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## The Relationship Between War, Capitalism, And Loss Of Innocence

In Omar Akkad's *American War*, he depicts a dystopian America undergoing a second Civil War due to a domestic discrepancy over use of fossil fuels. The North was against the usage of crude oil, but the South was adamant in holding onto their old ways. The author introduces the story's protagonist as a young child, who shows immense curiosity in the world. Akkad uses the protagonist Sarat as a metaphor for the ruin resulting from the war by following her experiences of the effects of the fight firsthand. By following the decline of Sarat's character, Akkad foreshadows the inevitable national destruction to come. In *American War*, Omar Akkad illustrates the relationship between the themes of war, capitalism, and loss of innocence through the evolution of the protagonist Sarat Chestnut.

In *American War*, Akkad utilizes the theme of war to show the extremes to which humans are capable of. War is brutal, raw, and unforgiving. When the novel begins, Sarat is just a young girl, not yet corrupted by the anticipating evil around her. The narrator of the book, Sarat's nephew Benjamin whose now elderly and cancer ridden, says "And this is how, in those moments when the bitterness subsides, I choose to remember her. A child." Shortly after, her father is murdered, becoming a victim of the impending war. The death of her mother later on during the Camp Patience massacre forced Sarat to take on the responsibility of protecting her siblings. Over the course of the novel, each of her most precious loved ones is killed, as a result of the war in one way or another.

The loss of her loved ones provoked Sarat to grow into an angry, vulnerable, and easily manipulative adolescent. Upon meeting Gaines, Sarat is exposed to things she had never dreamed of. Gaines claims to "seek out special people—people who, if given the chance would stand up and face the enemy on behalf of those who can't. I seek out people who would do this even if they knew for certain it would cost them dearly, maybe even cost them their lives. And then I do everything in my power to give them the tools, to give them their chance." He taught her about other countries, the war between the North and the South, and introduced her to his "pal" Joe. Sarat had a gaping hole in her heart that emerged when her father was murdered, and Gaines made it feel a little less empty. She became a deadly weapon for the South when Gaines gifted her a sniper to which she named Templestowe after the woman who assassinated President Chi. Sarat used this weapon to kill one of the North's most celebrated generals, implementing a turning point in the war.

War pushes all boundaries, emotionally, socially, and physically. Ethics often go out the window when such extreme circumstances surface. No one cares about right versus wrong; people are just trying to stay alive. War brings out the barbaric tendencies that live inside of all of us. War cannot be quarantined, it morphs and molds to fit the keyhole of any nation's door. "The misery of war represented the world's only universal language. Its native speakers occupied different ends of the world, and the prayers they recited were not the same and the empty superstitions to which they clung so dearly were not the same-and yet they were. War broke them the same way, made them scared and angry and vengeful the same way. In times of peace and good fortune they were nothing alike but stripped of these things they were kin. The universal slogan of war, she learned, was simple: If it had been you, you'd done no different." This is the sad

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truth that Akkad highlights throughout this book. Everyone has opinions and ideas about what they may do if they found themselves in a similar situation, but when it comes down to it, everyone reacts in the same way: survival of the fittest.

One of the primary driving forces behind war is also ironically the root of all evil. Money is one of the few things that can strip away someone's morals and push them to do the unimaginable. Capitalism is a major theme highlighted in American War. It essentially serves as the foundation for the South's fight. In current day America, and other nations around the world, oil is a substantial source of income, having a massive impact on the current flow of currency. Fossil fuels ran their half of the country in the novel, and they were willing to do just about anything to keep it that way. "Once, fossil fuels were a worthwhile currency, valuable enough to keep the Louisiana ports and Texas refineries economically viable, even if not flush with cash like in the previous century." [footnoteRef:8] Even though "the old fuel became utterly archaic and worthless. . . the rebels chose open warfare over prohibition." The South would rather cling to their greed than address the fate their people were heading towards. Capitalism holds its importance across the globe. During her time at Camp Patience when Sarat was becoming closer and closer to Gaines, he decided to introduce her to a long time friend of his. Joe was a foreigner from the Bouazizi empire, and appealingly seems to support the Southern cause without much reason. As time passes, with the help of Gaines, he too gains Sarat's trust. Later in the novel, Joe reveals his true intentions. "My real name is Yousef Bin Rashid. I am seventy-one years old. I work for the government of the Bouazizi Empire. . . we intend to make it the most powerful empire in the world." The Bouazizi Empire doesn't care who wins the war, their concerns are merely over greed and the thirst for power. They see the South as a radicalized ticking time bomb, that will explode America into a million pieces granting them the opportunity to snatch said pieces and use them to their advantage. America is known to be one of, if not the most powerful and affluent nations in the world, and Joe believed Sarat was the key to destroying all of it.

Sadly, Joe was right. Sarat experienced an extensive list of horrific tragedies throughout her life. Not only was she robbed of her childhood and her parents were mercilessly murdered, but she was relentlessly tortured thanks to the one person left she trusted and followed blindly, Albert Gaines. Each event tore away at the pieces of her which were barely hanging by a thread to begin with. The loss of Sarat's innocence parallels the deterioration of the nation. Gaines, Yousef, and the war pulled at the pieces of the young girl, leaving a crackling shell vibrating for revenge.

War and capitalism often break down any and all basic morals and ethics. Sarat experiences this firsthand as she is exposed to the evils of the world at a very young age. The Camp Patience massacre was one of the most horrific events and ultimate turning points in the novel. It was during the chaos that Sarat committed her first murder. "She approached the man and when she was upon him she reached around his neck and slashed open his throat. . . Soon the man stopped fighting but she kept moving the knife back and forth, back and forth, until she hit something deep within the body she could not sever." [footnoteRef:14] She was only 12 years old meaning Sarat's brain was far from being fully developed, and she committed an act that most adults cannot cope with. [footnoteRef:15] One learns soon after that Sarat's mother was killed in the bedlam. Sarat finds Gaines, who quickly realizes his young apprentice is putty in his hands. "'Then what do you want to do?' Gaines asked. 'I want to kill them... She never saw the faint smile that, in that moment, crossed her teacher's lips.'" Albert Gaines had successfully stripped away most of Sarat's innocence, and could begin grooming her into the South's

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deadliest weapon. While Gaines was successful in transforming Sarat into a radicalized weapon of war, he also played a major role in Sarat's loss of innocence.

Overall, *American War* portrays a multitude of themes. Arguably the clearest, war, spans the entire course of the novel. Even after the war ends, the effects of the brutality, barbarism, and all out turmoil it produces, still remain within the people, as it did within Sarat. A strong foundation behind war, capitalism, holds a significant presence in the novel. Greed proved to be the driving force behind most grisly events that took place. It also served as a strong backbone to the ultimate ending: Sarat's release of the plague on Reunification Day. Sarat's life up until that point is followed through a parallel between her and the world. As horrendous events continue to occur, each worse than the latter, she is slowly and brutally stripped of her innocence. This novel is about raw, emotional, unforgiving truth. *American War* is a metaphor for the catastrophes occurring around the world daily. This novel constructs a sense of immediacy, that we, as a species, must do better, because if we refrain from doing so, a dark and putrid future lies before us.

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