



## RESEARCH PAPER

### Dedoxifying Syrian War Rhetoric through the Lens of Just War Theory in *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes*

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## ABSTRACT

This study seeks to provide a nuanced comprehension of the moral complexities surrounding the Syrian war and the competing Just War discourse propagated by the sundry belligerents for political dominance. It primarily focuses on dedoxification of the (inter)national war rhetoric chanted by the hefty status quo to justify this war. The ongoing Syrian conflict, broke out in 2011, has raised profound ethical and political questions about the legitimacy of the use of force by the conflicting forces. This article delves into the moral dimensions of the Syrian war as portrayed in Atia Abawi's fiction, *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes*, through the prism of Just War Theory (JWT) as elucidated by Michael Walzer while incorporating Noam Chomsky's insights on war rhetoric and the manufacturing of public consent. The lens of JWT criteria in this Syrian conflict underscores the belligerents, manipulating war narratives to gain support, justify military actions and sustain the cycle of violence.

**KEYWORDS** Distinction, Just Cause, Manufacturing Consent, Proportionality, War Rhetoric

## Introduction

Atia Abawi (2018) in her fiction *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes* paints the Syrian ongoing conflict on a sprawling canvas which takes on a new dimension of the warfare rhetoric for political dominance when scrutinized through the lens of Noam Chomsky's theory of manufacturing consent along with the prism of the just war theory advocated by Michael Walzer. The depicted turmoil spanning decades, reflects the present armed struggle in Syria, pitting the entrenched Syrian regime and its foreign allies against a tapestry of diverse Syrian ethnic and religious factions, fueled by external patrons. Chomsky's lens highlights how the media machinery under the influence of dominant powers, shapes public perception to foster compliance with strategic agendas. The novel, when viewed through this perspective, portrays a conflict that has been distilled into an individualistic, chaotic theater of violence, resonating with Chomsky's assertion that media can sculpt reality to project the interests of those in power. In this fiction, war rhetoric appears to be deviating from the tenets of Just War theory which intends to follow ethical boundaries in military endeavors and confine them to morally defensible objectives.

The narrative delves into the Syrian conflict's sectarian dynamics, questioning whether the principle of just cause, which permits armed intervention only when civilian lives are at imminent risk, holds true. Chomsky's lens widens the perspective to encompass the rhetoric of imperialist dominance, where wars are waged not for noble intentions but for geopolitical supremacy. The refugee crisis depicted in the narrative becomes a poignant embodiment of the international community's failure to uphold the principles of just war.

## Literature Review

Amid the ongoing Syrian war, a comprehensive examination of literary works becomes indispensable to elucidate the profound impact of conflict on the narratives and voices emerging from this tumultuous period.

Catarina Kinnvall (2004) a professor in LUND University Sweden, notes that Trump exploited the ontological unease brought on by the advent of ISIS. His campaign language was very conventional and nationalistic (Kinnvall, p.763) so as to justify the military escalation on Syria.

Bahar Rumelili (2014) a professor in Koc University Turkey, observes that the US president Trump successfully exaggerated the threat of terrorism as a threat to "our very way of life" and promise to personally resolve this because "ontological insecurity undermines trust (Rumelili, p.2)." Trump statements feature with "We don't win with trade, we don't win with the military. We can't even knock out ISIS, and we will, believe me. We will (p.8)." This justification of war is in disagreement with the just cause and right intention principles of just war and draws attention to the importance of a closer look at the US engagement in Syria.

Ryan Burke and Jahara Matissek (2020), professors at the US Air Force Academy USA, find the imperialist objectives, global corporate campaigns and traditional ornamented language by the protractors of this war with noble goals. In their article, "The Illogical Logic of American Entanglement in the Middle East", they find out a strategic loophole in the just cause and right intention principles of war morality while backing up the rebels against Syrian regime. They observe that "some of these American backed rebels in Syria and Iraq will be future nemeses in 20 years (Burke & Matissek, p.18)," if the US do not bridge the gap between its discourse of democracy and its support of non-democratic forces in these war-torn regions. They add the Trump administration has given the U.S. military autonomy in conducting its wars so that "The oil continues to flow, and gasoline prices remain reasonable and stable in the United States (Burke & Matissek, p.19)." However, according to them, these causes for escalation under just war rhetoric cannot be justified.

