Causes and Effects of Ethnic Conflict in Gharbi Mustafa’s When Mountains Weep

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Abstract

This paper examines the causes and effects of ethnic conflict in Gharbi Mustafa’s When Mountains Weep. The novel was published in 2013. It relates the experience of a young man who is from the Duhok province, but is displaced with his family to the city of Mosul. As a young kid, Hamko faces discrimination by the Arabs he is to live with as an outcome of the policies adopted by the regime then. The paper falls into an introduction and two sections. The introduction shows how the act of displacing the Kurds is handled both as a cause and effect of ethnic conflict in the novel. Although this act is perpetrated by the ruling regime of the time, it creates tension and conflict between the major ethnic components in Iraq, Kurds and Arabs. Section one shows how the act of displacement in When Mountains Weep is systematically perpetrated by the regime against the Kurds in Iraq, obviously resulting in discrimination between the Kurds and Arabs; and sometimes leading to the feeling of hatred towards each other. Section two deals with the distinctive features of the Kurdish culture, namely with the Kurdish language and traditions, which shows that the Kurds cannot be forced into assimilation with the Arabic traditions despite being affected by them. The conclusion shows that despite living in the same country, there are many differences between the Kurds and Arabs. It shows that the regimes ruling Iraq have often tried to bring about a demographic change in the Kurdish-inhabited areas through the Arabization process for political reasons. It also shows how the displacement of the Kurds affected the Kurds’ socio-economic conditions.

Keywords: Ethnic conflict, Kurds, Arabs, displacement, culture, novel.

Introduction

Milton J. Esman points out that lack of power balance may lead to ethnic conflict. He maintains, “when an ethnic group gains control of the state, important economic assets are soon transferred to the members of that community,” (Esman 229). In When Mountains Weep (WMW), the reader comes across a number of causes and effects of ethnic conflict. This conflict, as Esman stated, is due to the fact that the Arabs of Iraq have been in power since the establishment of the Iraqi state. The Kurds, being a minority, have not only suffered from lack of power-sharing, but have also been severely exposed to attempts of annihilation including the use of chemical gases and mass graves. Examples of this conflict in the novel includes Arabization campaigns leading to forced displacement, denial of cultural rights leading to discrimination based on language and traditional differences between Kurds and Arabs. Sometimes, the causes and effects of the conflict overlap due to the nature of the conflict. Displacement is an example of such overlapping, as it could be the main result of ethnic conflict, and could further inflame such conflict in reaction. Other concepts such as culture represented by language and social traditions could be some of the causes of ethnic conflict when one realizes that differences between the ethnic components of the society are not

1 Henceforth abbreviated as WMW in the paper.
accepted. Moreover; displacement and cultural differences, being examples of ethnic conflict, show that the characters’ social, psychological and economic conditions are all affected. The displacement of people is a forced movement of people from their place to other places, which leads to a geographic shift in households, and which certainly impacts the socio-economic conditions of the displaced people. It also leads to/ or aggravate racial segregation. The population is forced to leave their homeland to which they are attached, and in which they have the knowledge and opportunity to make a living. Displaced populations often become impoverished (Displacement of people and its effects par.2).

In 1970, 300,000 people were reported displaced in Kurdistan as the result of fighting between Kurdish Peshmerga and the government, as well as between the Peshmerga forces themselves. In 1975, when the Kurdish revolution faced a catastrophic blow because of the Algiers Agreement,² as many as 600,000 were displaced, 250,000 over the border to Iran. The Iraqi government forcibly relocated perhaps 1400 villages and 300,000 people, mainly to 'strategic hamlets' designed to facilitate government containment and control (Dammers 181-182).

