholding the tortured body of her dead son in such a condition. Hence, Bartle is feeling guilty for his inability to take care of his friend, his broken promise to take him back alive and throwing his body into the river. This traumatic situation affects Bartle's psychological condition when he comes back home. Bartle promised Murphy's mother to bring her son home safely as he said "I promise I'll bring him home to you" (Powers, 2012: 47). But, he could not keep the promise, so his broken promise serves as a central factor of his psychological trauma after the Iraq War. The unfulfilled promise is a profound moral burden that underlines Bartle's inner conflict, survivor's guilt, and post-war disillusionment as Bartle narrates,

*All I really know for sure is that no matter how long I live, and no matter how I spend that time, those scales aren't ever coming level. Murph's always going to be eighteen; and he's always going to be dead. And I'll be living with a promise that I couldn't keep (Powers, 2012: 32).*

This quote documents how deeply John Bartle is affected by Murph's death and his broken promise. When he says "those scales aren't ever



coming level,” it means that nothing he does will ever make up for what happened, he cannot undo the past or fix the guilt he feels. The promise becomes a source of pain instead of comfort. It shows how war leaves lasting emotional wounds on the soldiers’ lives.

In addition to his broken promise, Bartle's psychological trauma is also caused by the destruction and brutality he experiences during the war. Seeing violence, death, and the inhumane treatment of Iraqi civilians deeply affects him. In this context, Bartle expresses his internal feelings to display what is happening in his mind as he says,

*Or should I have said that I wanted to die, not in the sense of wanting to throw myself off of that train bridge over there, but more like wanting to be asleep forever because there isn't any making up for killing women or even watching women get killed, or for that matter killing men and shooting them in the back and shooting them more times than necessary to actually kill them and it was like just trying to kill everything you saw [...] (Powers, 2012: 144).*

The above quote reveals the deep emotional and moral damage that war has caused to Bartle. He wants to sleep forever as a kind of escape and solution for his psychological toll due to what he has witnessed during the war, traumatising him and he cannot stand it. He is haunted by what he saw: the killing of women, the excessive violence, and the loss of humanity in those moments.

An extra cause of Bartle’s psychological trauma is his depression from Americans’ perception of him as a national hero without their realization of what he has participated in during the war because he thinks that a murderer should not be welcomed and thanked in this way, in contrast, Americans have to hate him for what he has done in Iraq. “I’m being eaten from the inside out and I can’t tell anyone what’s going on because everyone is so grateful to me [...]. I don’t deserve anyone’s gratitude and really they should all hate me” (Powers, 2012: 144).

What followed is a discussion of the devastating impacts of psychological trauma on the soldiers’ lives following the war and their return



to the States. It is also an investigation of the factors behind Bartle's psychological tolls as an example among other characters including the tragic death of Murphy, Bartle's broken promise, experiencing the destruction and brutality of war, witnessing cruelty against Iraqi civilians, the death of his fellow soldiers, the serious injury of his friends and his depression from Americans' perception of him as a national hero without their realization of what brutal actions they have committed during the war. In the next subsection, the study will dig into finding and discussing the violated principles of democracy in *The Yellow Birds* as the focal argument of this study.

### 3.2 The Violated Principles of Democracy in *The Yellow Birds*

February 15, 2003, has been marked as the largest protest event in human history because millions of people took to the streets of over 600 cities around the world to demonstrate against the U.S. invasion of Iraq (Walgrave and Rucht, 2010: xiii). According to De Loof (2016: 17), the motives like war on terror, spreading democracy, prosperity for Iraqis and the promotion of human rights were among the slogans of Bush's administration for waging the Iraq War. The human and political rights, equality, justice, rule of law, accountability, freedom, transparency, independence, prosperity, and peace are the cornerstone elements and values of democracy (Meyer-Resende, 2011: 5). In this section, through a close reading of the texts, conversations, characters' behaviours and the narrative techniques of the novel, the current study investigates the above-mentioned principles and values of democracy in *The Yellow Birds* to reveal to what extent they have been violated in the Iraqi War in 2003.

