

# The Erosion of Identity: Crowd Psychology and Conformity in Omar El Akkad's *American War*



تآكل الهوية: علم نفس الجماهير والتطابق في رواية الحرب الأمريكية لعُمر العقّاد

الأستاذ المساعد الدكتور قاسم حسن صبيح  
جامعة الكوفة / كلية اللغات / قسم اللغة الإنجليزية

البريد الإلكتروني Email : [qasimh.sabeeh@uokufa.edu.iq](mailto:qasimh.sabeeh@uokufa.edu.iq)

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Asst. Prof. Dr. Qasem Hassen Sabeeh

University of Kufa/ Faculty of Languages/ Dept. of English

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#### المخلص

تتناول هذه الدراسة التحوّل الذي تمر به "سارات تشسنتت" من كونها فردًا مستقلًا إلى أن تصبح رمزًا للمقاومة، من خلال استكشاف الآثار النفسية للتطابق وتلاشي الهوية الفردية في رواية الحرب الأمريكية لعُمر العقّاد. تنطلق الدراسة من فكرة مفادها أن الانخراط في الحشود يؤدي إلى تغييرات نفسية يعززها التفاعل الجماعي، ما يؤدي إلى فقدان المسؤولية الأخلاقية والاستقلال الذاتي. وتتناول الدراسة الطريقة التي تصور بها الرواية تأثير القيادة، وديناميكيات الجماعة، والضغوط المجتمعية على الهوية من خلال توظيف منهج متعدد التخصصات يجمع بين الفلسفة وعلم النفس وعلم الاجتماع، تستند الدراسة إلى علم نفس الجماعات لدى سيغموند فرويد، ونظرية الحشود لغوستاف لوبون، ونقد فريدريك نيتشه لـ "عقلية القطيع"، والنظريات الأخلاقية لإيمانويل كانط، ومفاهيم "سوء النية" في الوجودية لدى جان بول. وتشير النتائج إلى أن الصدمة والقيادة الكاريزمية والضغط المجتمعي للتكيف تسهم جميعًا في تفويض هوية سارات، إذ تتبنى الفلسفة الجماعية للمتمردين الجنوبيين.

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### Abstract

Sarat Chestnut's transition from an individual to a symbol of resistance is the main topic of this study. The study aims to examine the psychological implications of conformity and the collapse of individual identity in Omar El Akkad's novel *American War*. According to the idea, crowd participation causes psychological changes that are bolstered by group dynamics, which leads to the loss of moral agency and individual autonomy. The study follows up how leadership, group dynamics, and societal influences affect individual's identity. The study employs an interdisciplinary approach to integrate philosophical, psychological, and sociological perspectives. Drawing from Sigmund Freud's group psychology, Gustave Le Bon's crowd theory, Friedrich Nietzsche's critique of "herd mentality," Immanuel Kant's ethical theories, and Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist notions of "bad faith". The results show that trauma, charismatic leadership, and pressure to fit in cause Sarat's identity to be undermined as she absorbs the Southern rebels' collective philosophy.

### Introduction

Scholars from a wide range of fields have long been captivated by the study of crowd psychology, especially when comprehending how individual identities are frequently substituted by group behavior in huge settings. The dystopian novel *American War* by Omar El Akkad provides a rich environment for exploring these sociological and psychological concerns within the framework of a shattered future America. The story, which takes place in the late 21st century during the Second American Civil War, explores the life of Sarat Chestnut, the protagonist, as she faces the horrors of radicalization, displacement, and conflict. El Akkad creates a story that examines the psychological changes that take place in people and communities under tremendous stress in addition to reflecting the harsh reality of civil unrest.

Studying crowd psychology and conformity in El Akkad's *American War* from a philosophical perspective allows for a more in-depth examination of the existential and ethical ramifications of identity erosion in collective behaviour. The philosophical investigation of identity—what makes up the self, how it endures or changes, and the moral obligations associated with individual versus group behavior—improves the understanding of the main character Sarat Chestnut's metamorphosis throughout the story.





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From an existentialist perspective, the novel can be seen as a meditation on the loss of individual agency and the existential crisis that arises when one's identity is counted by a collective will. In his book *Being and Nothingness* (2018), Jean-Paul Sartre describes two categories of reality that exist outside of human consciousness. Both "being-in-itself" and "being-for-itself" exist. Sartre is able to highlight the significance of human freedom as a defining feature of existence by making a distinction between two realities. He posits that individuals are condemned to be free, and responsible for creating their own essence through choices and actions. However, in the context of crowd psychology, this freedom is compromised as individuals like Sarat are swept up by the collective force of the group, leading to what Sartre might describe as "bad faith"—a denial of one's own freedom and responsibility by conforming to the crowd's ideology. Sarat's transformation from a person with hopes and anxieties of her own to a symbol of rebellion highlights important issues regarding the nature of free choice and the degree to which an individual may maintain their identity in the face of tremendous external forces.