There were many phases of Kurdish displacement in the last decades of the twentieth century, which reached its peak during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88). At the end of the war, an increased collaboration started between Iran and Kurdish Peshmerga forces. This was an excuse for the Iraqi regime to pursue its policy displacing people from their homes. The policy did not only include displacement of people, but it also resulted in the killing of nearly 200,000 Kurds and destroying about 4000 Kurdish villages in the Anfal campaigns³. Their inhabitants, over half a million people, were forced to move to new collective settlements away from border or mountain areas, or to detention camps in the south and west of Iraq. Others fled to Iran. “Many of these people have been displaced more than once since then” (Dammers 181-182).

Thus, the Kurdish people faced an ethnic cleansing campaign by the powers that ruled Iraq for so many years. In the novel, WMW instances of ethnic conflict and displacement are widely seen impacting the characters’ life. The Kurds are rejected due to their ethnic differences by the community they live side by side. Examples of ethnic conflict arise when the main character in the novel speaks in Kurdish; and other instances are reflected in the behavior of the other ethnic group, the Arabs towards the Kurds. Many a time, they try to show they are superior to the Kurds because the Arabs are the majority.

1. Displacement in When Mountains Weep

In WMW, the impacts of displacement are obviously seen in different areas in Kurdistan. Lawrence points to this conflict when he describes what Saddam Hussein adopted as a policy of discrimination, particularly in the Kirkuk province:

Saddam Hussein now revealed his true genius – the Art of pitting Iraqis against one another … Saddam ensured the ethnic balance of Kirkuk would tip against the Kurds. Kurds left the city and were no longer allowed to own property and many went through a humiliating process if declaring themselves Arabs, in order to get jobs and buy houses (Lawrence 29).

²The Algiers Agreement was signed in 1975 in the Algiers, in which “Iraq agreed to move the maritime boundary between the two countries to the thalweg—conditioned on Iran’s withdrawal of support for the Iraqi Kurds”, which resulted in the termination of the Kurdish Revolution then. (https://www.britannica.com/topic/Algiers-Agreement) Accessed on November 7, 2019

³ Hundreds of thousands of men, women and children were executed during a systematic attempt to exterminate the Kurdish population in Iraq in the Anfal operations in the late 1980s. (https://us.gov.krd/en/issues/anfal-campaign-and-kurdish-genocide/) Accessed on November 7, 2019
Gharbi Mustafa refers to these actual events of conflict in the novel in a number of incidents, simultaneously showing an overwhelming sense of love of the motherland. The story’s main character has a fresh memory of what happened. Despite its nostalgic nature, the memories sum up some of the very common sufferings the Kurds went through:

Amid all the memories that clashed in my head, I heard my mother’s Kurdish lullaby, which echoed through the vast valley.” sleep, my son, sleep, in the Arabian sand, away from our father’s land. Sleep, my son, sleep. You may survive to see the day. To our sweet home, we find the way. Smile at your mommy, do not feel sad. Tomorrow you will grow into a lad. And ask for your missing dad. Lull, my darling, lull. Tomorrow you will grow into a man in the mountains of Kurdistan, in a nation without a homeland. (WMW 3-4)

The image of the Kurdish mother is both literally and symbolically significant. While it refers to the sufferings mothers or women generally went through due to displacement campaigns, it symbolically refers to the call of the homeland. Mustafa points out how common it was for children to lose their fathers. In fact, the fathers were not only the ones who gave their lives; women and children had a big share of the agonies too. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) presented a survey of the displaced people in Iraq during the 1980s. The survey shows that the eight years of the Iraq-Iran war in 1980 to 1988 brought a new phase of Saddam Hussein’s power to consolidate his rule in Iraq (IDMC). During the Iraq-Iran war, many other offensives were carried out by Saddam’s military forces against the Kurds. Gharbi Mustafa relates how the conditions of the Kurdish displaced families were during the time.

The displacement deepened the conflict between Arabs and Kurds. Baghdad moved Kurds to the Arab territories, apparently to assimilate them with the Arabs. A survey from the IDMC shows that Kurdish villagers were displaced during the 1980s to the center and south of Iraq (IDMC). The assimilation proved to be superficial as Kurds were moved to those areas against their will.