Humanitarian and human rights take a vital role in democracy and everyone deserves human rights just because they are human, and these rights should be the same for all people, no matter who they are (Vincent, 1986: 13). Tommasoli (2013: 13) says "Successful democratic governance must inevitably focus on promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms. For without this protection, there can be no democracy in any meaningful sense". Unfortunately, while reading the novel; it draws attention to any portrayals of American soldiers violating



human rights during the Iraq War. There are plentiful examples in the novel that document such a fact. Regarding this concern, Bartle confesses, "...there isn't any making up for killing women or even watching women get killed, or for that matter killing men and shooting them in the back and shooting them more times than necessary to actually kill them," (Powers, 2012: 144). This quotation confirms that the brutal actions that American soldiers have committed in Iraq never go in parallel with the human rights whereas one of Washington's claimed motives for declaring the war against Iraq was the promotion and protection of the human rights (Gregory, 2004: 181). It also does not match with the American slogan of uprooting terror. Although encountering terrorism was among the American reasons for declaring the war on Iraq as Gregory (2004: 185) explains that Bush considered the Iraq War as another front of "war on terrorism", but what the American soldiers have done in Iraq proves that the U.S.A. has mothered the terror. This has been supported by Chomsky who describes the U.S. as a leading terrorist state (Chomsky, 2001: 48). Thus, the destructive and cruel actions of U.S. forces in Iraq bear witness that America's using some catchphrases like the promotion of human rights and encountering terrorism were just fabrications to deceive the general populace if not the U.S. aims to follow its colonial ambitions and political interests which never works for protecting the human rights. This conclusion has been supported by Gregory (2004: 184) as he says, "human rights records were being used in a selective fashion to further political objectives and to legitimize military violence".

Equality is another crucial element of democracy (Meyer-Resende, 2011: 5). While investigating *The Yellow Birds*, it proves that American soldiers, who could represent the American policy, have violated this democratic feature because when their translator Malik was killed as the only Iraqi character in the novel, Bartle describes his death with no concern as he narrates, "Malik's body, crumpled and broken at the foot of the building, didn't shock me" (Powers, 2012: 14). In contrast, while American soldiers are being killed, they are deeply affected by their death, and they feel a deep depression and face psychological issues. For example, after finding Murph's dead body, Bartle narrates about how Sergeant Sterling



requires him to kill everyone on earth in revenge for his death as he says, "Fuck 'em, man. Fuck everyone on earth" (Powers, 2012: 211). This image in the novel proves that equality which is an essential element of democracy, has been corrupted because in a real democracy, people are equal, whereas to American soldiers, the death of Iraqis has no value, but when it comes to theirs, they want to burn the entire city in revenge for their victims. This situation also creates an image of "us" and "them," as a colonial tool to show that the colonisers have superiority over the colonised people (Gregory, 2004: 11). What has been discussed affirms that there is no equality in such a kind of treatment because in a democracy, people are equal. In other words, it validates that America has spoilt "equality" as a vital element of democracy as Malik, who can be symbolised to Iraqis, is treated as "them" while American dead soldiers are treated as "us".

As a central principle of democracy, peace or stability has a great role in conflict resolutions (Carbone, 2008: 5-6). One of the reasons behind the U.S.'s invading Iraq was allegedly peace and stability (Danju et al., 2013: 682), but by conducting a close textual analysis of the novel as an echo of the war, it appears that Powers has strongly rejected this in *The Yellow Birds* because there is no peace, no stability, it is as if America has created such a model of hell in Iraq. Accordingly, Bartle narrates, "We only pay attention to rare things, and death was not rare" (Powers, 2012: 11). Through this statement, Powers illustrates the extreme violence and instability in Iraq during the war, where death is regarded as something normal. This normalization of death thoroughly contrasts with the ideals of peace, which depend on stability and the rarity of violence. Since democracy is meant to promote conflict resolution, democratic societies are expected to experience peace, not the devastation and cruelty of war (Kinsella and Rousseau, 2008: 488). Moreover, Powers suggests that the true nature of war is perpetual violence rather than peace. This idea is echoed when Bartle says, "While I slept that summer, the war came to me in my dreams and showed me its sole purpose: to go on, only to go on. And I knew the war would have its way" (Powers, 2012: 4). The novel portrays a grim environment filled with violence and disorder which indicates the lack of peace and the resulting



failure of democracy to function effectively. In this regard Gregory (2004: 2018) highlights, “Troops who have fought a war are unable to secure the peace because they had orders to kill people, but not to protect them because the laws of belligerent occupation are clearly established and, for that matter”.

Another extra fundamental value of democracy is justice and fair (Independence Hall Association, 2025). Violating justice and fair is one of the prominent images in *The Yellow Birds*. Raihanah & Alosman (2022: 169) state “*The Yellow Birds* is a scream against the injustice of war and reprimands the issue against war farers and propagators”. Powers often uses a contradictory language mockingly. For example, when the colonel visits the soldiers, he says, “This is the land where Jonah is buried, where he begged for God’s justice to come.” He continued, “We are that justice” (Powers, 2012: 87). At this point, American justice has been compared to God’s justice. This draws the readers’ attention to a critical question: What kind of justice has the U.S.A. brought to Iraq? If killing the civilians and destructiveness is the justice that Bartle describes in the following quotation, then the colonel is confidently right as Bartle recounts,

*The war had killed thousands by September. Their bodies lined the pocked avenues at irregular intervals. They were hidden in alleys, were found in bloating piles in the troughs of the hills outside the cities, the faces puffed and green, allergic now to life* (Powers, 2012: 4).