Along with Abawi, many other Syrian fictionists depict the questionable war rhetoric and war ethics contending the reality. For instance, *The Shell* by Mustafa Khalifa (2008) is a novel that tells the story of a Syrian political prisoner who is tortured and mistreated in a detention center. The story provides a harrowing depiction of the brutality of the Syrian government's detention system.

*The Crossing* by Samar Yazbek (2015) depicts the pain and suffering of families who have lost loved ones to forced disappearances even by the regime itself, "The brutality of the regime knows no bounds. (Yazbek, p. 6)." She mentions the inhuman and disproportional tactics applied by the regime and voices for adherence to the proportionality ethic of war.

*The Morning They Came for Us* by Janine di Giovanni (2016) is a nonfiction book that provides a firsthand account of the war in Syria including interviews with refugees, activists, and medical professionals. The book details the widespread human rights abuses committed by all sides in the conflict.

## Material and Methods

The research methodology in this study is based on qualitative inquiry as the objective of this research is to evaluate the text of Atia Abawi's fiction in the context of the ongoing Syrian war by applying Chomskyian concepts of manipulation of war rhetoric with the juxtaposition of Just War theory. To prove the masses are victimized unjustly and aggressor military powers imposed unjust war on them, the theoretical framework of Michael Walzer's *Just and Unjust Wars* (2015) and Noam Chomsky's stance in *Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance* (2003) have been used as the foundation to develop the narrative of Just and Unjust wars through this fiction. The technique of textual analysis has been employed for this purpose.

## Theoretical Background to the Study

Noam Chomsky's (2003) seminal work, *Hegemony or Survival*, provides a comprehensive analysis of the dynamics of power politics and imperialist war rhetoric making it a valuable theoretical framework for critical analysis of contemporary war fiction. He offers a profound exploration of power politics and the manipulative nature of war rhetoric. This framework proves invaluable for critically analyzing contemporary war fiction, where the examination of how the political elite employs rhetoric to justify conflict is paramount. His concepts highlight how dominant powers exploit narrative to advance their geopolitical agendas, emphasizing the necessity of decoding underlying motives.

By incorporating Chomsky's concepts with Michael Walzer's Just War theory, we find a pertinent junction. Walzer's theory seeks to ethically assess the morality of warfare, focusing on principles such as just cause, proportionality, military necessity and distinction. In this context, Chomsky's insights augment Walzer's theory by delving into how imperialists employ rhetoric to mold public perception justifying wars that might lack a truly just cause. Thus, incorporating Chomsky's ideas enhances the application of Walzer's theory, encouraging a more holistic analysis of the dynamics between war rhetoric, power politics, and ethical justifications for conflict in contemporary war fiction.

Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky (2008) in their book *Manufacturing Consent*, claim that "The propaganda model remains a useful framework for analyzing and understanding the workings of the mainstream media (Chomsky & Herman, p.43)." While focusing on the role of propaganda for shaping public perception of conflicts, they also raise concerns that governments have institutionalized media and employ propaganda techniques to manipulate public opinion and present wars and military actions as necessary, just, and righteous. According to them, this fabrication of imperialist rhetoric for just war not only serves to control public discourse but suppresses dissenting views, and maintains popular support for military interventions also. Chomsky's theories on political language and war rhetoric align with the broader critique of this war fiction, reflect the powerful political structures and the concentration of power in a few hands as the key factors for this armed conflict.

As Raymond Williams (1960) points out in *Culture and Society*, the duplicitous role of media designed by the political institutions that "The whole theory of mass-communication depends essentially, on a minority in some way exploiting a majority. (William, p.333)," Chomsky suggests the importance of media literacy to unravel the manipulative techniques employed by political elites and foster a more democratic public discourse.