The main character, Hamko feels the effects of this discrimination as early as a child. It starts for him in the school he has moved to. He feels insulted because they never call him by his name. He is standing out as the only Kurdish child in the school. Mustafa relates:

At school, the other boys never called me by my real name. They called me “the Kurd “. Or sometimes “the brainless Kurd” if they wanted to start a fight. As I passed them, a group of boys would say, “Did you find your brain or are you still looking for it in the mountains”? Then they would laugh and add,” He cannot find his brain because Kurds do not have one! (WMW 13).

Mustafa points out how the regime implanted seeds of hatred of the Kurdish Peshmerga in the minds of the Arabs. This became part of the educational system as well. Obviously, no real assimilation occurs with the new community. Glorifying the role of the Iraqi army and contrastively depicting the Peshmerga as outlaws is another instance in which Hamko feels how segregated from his fellow Arab students he is. This is when his art teacher asks them to “draw a picture of the brave Iraqi army attacking the enemy – Kurdish outlaws in the mountains” (WMW10).

Clearly, the question of majority versus minority is mirrored in this conflict. In a democratic system, this maybe felt much less, whereas in totalitarian systems the majority would exert so much influence and disempower minorities. The insulting remarks of the Arab female teacher
in Hamko’s class about Kurdish mothers are an example of the outcomes of such lack of balance. It shows there is an inherent fear from the other side that the Kurds might one day enjoy some influence in Iraq. Kurdish mothers are accused of illiteracy, and this is why they give birth to children every nine months according to the art teacher thinking that “it is their national duty so Kurds will become majority in this country” (WMW 10).

As Lawrence stated above that Kurds were not allowed to legally own properties in the cities facing Arabization, mainly Kirkuk and Mosul. Denise Natali also points out how the act of displacing Kurds from their original residences drastically affected the economic conditions of the Kurds. It further widened the gap between the people and the regime.

The displacement of Kurds from their lands broke a key sector of the Kurdish economy, destroyed traditional living patterns, and increased the Kurd’s dependence on the state. Rather than integrate into the industrial sector, increase their agricultural production, or become Ba’th party members, most Kurds in the towns and cities lived off the government. (Natali 63)

The displaced family of Hamko has to earn their living expenses in one of the neighborhoods of Mosul city where they are forced to settle. However, even while working, Hamko’s father has to make sure his son would not mention the name of Kurdistan when advertising for the good tobacco he has brought from the mountains. When Hamko is selling tobacco with his father, he shouts, “we have the best refined tobacco from the mountains of Kurdistan, come over here, roll a cigarette for free, and find out for you!” (WMW 20). His father forces him to skip the word of Kurdistan because he knows that the word might irritate other people, Arabs in particular. Kurdistan and mountains are mentioned together for a purpose here. It is reminiscent of the common famous saying that “the Kurds have no friends but the mountains” (Terry Glavin, 2015, 57).

Saddam Hussein’s Baathist government tried to force ethnic change on thousands of Iraqis. Often, the government changed the documentation of people who had previously been registered as “Kurds” and made them “Arabs” to bring about a demographic change in the Kurdish-inhabited areas, which was part of the ethnic cleansing policy the regime adopted (King 76). King further describes how Saddam’s regime forced Kurds to change their ethnic origins and falsely adopt a fake identity. For example, in the censuses of 1977 and 1987, Yezidis in Sinjar were forced to register as Arabs and were prohibited from speaking Kurdish (King 104).