The novel also raises important questions about the moral conformity and the repercussions of actions motivated by group ideology. Based on the moral theory of Immanuel Kant, which emphasises the value of individual liberty and obedience to universal moral rules, one might critique Sarat's transformation as a loss of moral independence. According to Kant, morality is not determined by the results of our deeds, or our feelings, or even any other outside force. Duties are the foundation of morality; an activity is moral if it is driven by a sense of obligation. Kant (1996) gets this concept from which he initially formulated the categorical imperative, "act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law". According to Kant, a maxim is a personal guideline or overarching idea that serves as the foundation for a specific course of behavior. We don't just behave arbitrarily since we are human beings; instead, we have established norms that instruct us on what to do in various situations. In the novel Sarat grows more and more aligned with the broader objectives of the Southern uprising. Her acts, including her assassination and the subsequent release of a deadly virus, may be interpreted as disobeying Kantian ethics, which forbids using people as nothing more than tools. Sarat's loss of personal morality in favour of the group's objectives is a major example of the moral threats associated with crowd obedience, in which the group frequently defends behaviours that an individual would find morally distasteful.

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Sarat's radicalisation in the novel can also be understood via the prism of Nietzschean philosophy, specifically in relation to his notion of the "herd mentality." Herd Mentality according to Nietzsche refers to the values of slave-morality, which include sympathy, kindness, and humility. Nietzsche (2000) criticised the ways in which conformity and social pressures cause people to give up their will to power—the motivation to stand up for and live out their own values—in favour of the security and comfort of the herd. Sarat's path in *American War* serves as an example of the devastation, It results from the herd mentality, as her morality and sense of self are progressively subjugated by the rebel group's collective will. Her engagement with the situation is extremely violent acts in order to ensure the group's survival. Thus, Nietzsche's philosophy offers a framework for comprehending the moral and psychological degradation that can happen when people give up their individuality in favour of the group.

### Research Methodology

The present research uses an interdisciplinary method to examine how individual identity is eroded in Omar El Akkad's novel *American War*. It combines the sociological viewpoints of Gustave Le Bon, the psychological theories of Freud, and the philosophical insights of Nietzsche and Kant. The study aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of how the novel examines the conflict between individuality and collective power, especially in the context of crisis and social conformity, by combining these multiple theories. The unconditional imperative and Kant's emphasis on moral independence will operate as a philosophical dimension. It emphasizes the moral challenges that characters encounter while negotiating the needs of conformity and self-loss. By examining how societal structures and beliefs stifle individuality, Nietzsche's critique of morality and his investigation of power dynamics will be very suitable to this. Nietzsche and Kant will work together to offer a philosophical framework for analysing the existential and moral issues the book raises.

A psychological lens to examine how individual identities are formed within group dynamics, moreover will be analyzed by Freud's views on group psychology and the function of the ego. The understanding of how leaders shape group behaviour and the unconscious pressures that imposed will be especially helpful in examine the psychological changes of characters like Sarat Chestnut. Additionally, Freud's work will shed light on the subconscious impulses and internal struggles that lead to the novel's loss of originality.





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A sociological viewpoint will be treated by Gustave Le Bon's views on crowd psychology, including his ideas of "contagion" and the "submergence" of individual identity within a collective. Le Bon's theories will aid in the explanation of how the characters in *American War* undergo psychological changes as a result of their assimilation into various groups, losing their individuality as they blend in with the throng. His focus on the emotional intensity and irrationality of collective behaviour will enhance the examination of how social pressures and war cause conformity and identity disintegration.

This paper, is then, will provide a multilayered study of *American War* by combining Freud's psychological depth, Nietzsche's critique of power and morality, Kant's ethical rigour, and Le Bon's sociological insights. In addition to shedding light on the novel's examination of identity loss, this integrated approach will further larger conversations about the interaction of morality, individuality, and group dynamics during times of conflict.