Michael Walzer (2015), a contemporary moral and political thinker is renowned for his contributions to the realm of Just War theory and political philosophy. His comprehensive version of Just War Theory provides a nuanced framework for evaluating the morality of present armed conflicts. His theory emphasizes principles such as the distinction between combatants and non-combatants, proportionality in the use of force, and the need for a just cause to initiate war. His moral stance is pertinent to the indiscriminate use of weapons of mass destruction, biological, and chemical warfare as depicted in the recent war fiction.

There are two main components of Just War Theory: *Jus ad Bellum* (the justice of going to war) and *Jus in Bello* (the justice of conduct during war). *Jus ad Bellum* outlines the conditions for the authority deciding to start an invasion must seek for the war to be considered just such as having a just cause, having the right intentions, and using proportional force. *Jus in Bello* outlines the principles that guide the combatants for their conduct during a war such as avoiding civilian casualties, treating prisoners of war humanely and minimizing harms to soldiers. These principles of the Just War theory explained in Walzer's book, *Just and Unjust Wars*, are historically evolved from St. Aquinas's concept of war morality.

The first set of ethical rules *Jus ad Bellum* is obligatory for the authority that decides to start a war. *Jus ad Bellum* contains further several moral points to be considered. Walzer's historical and contemporary accounts are suitable to understand a war just or unjust; and what ethical limitations apply to the authority that wages it. The Just War theory covers normative issues in war such as mass murders, rape as a war weapon, physical, psychological, economic and environmental effects on human beings. The just war rules detailed by Walzer are closely concerned to the selected war novel portraying the issues of aggression, intervention, military necessity, the status of civilians, guerilla war, terrorism, neutrality, supreme emergency, superior orders and command responsibility.

According to Just War doctrine the reason(s) for going to war must be just. It means the use of force must be directed to protect innocent lives if in imminent danger. In addition, it must not aim only at regaining things taken or punishing people who have committed wrong. Walzer explaining the just cause of war argues that a state can wage a war if "There must actually have been a wrong, and it must actually have been received. Nothing else warrants the use of force in international society (Walzer, p.81)." He explains that self-defense and the defense of innocent people must be the primary just causes for war. In addition, he asserts that the use of force should be the last resort employed only when peaceful means of resolution have been exhausted.

While discussing the war morality, Walzer explains the concept of Right Intention within the framework of Just War doctrine which refers to the motivations and purposes behind waging a war that is crucial in determining the ethical legitimacy of the war. He argues that "force may be used for a truly just cause and only for that purpose – helping suffering human beings is considered a right intention while material or economic gain is not."

Walzer (2006) in another book *Arguing War*, observes that the recent invasions by the imperialist powers under the pretext of democracy cannot be justified. To him, "Humanitarian interventions are not justified for the sake of democracy or free enterprise or economic justice (Walzer p.69)." His discussion on the morality of war is comprehensive covering its maximum ethical aspects.

Burke and Matisek (2020) find lack of the just war probability of success rule and refer to Trump's deployment of Marines to Syria as the latest escalation in an untenable and unwinnable situation lacking a solution and exit strategy. The deployment of Marines to Syria lacks a clear just cause, and it raises concerns about the moral legitimacy of the action.

Both Burke and Matisek suspect the rhetoric of Just War on Syria by claiming that the propellant force is the imperialist mindset with "the status quo of believing that American military power can simply conduct regime changes effortlessly (Burke & Matisek, p.97)." They seem to suggest that the rhetoric of imperialism cannot justify the conduct of regime changes. Imperialist rhetoric often sugarcoat military interventions or regime changes for reasons that may not align with just cause principles. The use of imperialist rhetoric can indicate a desire to assert dominance or control over other nations for economic, strategic, or ideological reasons. This focus on self-interest rather than promoting peace, justice, or the well-being of the affected population can undermine the just intention of war. This use of military power to conduct regime changes without proper justifications or respecting the self-determination of other nations can perpetuate a cycle of imperialism, with resultant exploitation and violence.

### **Ethical Quandaries: Unraveling Jus in Bello in the Syrian Conflict**

According to Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) in his *Dialogic Imagination* that "The novel is the only developing genre and therefore it reflects more deeply, more essentially, more sensitively and rapidly, reality itself in the process of its unfolding (Bakhtin, p.7)".