Consequences of displacement in WMW are many. The feeling of nostalgia, disappointment, and helplessness are shown not only by adults, but also by kids such as our main character, Hamko. Forced displacement of the Kurds, and repopulation of Arabs in these Kurdish areas intensified the conflict. A Human Rights Watch report in 2004 sums up some of the Arabization methods followed by the Iraqi regime in the 1970s and the 1980s. The report goes:

The methods used by the Iraqi government to effect the forced displacements of the 1970s and 1980s involved first and foremost military force and intimidation: entire Kurdish villages were completely depopulated and bulldozed by Iraqi forces. But the Iraqi government followed up the brutality with legal decrees aimed at consolidating the displacement. First, the property deeds of the displaced Kurds were invalidated by legal decree, most frequently without compensation or with nominal compensation. The Iraqi government nationalized the agricultural lands, making them the
property of the Iraqi state. The Iraqi government simultaneously embarked on a massive campaign to resettle the formerly Kurdish areas with Arab farmers and their families, thus completing the Arabization process (Human Rights Watch 2004).

The report shows confessions from Arab families brought from the south of Iraq to resettle in Kirkuk. It states that “one elderly Arab tribesman from the al-Hadidi tribe recounted how his family and other tribesmen had moved north in late 1974 to be resettled in an emptied Kurdish village,” in Kirkuk (Human Rights Watch 2004). The reports of the Human Rights Watch show that some of the Arabs were against moving north and relocations. However, this policy of the government widened the gap between Kurds and Arabs (Human Rights Watch 2004).

Gharbi Mustafa often points to these violations of human rights perpetrated by the regime then. Hamko states, “I was thrilled when my grandparents finally came to live with us in Duhok. I kept urging my grandfather to take me to visit Atrush because he was constantly mentioning his childhood village in his stories” (WMW 35). Hamko feels nostalgic about his father’s village. His dream comes true when his grandfather decides to take him to the village of Atrush in the mountains of Duhok. “One Friday morning he told me to dress up because my wish was about to be fulfilled. We are going to Atrush!...After one hour drive, we arrived at a military checkpoint [who] asked us in Arabic for our identification cards and asked what we were doing in the area (WMW 35-36).

Love of the motherland is clear in the above quotation. However, it also shows that their land has been inhabited by people who do not belong there. It is even forbidden to visit their area unless they show their identification and a convincing reason they have to visit the area. Soon Hamko’s dream is shattered by the existence of other settlers in the area. Mustafa relates,

As the car came over the last rise, a picturesque village appeared, perched on the jagged mountainside that gently melted into a vast valley. I felt strange when I saw two women in Arabic gowns walking behind a cow on the road. My grandfather’s eyes glistened with tears as he pointed toward a two storey house. Then he said in a trembling voice, Hamko, that is the house I helped my father build when I was your age (WMW 36).

Mustafa makes it clear that the government of Iraq is the main reason behind ethnic conflicts in Iraq. As displacement was followed by a process of relocation of Arabs in Kurdish areas, the conflict developed into a sense of hatred and hostility between Kurds and Arabs, Hamko says:

I was excited to finally see the place where my father and grandpa had been born and raised. I asked if we could take a look at the house, but my grandfather sighed and told me we couldn’t get out the car and walk around the village because the government had banished all the native people and replaced them with Arab tribes from the south. It was at that moment I finally realized the true reason why our family had moved to Mosul (WMW 36).

It follows that the displacement of the Kurds, repopulation of Arabs in their locations, and confiscation of seized Kurdish properties were systematic policies adopted by the successive Iraqi regimes against the Kurds of Iraq. A survey of the Faili Kurdish displaced people shows the number of people whose lands and properties were confiscated through the eradication policy of the former Iraqi regime. Many of them have sought refuge in neighboring countries
fleeing from the campaigns carried out by successive regimes of Iraq for decades. Kinsley states:

Between 1971 and 1980, Iraq expelled at least 200,000 Faili Kurds. Unlike most Iraqi Kurds who are Sunni Moslems, the Failis are Shi’a and lived mainly in the Arab-dominated region of central Iraq. Many Faili Kurds had been wealthy businessmen and controlled large parts of the Baghdad bazaar. Although the real grounds for persecution were probably economic, the government used the Faili Kurds’ religion as a pretext to claim they were really Iranian -- Iran being a Shi’ite country -- and should therefore move (Kinsley 1991).