### Analysis

#### 1. Collapse of Personal Awareness

The concept of "collapse of personal awareness" can be illuminated through the methodologies and theoretical frameworks outlined in your research. In *American War*, this collapse reflects the erosion of Sarat Chestnut's identity as she succumbs to the collective forces and ideologies of the groups with whom she interacts with. This phenomenon can be analyzed by integrating philosophical, psychological, and sociological perspectives as follows:

#### 1.2 Collapse of Personal Awareness:

Sarat's journey in *American War* provides deep insights into the fragility of personal identity in times of crisis. It is eloquently capturing existentialist struggles with meaning, selfhood, and autonomy under trying conditions. Her loss of self-awareness becomes a poignant illustration of her inability to assert individuality amidst the chaos and moral ambiguity of war. She is resonating with Sartrean ideas of "bad faith," where individuals abandon their freedom to make autonomous choices and succumb to external pressures (Sartre, 1956). This internal conflict is vividly established in Chapter 6, when "Sarat thought about how easy it would be to fix the mistake, to simply redraw the stars properly. But she knew that even broken history is history. The stars, cast



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wrong, must remain that way. It would be more wrong to change them." (El Akkad, 2017, p. 112)

This moment reflects Sarat's diminishing action, as her decisions become increasingly influenced by the ideologies and desires of the groups she aligns with, rather than her own moral reasoning. Her transformation is further complicated by Nietzschean perspectives, particularly the concept of the "herd mentality". The idea critiques the propensity of individuals to subsume their identities under collective ideals (Nietzsche, 1967). This dynamic is evident in a conversation where Gaines tells Sarat: "You're a beautiful girl," Dana said, and stormed out the room. For a moment, Sarat stood dumbstruck. She was a child still and the purpose of a lie eluded her." (El Akkad, 2017, P. 89). Here, Sarat's vulnerability to external validation and group influence underscores her gradual surrender of individuality. Driven by the dual imperatives of survival and revenge, she becomes increasingly entrenched in the ideological and psychological confines of the collective, sacrificing her personal beliefs and autonomy. By integrating Kant's ethical dimension, Nietzsche's critique of herd mentality, Freud's psychological insights, and Le Bon's sociological observations, this analysis provides a comprehensive understanding of Sarat's transformation. Her journey serves as a powerful case study of how war and collective narratives can reshape personal identity. It is illustrating the delicate balance between individualism and social belonging. Through this interdisciplinary approach, the study not only illuminates Sarat's struggles but also offers a broader critique of the societal implications of war, conformity, and the erosion of moral autonomy in the face of overwhelming external forces.

Sarat sacrifices her personal opinions and independence as she is more and more involved in the collective's ideological and psychological limitations. She is motivated by the competing needs of survival and vengeance. For instance, an important turning point in her loss of identity is her affiliation with the rebel organisation, the Southern Rebels. After her family is slaughtered, Sarat first joins the rebels in an attempt to get revenge, but she eventually loses her individuality and becomes a symbol of the movement. As the narrator observes: "She was no longer Sarat Chestnut; she was a weapon, a symbol, a story told to inspire others." (El Akkad, 2017, p. 201). Sarat becomes a tool for the cause of the rebellion. Her conversion, also demonstrates how her identity is immersed by the requirements of the group. Her personal desires and moral reasoning are overshadowed by the group's ideology.





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The novel, moreover, examines the conflict between Sarat's ultimate deference to the group will and her ability to think morally on her own from a Kantian standpoint. The definite imperative and Kant's emphasis on moral independence prove how outside forces cooperation Sarat's capacity to behave morally and rationally (Kant, 1998). One example of Sarat's loss of moral autonomy is her choice to commit violent acts for the rebellion in spite of her internal moral dilemmas. As she reflects, that "She told herself it was necessary, that the ends justified the means. But deep down, she knew she was lying to herself." (El Akkad, 2017, p. 245).

Sarat's change is further clarified by Freud's group psychology theories. Sarat's integration into collective ideas can be understood by a psychological lens. His investigation of how the ego is repressed in group dynamics, especially when charismatic leaders are involved (Freud, 1989). The relationship between Sarat and the rebel commander Gaines, for instance, serves as an example of how charismatic leaders may stifle individuality and mold group dynamics. Gaines' influence over Sarat is evident when he tells her: "You're not just fighting for yourself anymore. You're fighting for all of us." (El Akkad, 2017, p. 178). This statement strengthens Sarat's submergence into the collective, as her actions are framed as serving the group rather than herself. Freud's insights into the unconscious forces driving conformity help explain how Sarat's individuality is gradually eroded as she becomes part of the crowd.

