

## **A Study of Roy Scranton's War Porn in the Scope of Johan Galtung's Violence Triangle Theory**

By

**Ahmed Abd Alrazzaq Majhool**

Wasit University/ College of Education for Humanities/ Department of English/ Iraq

Email: [ahmedalkhalidi127@gmail.com](mailto:ahmedalkhalidi127@gmail.com)

**Lamiaa Ahmed Rasheed**

Tikrit University/ College of Education for Women/Department of English /Iraq

### **Abstract**

In Roy Scranton's War Porn, Scranton strips away the gloss that most war novels have, which exalts the life of the troops, and smacks the reader back to reality. He spares no one or anything from his ferocious stare. Instead, Scranton highlights for the reader what war means from the perspectives of the occupiers and the oppressed. It discusses the misery of war, its devastation, and the crimes intentional or not that the US army committed during that time. The novel alternates between multiple settings: the first is a warm and drama-filled barbeque party for a small group of post-college liberals in Utah, and the second is a more menacing war front in Iraq, where a veteran named Wilson talks about his view and experience of the war and how he is somehow dehumanized into a total killing machine while the third is about a mathematics student who is ripped apart by the occupation and invasion of Iraq. The novel is analyzed according to Galtung's violence triangle theory, in which the novel demonstrates a lot of events that represent direct, structural, and even cultural violence, cultural violence is the main focus of this paper.

**Keywords:** Scranton, war porn, Galtung, violence, cultural violence

### **Introduction**

American author of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry Roy Scranton is a gifted and creative author. He was born into a working-class household. He was a member of the American military in Iraq for four years. According to a 2016 interview by Eric London for the World Socialist Web Site with Roy Scranton, in 2002, Scranton joined the US Army and spent time in Baghdad with the 1st Armored Division as a Private Second Class before eventually being promoted to Sergeant. In an unprecedented move, he also makes an effort to portray the realities of the war from the perspective of the Iraqi people in his novel, which deals with both the experiences of American soldiers in Iraq and at home (p. 1)

Roy Scranton wrote about his military service in Iraq in an article titled "War and the City: Of Arms and the Pen" which appeared in the New York Times in 2010, he states that his deployment was easy and that he didn't kill anyone as he has never fired a weapon in a battle yet he got shot at, he states that he mostly drove his Humvee around the city of Baghdad, and also he asserts that he saw bad people and nasty things, he remembers the hatred for the Iraqis, whom they called 'hadjis' but he also recalls "the dusty bodies in Baghdad streets," he describes paying a moral cost after witnessing the brutal labor of the empire firsthand while performing it with his own two hands.

Roy Scranton says in an article in rolling stone, that his job was to gather "artillery

rounds and he drove a Humvee in south Baghdad called Dora, and then down the highway to Karbala and Najaf, looking for roadside bombs and snipers. Roy Scranton's 2016 debut novel, *War Porn*, provides the opposite perspective from that of most war novels, which concentrate on how wars affect soldiers' mental states instead, it deals with the horror of wars and their destructive results and the crimes that are committed during that period by U.S army whether intended or not. This novel differentiates from other novels in its truthful, undisguised narrative of events and the presentation of the Iraqi people in a just rather unexaggerated way. As Christopher W. Clark(2020) says Although Iraqi characters frequently appear in war fiction, they are frequently shown from the viewpoint of the US soldier, confirming a long-standing societal belief that only US narratives are credible(p. 64).

Roy Scranton's *War Porn*, as Nathan Webster (2016) explains, is about the disgusting and repugnant Iraqi war. It mercilessly mocks soldiers of all stripes and has no atonement for any of the characters. This could be a reference to how war is useless and only results in anguish and pain. Charles Thorpe (2022), states that the novel alternates between multiple settings: the first is a warm and drama-filled barbecue party for a small group of post-college liberals in Utah, and the second is a more menacing war front in Iraq, where a guy named Wilson talks about his view and experience of the war and how he is somehow dehumanized into a total killing machine and the third is about a mathematics student who is ripped apart by the occupation and invasion of Iraq. The mathematician is treated in the most abhorrently inhumane manner imaginable and is then transported to a frightening dystopian nightmare where he is detained under the control and occupation of the US army. Due to the presence of a former American warrior who adheres to the torturer ideals of the US military, which stand for American sadism, the barbecue party is heated and tense which is both uneasy and awkward.

