



## RAJIV JOSEPH'S *BENGAL TIGER AT THE BAGHDAD ZOO* A CRITICAL STUDY OF WAR AND ITS NEGATIVE IMPACT FROM IRONIC PERSPECTIVE

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<p><b>Received:</b> February 11<sup>th</sup> 2023 <b>Accepted:</b> March 11<sup>th</sup> 2023 <b>Published:</b> April 17<sup>th</sup> 2023</p>	<p>Rajiv Joseph's <i>Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo</i> is a play that depicts the Iraq war in 2003. The American invasion of Iraq is known to be one of the millstones of postmodern history. The play approached the war in a documentary style. It is based on a real story that took place in the Bagdad Zoo when a couple of American soldiers murdered a rare Bengal tiger. The play is based on real names, historical places and characters which make it eligible as a documentary play. This paper depends on the Just War Theory in an ironic representation of the American invasion of Iraq that was held under the concept of both counterterrorism, as part of the American policy, and humane justifications. The paper also addresses the negative impact of war on both the Iraqi people and the American soldiers.</p>

**Keywords:** Just War Theory, Counterterrorism, Documentary theatre, Trauma, negative impact, irony.

### INTRODUCTION

In the wake of 9/11, In January 2002, the President of the United States George W. Bush warned "that the war against terrorism is only beginning and that the threat against which it is directed remains dire. That threat, he said, includes the terrorists themselves...and states sympathetic to terrorism, particularly those disposed to acquire or further develop weapons of mass destruction" (Farer 359). President Bush's speech before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union implied that the United States was going to pursue and eradicate terrorists wherever they are, as well also thwart countries that are viewed friendly to terrorism from increasing their volumes of weapons of mass destruction. Also, The United States will seek terrorist before they knock its door (359). Moreover, to secure its claim as moral supremacist, the Americans assert that the war is part of its efforts of counterterrorism as well as a liberation of Iraqi civilians from the tyrant Saddam Hussein. Terrorism is defined as "more than a criminal act or acts. It is directed against civilians and against the very fabric of society" (Samuel and White 1). While the word counter means establishing counter- blows after the terrorist initial blow. This would lead to cyclical violence that only keeps escalating. The Americans painted an image that war is serving a humane cause and protecting not only itself but the world at large from the Iraqi regime weapons of mass destruction.

Rajiv Joseph's *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* is a documentary play since it is based on an actual event that was published in newspapers. The playwright points this out in an interview with Gerald Raymond. Joseph states that "The initial impulse was a small article at the back of the paper about an incident at the Baghdad zoo that I read in 2003" ( Rajiv Joseph ). The portrayal of contemporary historical reality is named "documentary drama" or simply "docudrama".

Documentary theater aims to denounce the media spectacle of war and to provide alternative access to the reality by presenting an exact telling of war experiences. According to Carol Martin Contemporary documentary theatre represents a struggle to shape and remember the most transitory history the complex ways in which men and women think about the events that shape the landscapes of their lives (17). The invasion of Iraq has stimulated the world in both the literary fictional field and the non-fictional. It has enhanced the literary production with many stories where people recorded their own experiences and that of their fellows that occurred in Iraq.

The novelty of the documentary drama is that it attempts to capture the horrors of the Iraqi war from these personal experiences and thus deliver a new intimate perspective of it. Plays that adopted such techniques are: *Guantanamo: Honour Bound to Defend Freedom* (2004) by Gillian Slovo and Victoria Britain, *Mottor town* by Simon Stephens (2014), as well as *Vertical Hour* by David Hare (2013) and many others. Despite the fact of its documentary style, Rajiv Joseph inclusion of fantastical elements, like the ghosts, is to intensify the real depicted tragedies of the

play. Just war theory is used to examine the real events in the play and to deliver a verdict the war its reason and conduct in the aftermath.

### Just War Theory: Tradition and Background

Just war theory has two guiding principles (**Jus Ad Bellum**) which means a war for just cause and (**Jus In Bello**) which means justice in war conduct. Made by St. Augustine in the twelve hundreds, Just War Principles attempt to organize the conduct of war and going to war as the last resort. St. Augustine's theorizing endeavors come as a method to reconcile a peaceful Christian framework with the Roman empire's war mentality. The conclusion is that war is an unavoidable yet regrettable choice and violence hence is justified although it should be used as sparingly as possible adhering to Jus ad bellum and jus in bello as guiding trajectories. However, moral and religious reasoning come to its duo, when the world moved into a more secular approach enhanced by the failure of the crusades following the renaissance of the Christian, Jewish, and Islamic cultures (Evans 3).