A sociological interpretation of Sarat's journey can be explained in Gustave Le Bon's views on crowd psychology, namely in his ideas of "contagion" and the "submergence" of individual identity. Le Bon contends that when people are trapped in the emotional and ideological currents of a crowd, they experience a psychological transformation and lose their sense of self (Le Bon, 2002). This concept explains how Sarat's identity gets engaged by the groups she joins, with the collective's principles taking the place of her personal convictions. Her participation in the rebel organisation's violent activities, for example, exemplifies the "contagion" effect, in which moral boundaries blur in the midst of group action.

## 2. Social Conformity

### 2.1 Joining the Rebel

In keeping with Gustave Le Bon's theories of crowd psychology, Sarat's choice to join the rebels is a powerful example of social conformity. Le Bon argues that individuals in crowds undergo a psychological

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transformation, losing their sense of self as they are swept up in the collective's emotional and ideological currents (Le Bon, 2002). Sarat was initially opposed to the beliefs and methods of the rebel cause, yet her assimilation into the group shows how individuals can be swayed by charismatic leaders and the prevailing sentiment of their social milieu. Albert Gaines exemplifies the type of leader Le Bon described as crucial in influencing group behavior, with his compelling rhetoric and commanding presence, and authority. His ability to provide Sarat with direction and a sense of purpose speaks to her growing yearning for acceptance and significance amidst the chaos of war. This effect is exacerbated in the rebel camp, a microcosm of communal thought, where conformity is both emotionally and implicitly encouraged.

Sarat's gradual assimilation into the group's beliefs and practices illustrates how her desire for acceptance triumphs over her initial reluctance and moral convictions. Le Bon's concept of "contagion," where ideas and emotions spread rapidly within a crowd, helps explain how Sarat's individuality is eroded as she adopts the collective's values (Le Bon, 2002). By joining the rebels, she not only embraces their ideology but also begins to act in ways she might not have considered on her own. Her ultimate involvement in radical measures, such as the assassination of General Weiland, demonstrates how profoundly the group's influence has reshaped her identity. This violent act, carried out in arrangement with the rebel ideology, underscores how her personal beliefs and moral judgment were suppressed. The act illustrates how social conformity can alter one's identity and moral boundaries in service of group objectives.

Gaines' role as a charismatic leader is pivotal in this process. Le Bon emphasizes that such leaders possess the ability to captivate and mobilize crowds through their persuasive power and ability to articulate a shared vision (Le Bon, 2002). Gaines' influence over Sarat is evident in moments like when he tells her, "You're not just fighting for yourself anymore. You're fighting for all of us" (El Akkad, 2017, p. 178). This statement reinforces Sarat's submergence into the collective, framing her actions as serving the group rather than herself. Over time, Sarat's identity becomes inseparable from the rebel, as she internalizes their goals and sacrifices her individuality for the sake of the collective.

### 2.2 Massacre and Radicalization

A turning point in Sarat's ideological and psychological development, the Camp Patience massacre underscores the profound impact that trauma





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plays in accelerating social conformity. The brutal attack serves as an emotional corner that drives Sarat deeper into the rebel cause, following the death of her mother and the destruction of her home. This obligation with psychological theories suggesting that feelings of fear, anger, and grief can heighten an individual's exposure to group ideologies. Those ideologies provide a clear target for blame and the promise of retribution (Freud, 1989; Le Bon, 2002).

In Sarat's case, the trauma not only radicalizes her beliefs and actions but also hardens her loyalty to the Southern rebellion. The intense emotions evoked by the massacre—grief over her mother's death, anger at the perceived injustice, and a desire for vengeance—prevail any moral reservations she might have had, making her more receptive to the rebels' radical and violent directives. As Sarat reflects, "*The world had taken everything from her, and now it demanded her silence. But she would not be silent. She would make them pay*" (El Akkad, 2017, p. 156). This statement encapsulates how her personal suffering becomes a driving force behind her commitment to the rebel cause, illustrating how trauma can be weaponized to foster conformity.

Her growing dedication to the rebellion, fueled by her pain and loss, exemplifies how group ideologies can exploit individual emotions to reinforce unity and suppress dissent. This transformation marks the point at which Sarat's individual identity is nearly entirely subsumed by the collective identity of the rebellion. As the narrator observes, "She was no longer Sarat Chestnut; she was a weapon, a symbol, a story told to inspire others" (El Akkad, 2017, p. 201). This shift highlights the powerful interplay between social pressure and emotional openness in promoting conformity to group norms, even when those norms involve violent and extremist actions.