The novel also shows the real horrors of the Iraq desert and the violence of the American empire that is exerted on Iraqis, which is hidden from the public to produce an image of a pure American mind and everyday life in illusionary settings. Snatches of phrases that seem to be out of order suddenly erupt into the story. The work is interspersed with a poem titled "Babylon," which is written in the jargon of military orders, etiquette, news reports, and patriotic ideology. The awful banality and meaningless language of the empire yell down and shatter meaning into meaningless pieces. (p. 40)

## **Methodology**

The study's fundamental analytical approach is Johan Galtung's violencetriangle hypothesis. Galtung is a Norwegian sociologist and the primary pioneer of the field of peace and conflict studies. He is widely respected, and his thoughts have altered how the world views violence. He depicts violence as a three-dimensional triangle with three dimensions: direct, structural, and cultural violence. Thus, the study employs the cultural dimension only of Galtung's violence triangle theory as a means to analyze the violence in Roy Scranton's *War Porn* and use the result of the analysis to determine the extent of the existence of cultural violence and its forms in Iraq through the policies of American government as the main cause of violence expressed culturally by the U.S government and how these policies are reflected on Iraq whether intended or not.

### ***Analysis of Roy Scranton's war porn***

The first chapter of the novel is about the frontier of violence and its destructive concept; it is entitled 'Strange Hells on Columbus day,' which refers to a war poem by Ivor

Gurneys. This poem, according to Douglas Higbee (2008) is about the hellish environment of war and how there is no futility behind it. It elaborates on the fact that war is destructive and fruitless (p. 51). The title holds greater significance and meaning. Columbus Day is the day that Christopher Columbus discovered America, but many said that the discovery was more like colonization rather than a discovery, this discovery would later find its way into fitting the two terms of American exceptionalism and nationalism, which is used to justify most of the atrocities done by the U.S empire including the war in Iraq. According to Perveen Ali (2011), although the war in Iraq was ruled illegitimate from a global perspective, from the perspective of the United States, which saw itself as the dominating power, it constituted a type of authorized exceptionalism (p. 9)

The first scene is about a party, which is held on Columbus Day between friends that get interrupted by the arrival of a previous veteran in Iraq, named Aron, a muscular, tatted man that has a charming look yet a mysterious character. Aron gets into a heated argument with Mel, who accuses him of committing war crimes and likens him to a Nazi. She can't understand how he can be involved in this kind of illegal war and "then act like it doesn't matter" (Scranton, 2016).

Mel is a character in the novel who despises war crimes and thinks the war in Iraq is illegal. Mel strengthens the idea of U.S exceptionalism for readers to see. U.S exceptionalism according to Heather A. Hager (2013) refers to a term that is used initially, in 1831, by Alexis de Tocqueville, this term refers to the United States being quantitatively different from developed nations, which is driven by several reasons, because its distinctive historical development, national ideology, and political and religious institutions. This concept has been working as an auto-response to every decision made by the U.S empire, this rhetoric has come out from a lot of presidential mouths, From the fare well speech of Washington to the address of Lincoln Gettysburg to the portrait of the shining city on the hell by Reagans to nearly every single George Bush's speeches of 9/11. (p. 9)

The novel talks about the war in Iraq, which is held under the concept of nationalism, and U.S exceptionalism. These concepts give a pathway or a legitimation to violence. But first violence should be defined. Violence according to Galtung and Fisher(2013) is any form of avoidable insult to the needs required to live a free, healthy life without any constraint. (p.53) Galtung further explains the state in which the violence happens, he explains that violence is present when people are under the influence of something so that their actual bodily and mental realizations fall short of what they may realize potentially. (Galtung, 1969, p. 168). The tragic events that occurred in Iraq both during and after the invasion resulted in the restriction of the Iraqis' freedom, which hindered their actual and somatic capabilities putting them under their potential realization.

The Norwegian, scientist Johan Vincent Galtung, the principal founder of the discipline of peace and conflict studies, has said that "peace" happens only when violence is absent. (p. 168). According to Galtung(1969, 1990), there are three kinds of violence, which are direct, structural, and cultural violence, which work semitonally in a looping, rather circled way. Due to Galtung's definition of cultural violence, it is any violence that uses a cultural component to justify structural or direct violence. Religion and ideology are two examples of how violence permeates a culture. That can be used to justify or legitimize direct or systemic violence. The spheres of culture like language, art, empirical science, and formal science (logic, mathematics). The ubiquitous face of the Leader, flags, songs, military parades; incendiary speeches and posters; stars, crosses, and crescents are all parts of a culture that are used to generate violence (Galtung, 1990, 291)