At the start of the twentieth century, Just war theory went through a phase of stagnation as the nuclear war was very much impermissible, and the cold war did not cause an outbreak of gratuitous violence. However, a new era had been ushered after the collapse of the Soviet Union the United States became a rare supreme power as the unilateral force in the world. Consequently, the Vietnam war somewhat renewed and sustained traditions of Just War Theory with the writing of Michael Walzer's *Just and Unjust War* (1977), and the humanitarian intervention became a supplement to a just cause. The 'war on terror' launched by W. Bush after 9/11 and the attack on the world global center and the Pentagon (4). The Iraqi war came under the justification of counterterrorism. The concept problematized the principle of jus ad bellum. The principle stated that declaring war should be the last solution to any conflict. Moreover, war should be waged on the bases of just cause and good intentions. This means that the claims of war should involve righteous ideals that are initiated by the ideas of maintaining peace or self-defense (Rocheleau 29). The concept of 'Jus in bello' states that the soldiers involved in the war must not target unarmed civilians. The army must restrain the weapons used to the level of "appropriate violence" in order to avoid extreme and needless damage (Newton & May 19).

According to Walzer "The killing of combatants is justifiable ... only where the war itself is legal. But where the war is illegal ... there is nothing to justify the killing and these murders are not to be distinguished from those of any other lawless robber bands"(38). Rajiv Joseph in his *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* portrays both sides (Iraqi and Americans) grappling with the reasoning they were given for war and how to reconcile such idealism with the tragedies they must deal with. The insertion of a talking tiger that turns into a ghost within the depicted real-life event, illustrates the playwright's ironic yet tragic treatment of invasion.

Rajiv Joseph's Pulitzer-nominated play is set during the early days of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. It revolves around the interweaved lives of a caged Tiger, killed by an American named Kev soldier after biting off the hand of another soldier named Tom. Besides, an Iraqi translator is tormented by the ghost of Uday Hussein, who murdered his sister and for whom he used to sculpt exquisite topiary. Tom and Kev, as well as other American soldiers, were sent to Iraq to free the Iraqi citizens from the cruelty of Saddam Hussein's rule. The playwright ironically critiques the American soldiers' presence in Iraq by portraying the protagonists as useless and corrupt. Tom and Kev were out on a mission to protect a rare Bengal tiger in the Baghdad zoo. The tiger speaks about a group of lions that fled the zoo. The soldiers were standing next to the tiger, unable to hear what he is saying, started to speak of their accomplishments.

In scene one, Tom and Kev attempt to comprehend the war, To Kev, the war is dull, when he wonders why the Iraqis could attack them despite the fact that they came for the sake of their liberation "KEV. I don't know why they wanna kill us. We're trying to protect their zoo, you know?" (Joseph 8). Kev here struggles with the fact that not all Iraqis view them as liberators hence he should be cautious about his life. Ironically, the tiger whom they are protecting bites off Tom's hand. Yet, this comes as a reaction to their harassment of the tiger with Uday Hussein stolen golden gun. Tiger remarks, "This is what I'm talking about. Pure stupidity" (12). Joseph sets a sarcastic situation where the tiger bites the hand that allegedly came to protect him which leads Kev to shoot and kill the tiger. Killing the animal signals that Tom and Kev have failed in their peaceful mission and set the tone of the play as both violent and sarcastic.

The playwright portrays Tom and Kev not only as bewildered killers but as thieves. Joseph is very sensible when it comes to the violence in this scene, as he demonstrates them not to take a life of a civilian but an animal that as the incident could be open to interpretations that somewhat could justify their actions as self-defense since they are in the early heated days of the invasion. By doing so he stripped the combatant from the vindication of duty, but rather violent thieves.

Kev: You got to kill Saddam's kids, man. That's awesome.