Bakhtin asserts the fiction as the best medium for the representation of reality as it is opposed to earlier epical narration or celestial heroes. Fiction represents real life as it is experienced by ordinary people. Wars are catalyzers that test and trial the true colors of human beings. Abawi's novel is about the ongoing civil and proxy conflict which is a sort of hybrid war backed up by multiple external powers that have caused the worst refugee crisis in recent history. The book serves as a reminder of the terrible effects of war and the critical need for compassion, empathy and understanding in today's situations where polarization is snowballing despite the flowery imperialist war rhetoric.

Syrian long civil war is an ongoing crucial conflict that demands close scrutiny for its multiple dimensions of just war doctrine, its implication and the rhetoric applied by the confronting forces for its moral and legal acceptance. The Syrian regime frequently started to repress any sort of anti-government sentiment violently. Over the past 10 years, the State and citizens have engaged in severe disputes as a result of the regime's antagonistic stance.

As already mentioned, the primal tenet of the Just War theory is the rule of a Just Cause, which refers to a justifiable reason for going to war. This principle is historically manipulated by those in power which problematizes the moral use of force under the aegis of humanitarian intervention. Despite the regime's claim which calls it "a proxy holy war being fought (Abawi, 2018, p.37)" this fictional narrative explores the complex and multifaceted causes behind the conflict which makes it problematic to determine a just cause.

The Just War ethics determine the conditions under which a war can be considered just. The cardinality of Syrian war supposed to be for a Just Cause which requires that the war is fought for a morally acceptable reason such as self-defense or the defense of innocent people in imminent threat of massacre. The regime's defense of its military action on its own people that "the loss of fertile land sparked the anti-government revolt in 2011 (Abawi,

2018, p.17)" cannot be called justifiable according to the Just War theory as the situations in this story highlight the Syrian regime's unwillingness to negotiate or compromise with its own public in opposition that is demanding for democratic rights.

Questioning the war narrative, the novel historicizes the heart-rending event of three-year-old Alan Kurdi who was voyaging for a safe life "with his parents and five-year-old brother when their boat capsized (Abawi, 2018, p.111)." The picture of Alan dressed in a red T-shirt and blue shorts found dead on the beach appearing as though he were sleeping and dreaming like small boys, was published in newspapers and aired on television breaking hearts all around the world. Since then, many more children, adults, and women have perished for the same reason without being reported in the media or appearing on television.

It seems that the violence and instability that forced little Kurdi's family and thousands others to leave their homes is not a war for peace or even for comparative justice. From the perspective of comparative justice, it is difficult to justify a world in which the lives of some refugees are deemed more valuable than others. The text raises important questions about the ethical and moral responsibilities of individuals and nations in addressing the plight of refugees and urges to consider their lives as equally valuable.

The fiction portrays the distress of thousands of Syrian refugees at the border "trying to survive the frigid temperatures", lack of tents or food and refugees "burning cardboard, branches and scraps of wood to keep warm (Abawi, 2018, p.189)" and questions the claims of just cause of this war. The protection of civilians must be the core cause of conflict in the just war theory but the regime and world's failure to protect civilians and ensure their survival in such situations points out the rupture from the rhetoric of just cause and right intention.

The just war theory posits that the war fought for economic gain, political power, or territorial expansion would be considered unjust. The Syrian conflict as narrated in this fiction contends the justification of this war by referring to the political and economic motivations which drove the war instead of a just cause. The textual portrayal shows that the Syrian government has been indulged in violence and coercion to retain power and suppress opposition, while foreign powers are involved in the conflict to advance their own strategic interests. The fiction seems to suggest that the crux of the conflict is unjust and the suffering of the Syrian people are a tragic outcome of the flouting of just war principles. Musa, another refugee, shows his reluctance and the duplicitous war discourse by pointing out the presence of foreign actors backing the war flames for their own interest as following, "you've got Russia, Assad and even America in the air, and Daesh, the Free Syrian Army and militias on the ground (Abawi, 2018 p.35)." This involvement of various foreign actors in this conflict portrays a situation where the Syrian people become caught in the middle of a conflict that lacks a clear and justifiable cause. The Syrian people's suffering is intensified by the fact that the conflict is driven by factors that have little to do with the rhetoric for their safe life or wellbeing.