2. Culture and Traditions
Like other cultures around the world, Kurdish Culture is a set of distinctive elements. Some of these elements are also shared by other nations in the neighboring countries. Nowruz celebration as the New Year day, celebrated on March 21, is also celebrated by other ethnic groups in the region.

Kurdish language, costumes, and some Kurdish traditions and ways of life are what distinguish the Kurds from other nations in the region. Scholars have indicated that due to the multitude of hardships Kurds have gone through, their psychological make-up and their culture in general reflects those difficulties. They have a good storage of vocabularies about hardships than those about happiness as far as language is concerned. Aras Mhammad points out, “Kurdish people have been oppressed and our land has been occupied throughout history and this has hugely affected our psychology and culture of communication and increased the number of words that are used to describe hardship” (Aras Mhammad).

In WMW, the language is a key issue for the conflict engulfed among the Kurds and the Arabs. Several scenes in the novel tell stories of misunderstanding of two different nations who are in conflict. Literally, and in terms of discourse, when communication is lacking, ambiguity, uncertainty, and even fear are born. Many children would face the same fear and uncertainty that Hamko faced due to lack of understanding. Hamko says, “when we were in the headmistress’s room, my mother exchanged a few words in a language I could not understand. The only word I could pick out from the conversation was Hamko, my name” (WMW 5).

An outstanding element, which shows the differences among ethnic groups, is language. Whenever the mother tongue is used, there is tension for ethnic conflict. It is seen in the headmistress’s room that the language spoken is quite strange to Hamko because he comes from a different ethnic group. It is compulsory for Hamko to learn Arabic, in fact, if he does not, he will fail in school, and perhaps in his whole educational life.

As Heidi Burgess points out, knowledge of the language is key to understanding. He remarks that one of the reasons behind conflict and the difficulty of conflict resolution is the lack of communication because of language barriers. He states,

Given our tendency to hear what we expect to hear, it is very easy for people in conflict to misunderstand each other. Communication is already likely to be strained, and people will often want to hide the truth to some extent. Thus, the potential for misperception and misunderstanding is high, which can make conflict management or resolution more difficult (Burgess par. 11)

Language is clearly handled as an example of ethnic conflict in the novel. The novel shows that Kurdish is forbidden in the Iraqi educational system. When the boy attends the school, there is no such a language as Kurdish. This is despite the fact that according to the March 11
agreement of 1970 between the Kurds and the Iraqi government, Kurdish was the other
official language along with Arabic in Iraq. The Iraqi president, then Ahmed Hassan Al Bakir,
stated in a radio and TV broadcast on March 12, 1970 that the Kurds would have a
“proportional representation in a future Iraqi Parliament and that the Kurdish language would
be an official language, along with Arabic, in Kurdish areas” (Adams par. 3). This was
however, limited to Kurdish areas, but Hamko was sent to Mosul, which was not fully part of
the agreement then. Therefore, he is confused to see that there is a different language.

Motivation to learn is killed very early and Hamko is disappointed when he states, “my whole
sense of happiness and excitement about attending school faded away as I realized that no one
there spoke the way I did and I could not understand anyone…. Why did we speak differently
in our house, and what was the strange language I was hearing away from home?” (WMW 6)
But Hamko is encouraged by his family to go and learn Arabic because education is essential:
“So, little Hamko, go to school tomorrow and learn how to read and write, even if it is in the
language of your enemies” (WMW 9). Mustafa seems to indicate in a clear voice that the
other is considered an enemy.