Tom: Yeah, it was cool

This act of killing is not the only source of Tom's joy, for what makes him more delighted is that he had won "a gold plated gun", and a "gold toilet seat" that were stolen from

Saddam's castle by American veterans:

Tom: The toilet was gold. Sergeant dismantled the whole thing. I won the seat off him in poker.

Kev: You won a toilet seat?

Tom: Gold toilet seat. I won the gold toilet seat. (Joseph 10-11)

This minor theft parallels the bigger theft committed, which is the principal aim behind the invasion namely to dominate the Iraqi oil resources (Hinnebusch 212). The other reason is what scholar Slavoj Žižek considered that during the period of the Iraq's invasion, the United States was seen as the strongest on the world stage. By starting the war, it tried to retain its hegemonic power, as scholar Slavoj Žižek expressed that the Iraq invasion served "the urge to brutally assert ...U.S. hegemony" (326).

Tom seems to have forgotten why he is in Iraq. His operation has turned into a mere adventure to get wealthy. Rajiv Joseph mocks the Americans who want to steal anything, even if it is a toilet seat. The irony of the Americans' invasion belies a message to the American citizens who are misguided by their administration about their real objectives in Iraq. President George W. Bush has made the claim that the American troops existence in Iraq "to free its people and to defend the world from grave danger" (Bush 2003); Nevertheless, in the play the real danger is presented as being the American army, not vice versa. One can observe that Kev's mission at the Baghdad Zoo has been the true reason that prevented him from killing any of the Iraqi citizens: "Not one Iraqi I get to kill" (Joseph 11).

For Kev, it is justified whatever he does since for them the cause of war is just. His sense of guilt is masked as heroism which is built on bloodshed. He speaks of the Vietnam war where the soldiers were fortunate not only for killing Vietnamese but furthermore for having their women as well: "You know back in Vietnam, there was so many Vietnamese bitches all over the place, and everyone got a piece" (Joseph 11). The rich construction of the first scene by Joseph is to ridicule both the reason behind the war and the conduct in the war. The cause of the war was to defend one's own nation, which is in line with the Just War theory concept (Fotion 13) a just reason would have led to the humane treatment of Iraqi civilians. Ironically, justice war is used to justify this war and not prevent it. The theory is used by name only without any application of its core concepts.

Afterwards, Joseph introduces Musa. Musa is presented as Main Iraqi component in the play. He translates for the Americans during their military operations. Musa's character is crucial because it reflects the negative impact of the war on an entire Iraqi generation. In the beginning, he seems to be lost between formal American and the informal American English. Musa struggles to understand the American soldiers in spite of him utilizing the help of the dictionary: "I speak English, but I don't understand casual American phrases. So, when I go with the soldiers, I listen for these phrases and I write them down so that I can better understand the way you speak" (Joseph 14). The use of the American dialect indicates a symbolism in place. Where the use of informal American English signifies the dirty reasoning behind the invasion. While the use of standard dictionary English seems to symbolize the deceptive goals of the invasion. Musa's failure to understand informal American English signals his inability to comprehend the true causes of the war.

Joseph goes on to present a terrified Iraqi couple by the Americans in the third scene. Kev attacks their house the woman yells at him to leave: "Get out of our house! Leave us alone! ...There's nothing here for you! Go away... We've done nothing wrong. Go away" (Joseph 18). The Iraqi woman is shown to be attacked and afraid of the American force. This causes Kev to spoil the house while the couple is debating.

Man: Hathe shee-yreed? [What does he want?]

Woman: Ma a'roof, daykherboon ilbait. Yreedoon

Yakhtook wiyahoom! [I don't know, they're wrecking the house. They want to take you away!]

(Kev pushes the man.)

Kev: You speak fucking English, I said!

Musa: He doesn't speak English!

Kev: Fuck that, man. (Joseph 19)

Kev forces the Iraqi man not only to kneel but also not to use Arabic, as well as he forces him not to use Arabic his mother tongue and use English instead. This demonstrates a clear scorning of the man's rights down to use his mother language in his own country. The jus in bello principle has been completely derailed. This scene illustrates how the Americans forbid the Iraqis from their own basic rights while spreading the narrative of a deserved entitlement to spread these rights. Ironically, this is not what President Bush announced the role of America to "support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world" (Bush 2005).