This fiction projects another scenario which offers to recognize that the conflict with ISIS represents a new kind of challenge for Just War theory. In this case, ISIS because Raqqa city has already been taken by them which highlights the importance of distinguishing between legitimate military targets and civilians in the use of force. "The city had become the de facto capital for Daesh... the fundamentalist organization had created their own laws (Atia, 2018, P.19)." Achieving a just and proportional resolution in the context of this conflict will require innovative thinking and a willingness to adapt traditional principles of Just War theory to new and complex situations.

Tareq remembers that “his own mother, grandmother, sister and brothers were not killed by Daesh (Abawi, 2018, p. 59)” rather their own regime bombarded on the innocent civilians falsifying its Just War narrative. They were killed in the bombardment on the residential area in Aleppo was not by Assad regime which “killed more than two dozen men, women and children (Abawi, 2018, p.17)” including more than half of his family. This intense misery is brought on by the bombardment in Aleppo causing numerous deaths, widespread displacement and significant damage to infrastructure, hospitals, and other vital services in which civilians suffer the brunt of the conflict. It points out that the fight in Aleppo is not in line with the war rhetoric of humanitarian intervention by several external powerful countries.

Shyama, a Syrian refugee, explains the hatred of Rami against the regime because most of men in his family were murdered in the Hama Massacre thirty years ago. Rami survived because his mother smuggled him out. Later, his mother was “raped by Hafez al-Assad’s men and left to die (Abawi, 2018 p.63).” The novel sheds light on disagreement between the state discourse of freedom and prosperity justifying the forty years long rule of the family legacy and perpetuating injustice and war crimes. The situation emphasizing the need to consider this aspect in evaluating the just intention principle of war questioning the familial ties of those in power and their legacy of oppression serving only to complicate the determination of a right intention. Rami’s statement, “Like father, like son (Abawi, 2018 p.61)” pointing to ruling political dynasty suggests that the regime's actions are not just the result of their leader's actions but rather a continuation of the abusing of political power.

Abawi offers a different perspective on Syrian war through this story which dissents Just War rhetoric for it. Despite Just War discourse by the war mongers, she has narrated many events of rape which cannot be the just objective or conduct during an armed conflict. Tareq “remembers the story of a university student in his town three years ago, walking back from her lectures. She was abducted by two Shabiha (Government supported militia in Syria) men. Her body was later found raped and murdered (Abawi, 2018, p.21).” This brutality with the university student who is raped and murdered by Shabiha men highlights how military objectives can be distorted and twisted to justify violence against innocent civilians. The military necessity ethic strictly prohibits the abduction, murder or rape which can never be considered a legitimate military objective. Besides, the use of force for rape by the Shabiha men is not necessary, proportionate or legitimate to achieve any objective. This violation of the war rhetoric is particularly troubling because it targets innocent civilians who should be protected from harm in times of war because the principle of Military Necessity urges strict enforcement of the war morality as well as other ethics of Just War theory in order to prevent such atrocities from occurrence.

The multiple descriptions of female molestations in this novel show through the indulgence of state and non-state actors in the violation of just cause of war indicating the moral vacuum despite Just War rhetoric. Musa narrates the rape of “a Yazidi girl who watched all her male relatives executed and then was sent to be a sex slave for those monsters (Abawi, 2018, p.59)” and questions the rhetoric of just cause from non-state militia side who also pose themselves as the champions of human rights. Similarly, Rami’s protests against Assad that he too “is no better... his militias did similarly atrocious things (Abawi, Page 61)” further dedoxifies the war rhetoric promulgated by powerful conflicting forces in the region.

## Warzone Justice: Navigating Jus in Bello through the Syrian Battlefields

As explicated earlier, *Jus in Bello* is the second set of Just War doctrine which provides a guideline for the combatants in action on battlefields once war has started. It binds the fighting forces that even in the midst of war certain moral and ethical principles should be followed to minimize harm and protect human dignity. It is the second vital part of the Just War theory that outlines the principles for the conduct of combatants during a war and guides soldiers in action. *Jus in Bello* means "just conduct in war," and is also known as the law of war or International Humanitarian Law (IHL).