The massacre at Camp Patience also illustrates Freud's concept of the role of trauma in shaping group behavior and social conformity. For Freud shared experiences of suffering can create strong emotional bonds within groups, as individuals seek comfort and purpose in collective action (Freud, 1989). For Sarat, the massacre becomes a unifying event that fixes her to the rebel cause, as her personal grief bring into line with the collective narrative of victimhood and resistance. This shared trauma reinforces her commitment to the group, as she finds meaning and direction in the rebellion's ideology.



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Moreover, Le Bon's theories on crowd psychology provide further insight into Sarat's transformation. He posits that individuals in crowds are more subject to emotional manipulation and ideological influence, particularly in times of problems or crisis (Le Bon, 2002). The massacre at Camp Patience creates a heightened emotional state that makes Sarat more vulnerable to the rebels' rhetoric, as she seeks both revenge and a sense of belonging. Her actions following the massacre, including her participation in violent acts, demonstrate how trauma can erode individual moral boundaries and facilitate conformity to group norms.

This turning point in Sarat's journey highlights the complex relationship between trauma, emotion, and social conformity. By integrating psychological and sociological perspectives, the analysis reveals how the Camp Patience massacre serves as a substance for Sarat's radicalization. It highlights the ways in which personal suffering can be exploited to reinforce collective ideologies. Her transformation exemplifies the profound impact of trauma on individual identity and the powerful role of group dynamics in shaping behavior during times of conflict.

### 3. Influence of Leaders:

#### 3.1 Albert Gaines as a Leader

Albert Gaines, a master manipulator, personifies Gustave Le Bon's idea of the group's "mind," guiding its course and forming its philosophy. According to Le Bon, charismatic leaders can captivate and inspire audiences by using their persuasive skills and ability to express a common goal. They frequently taking advantage of the group members' emotional weaknesses (Le Bon, 2002). This relationship is best shown by the leader Gaines, who uses his personality and skill with speech to have a significant psychological impact on Sarat. When she is most helpless to outside direction, he recognises and takes advantage of her loneliness, trauma, and anger. His interactions with Sarat prove how much a leader can influence group members' attitudes and actions to match their own.

In the novel, for instance, Gaines provides Sarat with a sense of purpose and belonging by framing her actions as part of a larger, morally justified fight. He tells her, "You're not just fighting for yourself anymore. You're fighting for all of us" (El Akkad, 2017, p. 178). In addition to confirming Sarat's affiliation with the rebel, her declaration reinterprets her identity in terms of the group, and substituting a common ideological goal for her





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personal concerns. Gaines manipulates Sarat's feelings and refocuses her intentions on the objectives of the revolt which portrays her actions as contributions to a greater good.

Gaines' leadership style serves as an example of how group leaders can stifle individual agency by refocusing individual interests on group goals. By gradually guiding her away from her own moral compass and changing her ideals to conform to the philosophy of the insurrection, the leader radicalises Sarat. Sarat's transition from an unwilling participant to a committed rebel agent exemplifies this process. For instance, Gaines' decision to commit violent crimes, such the death of General Weiland, was greatly influenced by her. Sarat's internal conflict is evident when she reflects, saying: "She told herself it was necessary, that the ends justified the means. But deep down, she knew she was lying to herself" (El Akkad, 2017, p. 245). This moment highlights how Gaines' ideological appeals prevail Sarat's moral reservations, which illustrates the power of a leader to reshape personal convictions.

Gaines' ability to influence Sarat's feelings and beliefs supports Le Bon's claim that collective behaviour is greatly influenced by leaders. Le Bon highlights that in order to suppress uniqueness and encourage conformity, leaders frequently take advantage of people's emotional and psychological weaknesses through ideological petitions and persuasive rhetoric (Le Bon, 2002). This relationship is exemplified by Gaines' control over Sarat, who deflects her individual drives—such as her need for belonging and her desire for vengeance—toward the rebellion's overall objectives.

### 3.2 The Role of Joe/Yousef Bin Rashid

*American War* advances another level of leadership from Yousef Bin Rashid, who stands for outside, geopolitical forces that deliberately influence internal conflicts. Joe functions as an external orchestrator, using Sarat's personal grudge to further his larger, global goals, while Albert Gaines radicalizes Sarat from within the rebel cause. During the Reunification Ceremony, Joe uses his knowledge of Sarat's strong sadness and rage to control her into launching a devastating biological attack.