What Powers has illuminated in the above quotation rejects the justice that the colonel talks about or their politicians propagated for in pre-war and its duration. The U.S. soldiers’ actions in Iraq are entirely unjust and never match with the fundamental principles and values of democracy such as killing people and dehumanising the Iraqi people regardless of age or gender. Regarding to this concern, the narrator recalls,

*The enemy dead strewn about a shallow ditch: two boys, sixteen or so, [...], had been shot in the face and torso. Their skin had lost most of its natural brown, and [...] their blood had*



*congealed in pools at the bottom of the ditch* (Powers, 2012: 118).

From the quotation above, it is evident that American forces kill the civilians regardless of age and gender as it displays that how the U.S. soldiers look at the children and teenagers as their enemies and kill them in a brutal way. Additionally, Bartle explains how Sterling shoots an elderly woman in a tragic way until she was motionless, as he says,

*The car stopped in the middle of the road, but Sterling did not stop the shooting. [...]. The door opened and she fell from the old car. She tried to drag herself to the side of the road. She crawled. Her old blood mixed with the ash and dust. She stopped moving*” (Powers, 2012: 22).

In the light of the above quotations, Powers draws a portrait of dehumanising aspects of the war to reveal that American soldiers have killed Iraqis regardless of age and gender because among the victims, there were children, elderly men and women to inspire the readers about the kind of justice America has brought to Iraq and the meaning of justice in American ideology.

Dehumanisation is an additional dimension of American violation and disrespect in Iraq during the war in 2003. Many imageries of demans or dehumanisation of Iraqis have been reflected in *The Yellow Birds*. David L. Smith (2011: 13) states that the dehumanisation “empowers us to perform acts that would under other circumstances, be unthinkable”. According to Democracy Reporting International (2011:5), one of the essential elements of democracy is the respect for human beings and political rights. There are countless illustrations in the novel that disclose how the American soldiers continue to dehumanise Iraqi people during the war. As Bartle narrates,

*Bodies were scattered about from the past four days of fighting in the open space between our positions and the rest of Al Tafar. They lay in the dust, broken and shattered and bent, their white shifts gone dark with blood. A few smoldered among the junipers and spare tufts of grass, and there was a heady mix of carbon*



*and bolt oil and their bodies burning in the newly crisp air of morning* (Powers, 2012: 4).

The quotation shows that Powers has portrayed a portrait of the battlefield where the dead bodies of Iraqis have spread, laid in dust, broken, shattered and bent. The blood has changed the colour of their clothes from white to dark. Their bodies have been bloated and smelt terrible. All these terrible images show the intentional violent actions of American soldiers against Iraqis to dehumanise them. Another example of dehumanisation is the death of Malik. While he dies, the soldiers talk about his death with no concern, and they argue if they can count him in the list of the deaths as Murph asks Bartle, "Doesn't count, does it? No. I don't think so," (Powers, 2012: 11). These two examples remind us of the concept of "homo sacer" in Derek Gregory (2004: 62) because despite all these massacres in Iraq due to their brutal actions, they have no concern for Iraqis, as if their death has no value. This is something that demeans and humiliates Iraqis in their perspective.

Accountability and transparency are fundamental principles of democracy and play a great role in the process of democratisation (Meyer-Resende, 2011: 5). Powers (2012: 35) writes, "Eventually, I had to learn that freedom is not the same thing as the absence of accountability" which means that it is not the right to do whatever you can do because you should feel responsibility. Through a deep reading of the novel, it seems that there are aspects of violating these democratic principles because along with other American soldiers, whether intentionally or compulsorily, Bartle shares with them in the U.S. crimes in Iraq and while he returns to the States, he is uncomfortable with their gratitude and sincere welcome to him in a way that they call him a national hero for his service in Iraq as the Americans do not know what brutal actions he has participated in Iraq due to the glorification of war by American media. However, Bartle realises that he is a murderer, he knows that he does not deserve all this great gratitude to be called a hero, but he does not want to tell them the truth, he does not want to tell them he is a murderer, he does not unveil what he has witnessed and experienced in Iraq to show the real face of American policy. As Bartle narrates,



*I'm being eaten from the inside out and I can't tell anyone what's going on because everyone is so grateful to me all the time and I'll feel like I'm ungrateful or something. Or like I'll give away that I don't deserve anyone's gratitude and really they should all hate me for what I've done but everyone loves me for it and it's driving me crazy (Powers, 2012: 144).*

The above quote demonstrates that Bartle avoids taking responsibility and lacks transparency in informing Americans about the brutal actions and crimes committed against Iraqis. Here, Bartle can be symbolised as the U.S.'s hypocritical policy that mislead the public perception through glorifying the war and is never ready to reveal its real face to the public. Now, it bears witness that America has spoilt the values of democracy and this contradicts with its pre-war dictums.