Tareq, a young child with other innocent civilian caught in the crossfire of a violent conflict. "That air strike killed twenty-six people, including two of his classmates—a brother and sister." (Abawi, 2018, p. 9)." Keeping in view the principle of Distinction, in the face of the immense complexity and chaos of modern warfare, the application of this principle can prove immensely challenging if not impossible. The bombed-out residential site without differentiating between combatants and non-combatants seems the intentional targeting of civilians in war, raises several ethical questions in relation to the Just War. The air strike killed 26 civilians including Tareq's brothers and sister and two of his classmates. This suggests that the strike resulted in the death of civilians who are not directly involved in the conflict and inquires if the attack is justified under the distinction principle of the Just War theory.

A proxy war is another breach of war ethics recurring in the novel as it explores the involvement of many foreign regimes backing up and fueling the multi-ethnic and sectarian flames for their own stakes. Tareq comments that "President Assad, the Alawite, and his backing from Iran and the Shias. This is a proxy holy war being fought, and our lives—your family's lives—used as martyrs! (Abawi, 2018, p.38)". The protagonist's reluctance that it is not a war for Syrian people rather "unfortunately, it was the decisions made by those in their country—and those outside Syria—that brought them to this night (Abawi, 2018, p.2) contradicts the Just War narrative by the conflicting factions. His struggle for survival suggests partiality and selective justice in form of foreign support. Tareq, a Syrian refugee, experiences the chaos and violence of war and his story highlights the complexity of the conflicts in the region. His observance that "militia speaking more French and English than Arabic" alludes to a proxy war inside the land. Abawi suggests that more likely, the presence of multiple ethnicities in Syrian battles, betray the rhetoric of right intention of war.

The confronting forces in Syria keep harping on the Just War string but this story highlights that the Just War principle of Proportionality which entails that the means used in a war be proportional to the end being pursued is not observed. In the case of Syria, the use of chemical weapons by the government and extremist factions like ISIS violates war ethics and has caused disproportionate harm. Such weapons have been declared illegal by International Humanitarian Law as well (IHL) and its use in a war is charged as war crime against mankind. The use of chemical weapons including nerve agents such as sarin is a grave concern and has been condemned by the international community. The use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government, indiscriminate bombings of civilian areas, cutting off food supply and targeting of hospitals and schools are all clear moral violations and disproportional use of force which contend the rhetoric of this war.

Another important concern raised in this fictional narrative is in the form of a horrific scene of violence and brutality that voices concerns about the integrity of this war justification in connexion with the principle of Military Necessity of Just War theory. Particularly, the scenes of planting human heads on spikes are highly questionable about



the proportionality of the military action being taken against the war rhetoric. Tareq witnesses in Naim city some “sticks were buried firmly in the ground, as the human heads were planted on top of the spikes (Abawi, 2018p.21).” The planting of human heads on spikes cannot be considered a legitimate military objective as it serves no strategic purpose in achieving any legitimate military goals. Ultimately, such sights emphasize the importance of upholding the principles of legitimacy in the conduct of military operations.

### **Conclusion**

The critical study of this novel traces a severe humanitarian crisis, with millions of people forced to flee from their homes and seek refuge in neighboring countries. Opposed to war oratory, the influx of refugees has put significant strain on the infrastructure and resources of host countries, exacerbating existing economic and social challenges. The fiction portrays that refugees face discrimination and limited access to essential services, including healthcare and education. Abawi tracks the unfulfilled promises and dedoxifies the Syrian war rhetoric pointing our compromised war morality in practice, particularly, by foreign powers supporting opposing sides that has further complicated the situation and contributed to the continued violence. The novel suggests also that if the Just War ethics had been observed as announced in war rhetoric, the current catastrophe for populace would have been avoided. The continued violence and involvement of external actors call for concerted international efforts to promote peace and protect the rights and welfare of civilians.

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