Joe is a perfect example of how leaders with more ambitious plans can control people by taking advantage of their feelings and past traumas in order to achieve their own objectives. The degree to which leaders may



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transform individual motives into group actions with far-reaching effects is demonstrated by his ability to place Sarat's personal need for revenge inside the framework of an intended act of terrorism. As Joe tells Sarat, "You think you're fighting for your people, but you're fighting for something much bigger. You're fighting for the future" (El Akkad, 2017, p. 289). This statement reveals how Joe reframes Sarat's personal struggle as part of a grander geopolitical narrative, manipulating her into serving his agenda.

Beyond the immediate rebel, Joe's handling of Sarat serves as an example of how group dynamics and leadership can persuade people to take actions that support more important, frequently concealed goals. His use of Sarat's weakness to achieve his own strategic goals emphasises the interaction between internal trauma and outside management. This tension is demonstrated by Sarat's ultimate choice to use the lethal virus, which furthers Joe's larger objectives at the expense of the rebellion's pressing requirements. As the narrator observes, "She had become a pawn in a game she didn't fully understand, her pain weaponized for purposes far beyond her comprehension" (El Akkad, 2017, p. 301).

The novel's criticism of how outside forces take advantage of internal conflict for their own gain is further highlighted by Joe's leadership. Joe shows how geopolitical powers can use personal pain to further their strategic goals, frequently at the expense of the people they use, by controlling Sarat. This dynamic is reliable with more general theories of manipulation and leadership, including Gustave Le Bon's claim that collective behaviour can be influenced by leaders by playing on emotions and taking advantage of weaknesses (Le Bon, 2002). This approach is best illustrated by Joe's ability to turn Sarat's personal grievance into a more important act of terrorism by using it as a means of furthering his objectives.

Ultimately, Joe/Yousef Bin Rashid's leadership is a clear reminder of how outside influences may control people and organizations to suit their own purposes. His ability to turn Sarat's personal grudge into a devastating act of terrorism and his exploitation of her trauma highlight the perilous relationship between personal vulnerability and geopolitical manipulation. Joe's identity serves as a way for the novel's indictment of the way external powers exploit internal problems, highlighting the terrible effects of such manipulation on both individuals and societies.





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### 4. Crowd Dynamics and Collective Behavior

#### 4.1 Rebel Operations and Groupthink

The Southern rebels in *American War* exemplify the phenomenon of groupthink, a psychological dynamic in which the desire for unity and cohesiveness within a group stifles dissent, and independent thought. This dynamic forces Sarat and other members of the group to adopt the collective ideology, even when it leads to irrational or destructive decisions. Groupthink creates a feedback loop of reinforcement, where shared goals and beliefs are insulated from external criticism, normalizing and justifying extreme behavior (Janis, 1982).

The rebels' groupthink is a key driver of Sarat's radicalization. As she becomes more deeply involved in the rebel activities, the absence of critical discussion or opposing viewpoints weakens her ability to exercise independent moral judgment. The group's singular focus on the rebellion's goals fosters an environment where members are encouraged to escalate their methods, leading to increasingly violent and morally questionable actions. This dynamic is evident in Sarat's eventual decision to organize the deadly virus. The act reflects not only her personal battle but also the collective mindset that prioritizes the group's objectives over broader ethical considerations.

The rebels' operations illustrate how groupthink fosters dysfunctional decision-making and amplifies the potential for extremism. For example, the group's unwavering commitment to their cause creates a closed system of thought, where dissenting opinions are dismissed and alternative perspectives are ignored. This is evident in the way the rebels justify their actions, framing them as necessary sacrifices for the greater good. As Sarat reflects, "They told her it was the only way, that the ends justified the means. And in her grief and rage, she believed them" (El Akkad, 2017, p. 245). This statement highlights how the group's ideology overrides individual moral reasoning, as Sarat's personal emotions are co-opted to serve the collective agenda.

The rebels' groupthink also manifests in their escalating violence, which becomes normalized within the group. Sarat's participation in increasingly extreme acts, such as the assassination of General Weiland and the deployment of the virus, which demonstrates how the group's attitude shapes her behavior. These actions are not merely the result of her personal vendetta but are also driven by the collective pressure to conform to the group's goals. As the narrator observes, "She was no



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longer Sarat Chestnut; she was a weapon, a symbol, a story told to inspire others" (El Akkad, 2017, p. 201). This transformation underscores how groupthink erodes individuality, replacing personal identity with a collective identity defined by the group's ideology.