Another concern of violating principles and values of democracy is misinformation and disinformation as a mechanism of deceiving both Iraqis and Americans. Misinformation can be regarded as a condition when individuals confidently believe false information to be true. It was firstly defined by Kuklinski and colleagues in 2000 (Jerit and Zhao, 2020: 77), whereas disinformation refers to intentionally false or misleading information intended to make people believe unreal things (Fallis, 2014: 137). The information to distort public perception during the 2003 Iraq war represents a breach of democratic principles, a theme critically reflected in *The Yellow Birds*. The utilisation of a fragmented narrative technique can represent the misinformation and disinformation of the public perspective because the U.S. particularly through media could glorify and romanticise the war (Gregory, 2004: 165-167). Thus, Powers in *The Yellow Birds* idealizes war in a way that blurs reality and fiction, misleading readers about the true nature of war. Powers uses fragmented narratives such as non-linear timelines and disjointed episodes to show how truth becomes inaccessible, aligning with Pradiprao's (2025) claim that such narrative techniques explore the obscurity of absolute truth. A striking example is Bartle's forged letter to Murphy's mother, which symbolizes how the U.S. government deceives the public to obscure its true intentions. This act of deception



reflects a broader pattern of misinformation and disinformation in U.S. policy, especially in the Iraq War. Gregory (2004) believes that the Operation of Iraqi Freedom which is regarded as a fake excuse to take control of Iraq is much more like old European colonialism. The points outlined above serve as practical demonstrations of both misinformation and disinformation because they have been used by American fake policy to deceive the public opinion as a means of purchasing its benefit, so this policy undermines the American request of democracy.

There are also other aspects of violated principles and values of democracy that have echoed in the novel such as the lack of the freedom. As a vital principle of democracy, protection of human freedom is one of the forefront expectations of democracy (Shapiro and Hacker-Cordon, 1999: 1). While looking at the novel, it seems that this fundamental principle of democracy has been degraded as a reproduction of the 2003 war in Iraq. For example, Bartle says, "We were just returning from one of our cushier patrols through the sparsely occupied buildings on the southern outskirts of Al Tafari" (Powers, 2012: 151). In this quotation, Powers has used a figurative language, so the occupied buildings can represent the land of Iraq which proves that the American forces came to Iraq as occupiers, not liberators (Salih, 2022: 72) and when a country is occupied, its people are not free, or if they are, it is a restricted freedom. Additionally, in another part of the novel, Bartle narrates how the American soldiers behave with Iraqis as slaves when they go to a man from his doorway, the Iraqi begs them so as not to kill him, "Mister, mister, don't shoot, mister, [...] His fear was obvious as he stood there shaking, his body framed by the soft light in the doorway [...]. We bound him and sat him on the ground against the block wall of his home," (Powers, 2012: 194-195). This example shows how American forces severely limited the freedom of the Iraqi people. The fact that Iraqis refer to Americans as "Mister" reflects a colonial mind-set, suggesting a power imbalance where the colonisers and occupiers see themselves as superior. This aligns with Derek Gregory's theory, which explores how the West constructs the "other" through ideas like the colonial present, the architecture of enmity, and the war on terror, among others



(Gregory, 2004: 1, 17, 30, 47, 62, 65, and 144) and gives evidence that the Americans are colonisers, not liberators.

The U.S.A not only restricted the Iraqi freedom, but it also imposed similar restrictions on its soldiers. For example, the soldiers are treated as tools to follow the orders to kill the civilians and they are unable to refuse commands, it is not important if the order suits the humanitarian principles and democratic values. Regarding this, Bartle narrates how Sergeant Sterling screams into Bartle's ear to kill the civilians, "Shoot these hajji fucks" (Powers, 2012: 19). The quote reinforces the soldiers' obligation to continue killing, denying them the right to refuse. Another aspect is that when Bartle promises Murphy's mother to bring her son home safely, he is being attacked by Sterling for the promise. As Bartle narrates in this regard, "You're making fucking promises now? [...] He knocked me to the ground quickly and hit me twice in the face, once below the eye and once directly in the mouth" (Powers, 2012: 47). This validates that the right of freedom has been restricted because the soldiers do not have the right of freedom of speech as the simplest right. Gregory (2004: 225) views the type of freedom and democracy that America demand for as fake and propaganda.