According to Galtung(1990), one of the spheres that cultural violence works through, is ideology, in discussing this concept, Galtung explains that sometimes religious beliefs find their way to be used in political ideology, he elaborates that religion encourages the idea of God and Satan, each of whom gets to choose his people, the chosen are closer to god and the unchosen are closer to Satan, while this distinction might not work in the same ways in modern times, as lines might not be drawn between god, the chosen, the unchosen, and Satan instead it might be drawn between chosen and the unchosen, which Galtung calls them self and other. Examples nationalism with the state working as god's successor. This concept would transfer the power from God to the state, which gives the inherent right to destroy or redeem, or control the life creations. (pp. 298-299). If both nationalism and self-steep other and statism get mixed, then the result is the ugly ideology of the nation-state, which has a catastrophic effect, killing in war, according to Galtung and fisher(2013) is now done in the name of the nation comprising all citizens with some shared ethnicity.

This novel has many speeches and explicit references to U.S exceptionalism and nationalism. One of the instances is In the second chapter of the novel when the president of the United State, George Bush, gives speeches that represent the concept of U.S exceptionalism; in the chapter, which is entitled The Fall (Baghdad, 2003), he says that "coalition forces came reluctantly and that the people of the United States and our friends and allies will not live at the mercy of an outlaw regime"(Scranton,2016), which conveys a threat to America, for the reason that they don't want the fight to be fought inside the United States affecting soldiers, police, and doctors, and that their measures would not be short, with a total sureness of victory; this is drawn from the fact that America is the chosen nation by God, and that they have the right to change anything that doesn't fit their desire. According to examples of cultural violence mentioned in a 2007 interview with Galtung, "U.S. exceptionalism to persuade Americans that it is not only their right but also their duty to begin killing in Iraq" (Espinoza, 2021, 3:58).

This ideology would be then integrated into the nation's people, including soldiers, which is used to convince soldiers that they are doing their job and that certain things have to change by them, for example, the encouraging speech of Lieutenant Colonel Braddock, who says to his soldiers

We are soldiers, the fighting men who man the ramparts protecting America from the insidious evils of terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism that now threaten our way of life... Men, we're here to make America safe, and to make the world safe for America. (Scranton, 2016)

According to Galtung(1990), cultural violence makes people see something turned from red, giving it the green light or at least turning it to yellow approvable to be considered (p.292), for example being killed by a nation is right but by a person is wrong like the genocide that happens in Iraq, which according to Ali. A. Allawi (2007) as reported by the *Lancet journal* in 2006, the journal estimation of the number of Iraqi death may have exceeded 650,000 fatalities in Iraq between March 2003 and July 2006. (p. 450)

Another form through which cultural violence works, is through racism, if God chooses white and not colored people according to the assumption of a nation, U.S exceptionalism for example, then whites are preferable and they are the chosen ones. In the second chapter, where specialist Wilson narrates the events saying, "We'd prepared our whole lives for this. Bombed little brown people helicopters swooping low, the familiar sight of American machinery carving death from a Third World wasteland." (Scranton, 2016). He is referring to Iraqis as

“little brown people” and further states that Iraq is a “wasteland”, and in another scene, where both Wilson and a soldier named Pyle say that they should be careful in involving in any relationships with Iraqis or ‘Hadjis’ as they are “fucking diseased or some shit. Catch some freaky Mohammed clap.”(Scranton,2016), while other soldier named Burnett says their disease might be “black syphilis”, which as a medical term happens to all people from all sorts of ethnicities but they are being racist. This represents the eponymy of racism, which, according to Galtung, represents a form of cultural violence. Galtung (1990) assumes that the whites think that they are more intelligent and more logical than non-whites; he adds that certain nations think that they are the rightful holders of civilization more than others. (p. 298)

Another form of cultural violence, as illustrated in Galtung’s theory (1990), is the ideology of Militarism, which entails the process of militarization (p. 296). Bestowing on Meriam webster’s definition of militarism, it is “the exaltation of military virtues and ideals, a policy of aggressive military preparedness”; Marek Thee (1977) viewed modern militarism as primarily associated with war, territorial conquest, imperialism, and great power politics. Arms races’ attempts to establish military dominance over politics, the economy, and public life are products of militarism. (p.297) Additionally, it is employed for military goals, according to Michael T. Klare (1978) such as the development of military industries, purchase of weapons, and the preparation for war, as well as military ideals, such as the centralization of power and hierarchy, combativeness, and xenophobia(p. 121)