The rebels' groupthink is further reinforced by their isolation from external perspectives. The group operates in a closed environment, where opposition is discouraged and loyalty to the cause is dominant. This insularity creates an echo chamber, where the group's beliefs are constantly reaffirmed and extreme actions are rationalized. For instance, the rebels' decision to use biological warfare is framed as a strategic necessity, despite its catastrophic consequences. Sarat's role in this decision reflects the extent to which groupthink has shaped her thinking, as she prioritizes the group's objectives over the ethical implications of her actions.

Sarat's eventual deployment of the deadly virus is a culmination of the groupthink dynamic. This act, born of both her personal trauma and the collective mindset of the rebels, that illustrates how groupthink can lead to morally reprehensible decisions. The group's firm commitment to their cause blinds them to the broader consequences of their actions, as they become trapped in a cycle of escalating violence. This dynamic serves as a case study in how groupthink fosters dysfunctional decision-making and amplifies the potential for extremism, highlighting the dangers of prioritizing group cohesion over critical reasoning and ethical considerations.

### 4.2 The Reunification Ceremony Attack

The peak of Sarat's development into a weapon of mass violence is her involvement in the Reunification Ceremony attack, which sufficiently illustrates the psychological and sociological dynamics of mob behaviour. The incident serves as an example of how people can act in ways that they might not contemplate individually when they are trapped in the group's collective identity. The emotional intensity and common goal of the rebel group increase and weaponized Sarat's personal hatred, which stems from her tragic situation and history.

This incident's crowd psychology illustrates how the collective's emotional fervour and sense of grievance can transcend personal moral boundaries. The climax of Sarat's internalised group identity is





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demonstrated by her choice to spread the deadly virus during the ceremony. It is an act that decimates the country. Her dedication to the case is strengthened by her allies' encouragement and support, which not only validates her activities but also gives her a sense of righteousness and purpose. The catastrophic potential of crowd dynamics when driven by emotional intensity and ideological conformity is emphasized by this act of collective aggression. Sarat's transformation from a traumatised individual to a mass-destructive agent serves as an example of how crowd psychology and groupthink can turn individual suffering into collective retaliation.

### 5. Consequences of Conformity

#### 5.1 Sarat's Disillusionment

An important turning point in Sarat's life story is her eventual disenchantment with the Southern rebels' leadership, which underlines the consequences of blind compliance and the cost of placing trust in a dishonest group. Sarat comes to realize that the leaders she once admired and loyally followed are not the moral models as she believed them to be. Instead, she feels profoundly betrayed by their self-serving motives and willingness to exploit their followers for personal and private gains. This moment of disillusionment goes with the psychological effects individuals experience when they confront the truth about their choices and the true nature of the leaders who influenced them after adopting the beliefs or behaviors of a group (Janis, 1982; Freud, 1989).

Sarat's growing awareness of this betrayal emphasizes the idea that blind obedience, while initially providing a sense of purpose and belonging, often leads to moral and emotional devastation. Her realization deepens her sense of alienation and reinforces the novel's critique of the destructive nature of conformity. It compels her to reflect on the moral consequences of her actions and the futility of her sacrifices. For instance, Sarat reflects, that "They had used her, just as they used everyone else. She had given them everything—her family, her freedom, her soul—and in return, they had given her nothing but lies" (El Akkad, 2017, p. 312). This moment of clarity marks a pivotal shift in her understanding of the rebellion and her role within it, as she recognizes the manipulation and exploitation at the heart of the movement.

This disillusionment serves as a sobering reminder of the fragility of trust in collective trust c vs and the high personal cost of surrendering individual judgment to the directives of dishonest leaders. Sarat's journey

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illustrates how the initial appeal of belonging to a group—especially in times of crisis—can blind individuals to the moral compromises and ethical failures of their leaders. Her eventual rejection of the rebels' ideology reflects a broader critique of the dangers of conformity and the loss of autonomy that often accompanies it.

The psychological impact of Sarat's disillusionment is profound. Freud's theories on group psychology suggest that individuals in groups often idealize their leaders, projecting their own desires for guidance and purpose onto them (Freud, 1989). When this idealization is shattered, as it is for Sarat, the resulting disillusionment can lead to a crisis of identity and purpose. Sarat's betrayal by the rebel leaders forces her to confront the emptiness of the cause she once believed in, as well as the moral compromises she made in its name. This reckoning is both painful and transformative, as it pushes her to reclaim her individuality and question the systems of power that exploited her.