Manipulation is an extra core issue that undermines democracy. In this context, Christiano (2021: 110) explains manipulation as a primarily issue for democracy because it does not suit to the democratic context. Through a critical and close perspective to *The Yellow Birds*, the study finds facets of manipulating by the U.S.A. as an echo of invading Iraq in 2003. For instance, Powers has portrayed the role of Iraqis voicelessness and the passive role of their characters in the novel. The only Iraqi character, who appears in the novel, is Malik as their translator. Upon his death, Bartle and Murphy have no concern for his death as if his death has no value. They even discuss if they can enrol his name in the list of the victims. Murph asks Bartle, "Doesn't count, does it? No. I don't think so," (Powers, 2012: 11). Here, Powers unveils a colonial mechanism which is the creating of "other" to tell the readers that American forces revive the colonial tools in Iraq. Additionally, Malik as the only Iraqi character tells the American soldiers that he wants to practise English as he says, "My friend, I need to speak



English for the practice” (Powers, 2012: 9). As such, Powers illuminates that Iraqis should speak English in their native land because America has manipulated and invaded Iraq, so Iraqis need to suit with the colonial culture. As language is a crucial colonial tool to colonise countries. This concern has been supported by critics and scholars. Regarding this, Ashcroft et al. (2004: 7) state, “One of the main features of imperial oppression is control over language”. Derek Gregory (2004: 249) explains that in American colonial ideology, the language of the opponents like Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine is called the language of the monstrous as a colonial way to demean them. Again, this never aligns with the values and principles of democracy.

Following these discussions, the study has found numerous violated principles of democracy and some colonial tools, showing that the United States of America has corrupted the main values and principles of democracy, including humanitarian and human rights, equality, justice, freedom, peace, prosperity, and more. In other words, under the guise of democracy, the promotion of human rights, and encountering terrorism, the U.S.A. has misled and deceived the public view, particularly Iraqis and Americans to violate the fundamental principles of democracy for the sake of its imperial and colonial ambitions to get its political and economic interests. There have also been found colonial tools in the novel which can be considered as spreading democracy has been used as a colonial pretext for invading. In this regard, Encarnación (2003: 47) explains that President George W. Bush’s invasion of Iraq clearly marked the re-emergence of “democratic imperialism” in the United States’ foreign policy. Such American deceitful policy has been felt by the U.S. soldiers. In this regard, Murphy says, “I’m never going to tell anyone I was here when we get home,” (Powers, 2012: 164). Powers wants to tell the readers that it was a shameful war because it contradicts the American pre-war guise that is why after his back home, he is not ready to tell anyone that he served in the American army in Iraq. Furthermore, Bartle continues, “Maybe I had intended to come here [Iraq]. I wanted something, something different” (Powers, 2012: 61-62). This quote affirms that through its hypocritical policy and fraudulent policy under the guise of democracy, America could



mislead not only Iraqis, but even its soldiers because in the previous quote, it appears that American soldiers have been convinced to serve in the army to uproot the threats of terrorism and increasing democracy, but during the Iraq War in 2003, even the soldiers understood that what the U.S. called for was just a pretext for its imperial and colonial interests, if not American brutal actions in Iraq bear witness that the U.S.A. is the mother of terror as this has been supported by Chomsky (2001) and Gregory (2004).

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

1. Human rights, freedom, justice, equality, fairness, transparency, prosperity and responsibility are the most crucial principles and values of democracy (Meyer-Resende, 2011: 5). This shows that democracy is hollow in their absence, but they have been violated by the U.S forces in Iraq.

2. The U.S.'s pre-war justifications provided by the United States for the Iraq war do not align with the post-war realities on the ground. Spreading democracy, rebuilding the country, and the promotion of human rights, prosperity, and uprooting terror were pre-war catchwords propagated by the Bush administration, but the Iraqis experienced nothing but suffering and destruction.

3. Several violated principles of democracy and some colonial tools, showing that the United States of America has corrupted the main values and principles of democracy, among which are human rights, equality, justice, freedom, peace, prosperity, and so on.

4. Under the guise of democracy, the promotion of human rights and encountering terrorism, the U.S.A. has misled and deceived the public view, particularly Iraqis then Americans to violate the fundamental principles of democracy for the sake of its imperial and colonial ambitions to get its political and economic interests.

5. There are other colonial tools in the novel where spreading democracy has been used as a colonial pretext for invading, such as othering, slavery, and humiliation.

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