There are many different kinds of traditional costumes amongst the local Kurdish
communities. Kurdish costumes are easily recognized everywhere as long, colorful dresses.
The traditional male and female Kurdish costumes distinguish the Kurds from other ethnic
components in Iraq. In WMW, costume and traditions, instead of being viewed as the source
of cultural variety, are also shown as examples of conflict. It has been for centuries that the
rulers and other opponent ethnic identities tried to wipe out the Kurdish traditions and impose
other religious and cultural aspects, which are very different from the Kurdish tradition. It is
therefore, quite natural to see that the Kurdish traditions have been also affected by Islamic
traditions, as the great majority of the Kurds are Muslims.

This sort of forced assimilation, however, did not affect the way Kurds dressed, when it came
to the Kurdish traditional costumes. Traditionally, Kurdish women wore long colorful dresses
or gowns. Kurdish dress is unique in the region.

Men wore baggy, colorful pants with a plain shirt having very full
sleeves, which were tied at the elbow. Bright-colored vests and sashes
(often red) were worn over the shirt. A man wore a blue silk turban on
his head, and often completed his costume with a dagger worn at the
waist. Traditionally, nomadic Kurdish men shaved their heads and
wore long moustaches. Women wore bright, colorful, heavily
embroidered clothing (Kurds par. 11).

As Kurdistan was divided amongst four countries, the Kurds willingly or unwillingly
embraced the traditions of the countries they live in; hence, a duality in traditions including
forms of dressing came to exist. Though globalization has affected the way people dress in
general, in countries where Kurds live, there are still restrictions on what one should wear.
For example in Iran, women must wear a cloth covering their hair and clothes as well. In
Turkey, on the other hand, the government used to ban women from covering their hair in
universities and public jobs, something that has changed a few years ago:

Women there are required to wear more Western-style clothing.
However, in Iraq, men wear woolen coats and vests, checkered head-
scarves, and baggy pants. Women wear the Muslim-style dress, often
with baggy trousers underneath. The traditional Kurdish shoe, the
klash, is a soft crocheted moccasin with a flexible sole. (Kurds-
Introduction, location, language …. (Kurds par. 11).

Pointing to the cultural differences between the Kurds and Arabs in the novel, Mustafa gives
more details about Kurdish Traditions. He remarks, “at a Kurdish wedding party, the groom
sits circled by male guests while the bride sits on the ground wearing a translucent veil
surrounded by women guests. The bride should look somber and never smile during the celebration to show how sad she is to leave her parents” (WMW 54). The differences in traditions and costume many a time caused conflict. This has continued to the present day. A recent example goes back to the Newroz of 2018 in Kirkuk. Despite government warnings and bans, the Kurds celebrated the Kurdish Clothing day in Kirkuk on March 12, 2018. This defiance has always been there, and is a testimony that such conflict has always existed (Kurdistan 24 TV, 2018).

Conclusion

Although When Mountains Weep is not an autobiographical work, many Kurds can identify their experiences with the novel. This is because the writer reflects on the political agenda of the Iraqi regime in the 1980s. The government of Iraq followed a policy of demographic change for political reasons. One immediate outcome of this was an ethnic conflict. The novel recounts many instances of this conflict due to the displacement of Kurds and the repopulation of Arabs to be settled in areas previously belonged to the Kurds. Displacement, changing one’s ethnicity into Arabs (infamously known as ethnicity correction in the 1980s), deprivation of property, and language and cultural differences all constitute examples of ethnic conflict in When Mountains Weep. The novel shows how the Kurds had been psychologically and economically also affected by the conflict. To carry out a successful policy of demographic change, the Iraqi regime sent many Kurds to the center and south of Iraq and replaced them with Arabs from those locations in an attempt to assimilate the Kurds with the Arabs. However, the examples Mustafa provides about the main character, Hamko, in the novel are evidences that assimilation between displaced Kurds and Arabs is very superficial and that it has been counter-productive. In fact, instead of assimilation, the regime has deepened the conflict between the Kurds and Arabs due to those policies.

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لا يوجد نص يمكن قراءته بشكل طبيعي من الصورة المقدمة.