Moreover, Sarat's disillusionment aligns with Janis's concept of groupthink, which emphasizes how the desire for cohesion within a group can suppress opposition and critical thinking, leading to flawed decision-making and moral failures (Janis, 1982). Sarat's eventual rejection of the rebels' ideology represents a break from this dynamic, as she begins to question the group's motives and actions. Her disillusionment serves as a critique of the dangers of uncritical conformity, that highlights the importance of maintaining individual moral agency even in the face of collective pressure.

In the end, Sarat's disillusionment with the rebel leadership is not just a personal turning point but also a broader commentary on the consequences of blind obedience and the exploitation inherent in many collective movements. Her story serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of surrendering one's judgment to charismatic but dishonest leaders, and the high personal cost of doing so. By reclaiming her independence and rejecting the rebels' ideology, Sarat ultimately exposes the fragility of trust in collective movements and the moral devastation that can result from conformity.

### 5.2 Benjamin's Role as Historian

Benjamin's decision to burn Sarat's diaries after discovering them is a powerful act of defiance against the cycle of revenge and conformity that dominated his aunt's life. As the historian of the family's story, Benjamin





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stands apart from the prevailing ideologies that shaped the lives of his family and community. His choice to destroy the diaries symbolizes a deliberate effort to break free from the destructive patterns that defined Sarat's existence, rejecting the pull of inherited revenge and the attraction of collective ideologies.

By burning the diaries, Benjamin distances himself from the communal forces that drove Sarat's actions and the broader devastation of the war. This act represents a reclamation of individual thought and an assertion of his autonomy. As Benjamin reflects, "The past was a fire that consumed everything it touched. He would not let it burn the future too" (El Akkad, 2017, p. 333). This statement underlines his determination to prevent Sarat's story from perpetuating further cycles of violence and hatred. In doing so, Benjamin not only honors his aunt's humanity but also demonstrates the possibility of resisting societal expectations and choosing a path of ethical independence.

Benjamin's decision is deeply rooted in moral reflection. He recognizes that Sarat's diaries, while a testament to her experiences, could also serve as a tool for perpetuating the ideologies that led to her downfall. By destroying them, he ensures that her story cannot be exploited to fuel future conflicts or justify further acts of vengeance. This act of erasure is not an attempt to deny Sarat's legacy but rather to protect it from being weaponized. As Benjamin explains, "Some stories are better left untold. Some fires are better left unlit" (El Akkad, 2017, p. 334). The sentiment reflects his understanding of the power of narratives to shape collective behavior and his commitment to breaking the cycle of violence.

Benjamin's defiance of conformity and his rejection of inherited ideologies emphasizes the novel's broader critique of the destructive nature of collective movements. While Sarat's life was shaped by the pressures of groupthink and the demands of the rebellion, Benjamin's actions represent a counterpoint to this dynamic. His decision to burn the diaries is an assertion of individual agency, demonstrating that it is possible to resist the pull of collective ideologies and choose a different path. This act also serves as a commentary on the role of memory and history in shaping identity. By destroying the diaries, Benjamin takes control of his family's narrative, refusing to let it be defined by the cycles of violence and vengeance that characterized Sarat's life. In doing so, he reclaims the power to shape his own identity and future, free from the



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constraints of the past. This act of defiance is a powerful reminder of the importance of individual moral agency in the face of societal pressures.

Ultimately, Benjamin's decision to burn Sarat's diaries is a profound act of resistance against the forces of conformity and retaliation. It represents a rejection of the ideologies that shaped his aunt's life and a commitment to forging a new path, one defined by ethical independence and a refusal to perpetuate the cycles of violence that defined the past. Through this act, Benjamin not only honors Sarat's memory but also offers a hopeful vision of the possibility of breaking free from the destructive patterns of history.

### Conclusion

This study has demonstrated how Omar El Akkad's *American War* portrays the erosion of individual identity through the psychological, sociological, and philosophical dynamics of crowd behavior, conformity, and leadership. Sarat Chestnut's transformation from an independent individual into a symbol of resistance reflects the powerful forces of trauma, groupthink, and ideological manipulation. Drawing on the theories of Freud, Le Bon, Kant, Nietzsche, and Sartre, the analysis revealed how external pressures and fascinating leaders suppress moral independence and reshape personal identity. Ultimately, the novel serves as a critical reflection on the dangers of subordinating individuality to collective ideologies and highlights the ethical and existential costs of blind conformity in times of conflict.

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