The woman appears to be accustomed to such behavior as she offers Kev all she possesses.: "Take it, steal it, steal everything we have. Criminals, all of you, every one of you" (Joseph 21). These words are expressed by a victim. This Iraqi women represents all of the Iraqi citizens that were victimized due to the American invasion that came to seize their natural resources. Moreover, Rajiv Joseph demonstrates that the damaging impact of this invasion has touched even the Americans and made them suffer from the cruelty of their own country. This is presented in the play through episodes of post-traumatic stress disorder that the soldiers are suffering from. A scholar by the name of Rick Kelly has clarified that: "These young people have been dispatched to a war that was based on a series of flagrant lies, and that violated numerous precepts of international law. They are now being ordered to intimidate and terrorize the Iraqi people". The playwright's inclusion of the ghost of the Bengal tiger and other ghost as well, is to witness these psychological disorders. The tiger also shows the strength of a fierce animal, as he remembers, while haunting Kev, that he attacked children namely little boy and a girl because it was hungry and needed something to

eat. This scene metaphorically symbolizes that strong nations, too, attack the weak to become more powerful exemplified in America and Iraq.

Musa is pledged with anxiety and the feeling of guilt. The ghost of Uday tortures him by telling him that he is not different than him he is also an immoral human being. Musa cannot comprehend that he resembles Uday in any way. "I'm tired of making the same mistake ...I always work for the wrong people...I'm tired of being made a fool" (Joseph 56).

Tom has always looked down at Musa; he treated him as his slave. So, Musa shoots him as a way to act of rebellion. Tom, dies in the desert: "No... I can't believe I'm going to die here... I'm from Michigan..." (Joseph 63). The cries of Tom are even more striking considering that his presence in Iraq has been pointless. He has been part of the force that destroyed Iraq; thus, he paid the price by dying in the middle of nowhere. Musa, also, falls into ruins after realizing that he became a killer as well. The ghost of Uday tells Musa that just like himself, he also has become a killer and a terrorist adding to the other characters in the play, such as the two soldiers Tom, Kev, and the Tiger, he as well as becoming a killer and a terrorist.

All the characters end up as ghosts in the play. The play closes with them struggling due to their internal crises. The same scene also encompasses Tom, Kev's ghost and the Tiger's ghost informing each other of their psychological dilemmas:

Kev: You feel incomplete without your hand. You feel like  
You're never going to be you again....

Tom: I didn't know you're gonna kill yourself! I'm  
sorry,...

Tom: I wish I hadn't done that! But it's over now. I'm  
fucked up with guilt, what do you want me to do about it?

Tiger: I have to become something else. I renounce  
Tigerhood. I renounce myself.

Kev: We all have a psych problem now, Tommy. Me and  
the Tiger and You. (Joseph 51)

The play concludes with a horrifying scene of Baghdad being bombed and everything seems to fall into pieces. Here, the idea of Baghdad becoming a city haunted by ghosts has been fully realized by the playwright.

## CONCLUSION

The United States gave inconsistent reasons to justify its war in Iraq. The war was not a reaction to hostility or even an imminent threat of attack, the cause was regime change. The US government was attempting a major extension of the doctrine of jus ad bellum. The existence of an aggressive and murderous regime, it claimed, was a legitimate occasion for war and the use of the 9/11 tragedy that Iraq had no part in as there was no clear evidence. In more familiar terms, this was an argument to prevent a war not to cause it. Rajiv Joseph portrays Americans as they failing their purpose for the war in every aspect. They countered the Iraqi people with fear and looting rather than adhering to jus in bello. Moreover, the playwright illustrated the negative impact of this invasion on the American and Iraqis alike. Joseph's use of the ghost to show the impact of trauma on American soldiers has vindicated some of their guilt albeit demonizing the US even more.

Joseph is not only criticizing the Americans but all who let their predisposition rule over their better judgment. As he portrays the Iraqi translator Musa becoming evil as well since he served evil individuals, Uday and the US army. He represents every Iraqi traitor who has harmed his people for his best interest. The consequences of his doings is manifested via his internal struggle. In short, Joseph's message is rather humane, to keep one's humanity and don't be guided to have a negative effect on people's lives albeit American, Iraqi, or of any nationality.

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