Pierre Guerlain (2013) sees that cultural war has erupted due to the military-industrial complex, which is used academically by researchers by a percentage of 70 percent funded by the pentagon and is used also in Hollywood where a lot of films are co-produced or supported by military professionals to the connections between Big Oil and the military (p. 14). Galtung demonstrates that militarism recruits young guys in schools, Primogeniture, unemployment, and generalized exploitation. Additionally, the highly nationalist use of military manufacturing and deployment to promote economic growth and distribution, are sexist and racist views (p. 296). One method of funding militarism through the creation of urgency is through the dilemma of unemployment, which in this case could be easily resolved by some recruiting offices, which tempt the recruiter with lots of offers like bonuses and college money and then provide a way of earning money to alleviate the person's financial difficulties. Wilson visits an army recruitment facility in his hometown in the second chapter because he is having financial difficulties due to being unemployed. The recruiting officer starts his package form right away, as Wilson states “He asks me about drug use and criminal record. He tells me about bonuses and college money. He asks me what I want todo and where I want to go” ( Scranton, 2016). Asking about drug use is routine, so it is easy to lie about it. For example, Jimmy Wuckertt, a soldier in Wilson's unit, responded that he was considering spending his life in prison for drug offenses when he decided to join the army. Wilson claims that it should be impossible for someone with drug offenses to still serve in the military, but he goes on to explain why it is not impossible. As he explains, “there’s a waiver for everything.” (Scranton,2016)

Aron, a harsh and aggressive soldier in the novel, is another example of how Militarism is used. When Mel asks him why he joined the army, Aron responds that he” joined the army because of College money, patriotism. Service, challenge, honor. Nine-eleven. Same things as anybody else”( Scranton,2016), the last thing, which he says that he joined for the same reason as anyone before him, is stating that this ideology is normal and it has been normalized everywhere; and also he assures that part of the reason he joined the army is for college money, a dilemma which joining the army gives a solution to. So now unemployment makes people look for a way to solve and gain good financial life for themselves which recruiting in the army

solves, which as Galtung states a way for militarism to work ergo, it is considered cultural violence that would legitimize direct violence, as when these soldiers are killing other people in the battlefield for simply to gather college money or be financially stabled.

Militarism works through propaganda and scares campaigns designed to scare the public, for example, Bush claims that Iraq has nuclear weaponry and that Saddam was involved in terrorism and has a strong connection to 9/11; according to an article called *Chaney on Iraq*, the Washington Post vice president Dick Chaney has clarified that "there is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction" and that he is assembling them to harm or devastate America's friends, allies, or even the country itself. Once the public became aware of this, a general sense of threat would be propagated, which would encourage people to embrace going to war or even enlisting in the military. According to Galtung (1990), militarism is a general proclivity toward direct violence in the form of actual or threatened military action, whether initiated or settled, whether due to external or internal provocation. This propensity results in the creation and implementation of the necessary hardware and software. (p. 296). This conforms to Galtung's definition of cultural violence which gives the green light to an action that is red wrong, making it seem normal, which would, in turn, leads to direct or structural violence.

President George W. Bush addresses the American and Iraqi people in a speech that is broadcast on the CNN channel. He explains that he gave orders to disarm Iraq by attacking key military targets. This fact is based on the assumption that Iraq had WMDs (weapons of mass destruction); Roy Scranton quoted the exact speech that President Bush gave before the attack and the invasion of Iraq, in which he explains that coalition forces have begun, due to his orders to start "striking selected targets of military importance to undermine Saddam Hussein's ability to wage war" (Scranton, 2016), this is a total lie since, no weapons of mass destruction were ever found, as Stephen J. Hartnett and Laura A. Stengrim (2004) have argued that President Bush and his administration's claims of Iraq posing threat to America, due to their claimed position of weapons of mass destruction were just fabrications drawn from Shakey evidence at best, complete nonsense at worst, they are not just statements of loose speech but are a campaign of deception, these lies brought destruction and a lot of casualties. Moreover, the president's war against supposed WMD has left Iraq devastated and lawless, proving the fact that speech kills. (pp. 152-156)

According to Galtung (1969), imprisonment is a different type of direct violence that tightens restrictions on a person's freedom of movement. The focus returns to Aron at the Columbus Day party in the fifth chapter of the book. Aron keeps a flash memory that he reveals to Matt, Dalyha's husband, and that includes pictures of his base in Iraq with his fellow troops as well as, more importantly, pictures of people who are detained, tortured, humiliated, and abused in a jail called Abu Ghraib. The horrifying footage contains several people, which Aron implies have been in the wrong place and time, implying that they might be very well innocent. He displays images of a translator and mathematician who works for the US army in Baghdad and is apprehended in Baqubah, He was charged with giving information to al-Qaeda. The images depict jail, but not any kind of imprisonment where a person has rights, but rather a prison riffs with horrifying brutal abuse and humiliation. A great amount of torture has been placed upon a mathematics professor and a translator, Qassim. The next picture showed "Qasim hanging against the cell door, naked now, blood across his chest and thighs, his face cut, bruised, swollen, and bleeding." (Scranton, 2016) he tells matt that this picture happens before a couple of beatings and stressing.

Michelle Brown (2005) sees the images of the abhorrent and inhuman pictures as a

representative of an extreme contradiction, a process of liberation at the hands of torture that comes from a democracy of sadism in a setting of totalitarianism (p.973). Mark Danner reveals (as cited by Michelle Brown, 2005) that the violent actions at Abu Ghraib prison were an extension of a treatment that is logical and the soldiers have seen countless, every day under a harshly military occupation that metastasizes more brutally under the insurgence stress (p.973). An article by Slavoj Žižek, entitled *Between Two Deaths*, explains that the humiliation of the Iraqi detainees gives insight into the values of the American society, that the morality of the “unknown knows” which represents the horrible things people know about, yet they pretend not to know, which represent public morality from the other way around, that allows soldiers to redeem torture and abuse as acceptable and normal. David Garland (as cited in Michelle Brown, 2005) displays that the penitentiary is a construction of a regime that is exerted from the American value system which includes targeting liberty as the object of punishment and an overall intense concentration on the individuals in prisons (p.975). If this ideology is culturally practiced by societies, then it's a start for violence expressed culturally; according to Galtung's (1990) definition of cultural violence, the spheres of culture whether in religion, politics, ideologies, art, and empirical science are used to legitimize direct or structural violence (p.291), thus liberty is used to legitimize violence abroad by the U.S army upon prisoners in Abu Ghraib prison.

The Abu Ghraib controversy gave the Americans a wake-up call about what the government is hiding from the public's eyes, and these photographs of repulsive pictures show how cultural violence is also perpetrated. The Abu Ghraib scandal, according to Galtung (1990) concealed the truth or made it vague (p. 292). The horrible ill-treatment of the prisoners was not declared by the government, instead, a man named Joe Darby, a former soldier, who worked in Abu Graib leaked it to the public; this character is based on a real man carrying the same name, who leaks the pictures for the American public to see. In the novel's fifth chapter, Private Aron says to Matt, as he shows him the pictures of torture in Abu Ghraib, that “this fuck Joe Darby was jeopardizing the whole intel-collection apparatus in Iraq, which put the lives of our fellow soldiers at risk” (Roy Scranton,2016), hiding the truth or masking it in the aim of making it seem not that important is considered violence working culturally and would permit for the direct or the structural violence to take its place.

In the novel, private Wilson asks professor Qasim; a translator with American forces, if he believes that things have improved for him since the arrival of the American soldiers in Iraq. Qasim's answer represents the mayhem that exists currently, “in Baquba it is very difficult. many religious, Sunni, Shia, same-same. They fight” (Scranton, 2016). He further adds that instead of being dominated by one Saddam now they are under the rule of too many Saddam, which refers to militias.

## **Conclusion**

Roy Scranton was a soldier, a living witness of all the violence inflicted by the U.S army, which he stands against. Scranton's novel *War Porn* shows the violence and the overall terror spread by the U.S army. It tackles the issues during and after the war in the 2003 invasion. The analysis has proven that the novel's portrayal of violence is consistent with Galtung's theory of the violence triangle, in which the novel highlights a series of incidence whether done by the U.S army or by locals. It shows that Iraq deals not only with direct violence but also with structural and cultural violence, which are highlighted according to the U.S invasion and its outcomes and the decision leading to the invasion as well as the infamous torture and violation of rights at Abu Gharib prison.

The analysis also concludes that America uses its people or conceals the truths in order that their actions are seen as not violent, for example, their claims of Iraq WMD. The government of the U.S.A recruits all sorts of people just to partake in wars luring people with bounces, vacations, or money creating urgency or solving financial difficulties through partaking in war, consequently, the current analysis proved the existence of violence not only in Iraq but in America as well. A lot of American decisions led to the destruction of Iraq these decisions are based on a staged theater of normalized behaviors that are part of the American culture, which gives the green light for structural or direct violence or making the unnatural sounds and even feel normal

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