



The Language of Violence and the Violence of Language: We Unknowingly Normalize A Never-Ending Civil War

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“Do I want a civil war? Of course not. But if it happens, I already have a list of 200 people I’d want to tear apart.”

That was how journalist Joseph Abu Fadel put it in a recent TV interview. His comment quickly went viral, turning into a joke on social media. People laughed and shared it, but hardly anyone seemed unsettled by the fact that it was, in essence, a call for renewed civil conflict.

It is not the first time violence—or references to the Civil War—has surfaced as humor on Lebanese screens or in public spaces.

I was born in South Lebanon, three years after the war had officially ended. My parents did not carry direct memories of it, but I grew up under the weight of other wars, ones that touched daily life more closely.

In the South, the real ghost was

not the Civil War; it was Israel. That was the fear shaping our childhood, the threat adults whispered about, the shadow always hanging over us. In the cellar of my memory live images of “Operation Grapes of Wrath” in 1996, the massacre at Qana, the children of Mansouri.

And yet, on the edges of those memories, there were other wars—the “War of the Brothers,” the “War of the Camps,” and new wars we were always waiting for, lurking around the corner. We never fully understood their causes; they stayed confusing, half-told in stories, hinted at in jokes and insults, present in silences and in fear.

Sometimes I ask myself: Can a war break out without us even noticing? What makes war seep into our language and imagination? Does it really end





when the guns fall silent—or does it lie in wait, ready to return?

Language as Inheritance

We do not only inherit houses, debts, or family names. We inherit language, memory, and ways of speaking. Words and expressions imprint themselves on us from childhood, so familiar we forget to question their meaning.

My mother never laid a hand on us, yet when we pushed her too far, she would say: “You need to be hung on the Blanco!”—her way of insisting that what we had done could not go unpunished.

Our neighbor, whose brother was kidnapped at the very start of the Civil War, would cry whenever the threat of renewed fighting loomed. She would whisper lines from the poet Zain Shuaib: “The Angel of Death is always setting a trap for us.”

As a child, I used the word “Blanco” with my siblings and at school without knowing what it meant. Later, I learned it was the name of the iron chain butchers use to hang meat, repurposed during the war as an instrument of torture. What could be more terrifying than that? Another classmate once said to me: “You’ve made me so angry I should cut you up and

pour concrete over you.” Another image pulled straight out of Civil War violence. Even imagining it made me shiver.

The Violence of Language

Psycholinguistic studies show that violence is not only physical. It can also be linguistic: words hurled like blows, insults and threats that wound as deeply as action. Violent language does more than express anger; it shapes how communities think and talk about conflict.

In moments of rage, people discharge their bitterness and frustration through violent words. Sometimes it is just a safer release. But repeated too often, this kind of language normalizes aggression, planting the seeds for violence beyond words. The more our brains get used to violent images and expressions, the easier it becomes to imagine—and accept—them in real life.

Literature’s Struggle with Violence

Trying to make sense of the language of violence, I revisited Lebanese novels born out of the Civil War. Each, in its own way, wrestled with the same question: how do you tell the story of war without reproducing its violence?



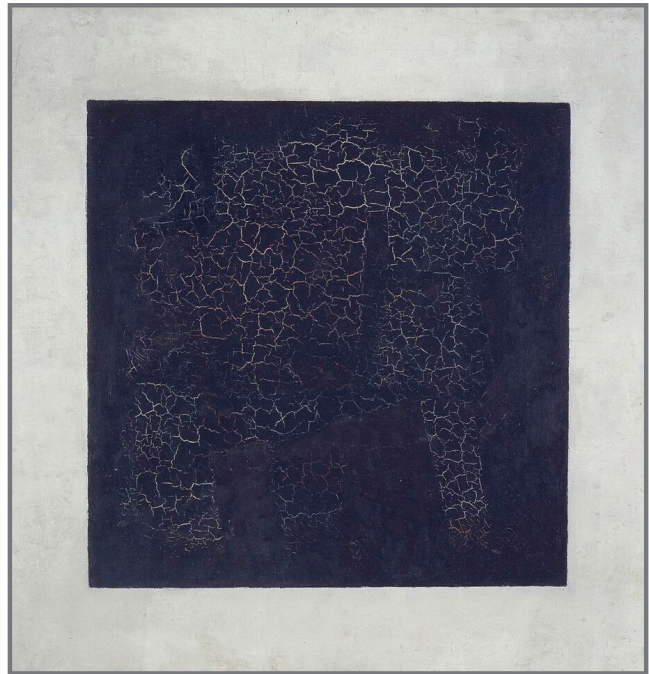


In her 1976 novel *Beirut Nightmares*, Ghada Samman writes: “Neutrality in a world of violence is also a crime. It means helping one side eliminate the other. At least joining one side makes death less bitter—collective death is easier to face than confronting death alone.” She goes on to ask: “To what extent can rejecting violence be a crime? And is it one punishable by violent death?”?

Samman’s novel left me haunted by an image of rats devouring children trapped in a shelter. Ever since, the word “rats” conjures up terror.

Mona Shatila’s *The Disappointed* (1995) is different—rich, layered, almost overwhelming in its detail. She dissects the contradictions in Lebanese society, exposing the fault lines that, she argues, fueled the war. Her characters argue fiercely, often violently, their words brimming with the aggression of the time.

Hanane Sheikh’s *The Story of Zahra* (1980) follows a woman destroyed by violence in all its forms—mockery, harassment, rape—until she met her end in murder. Zahra’s story was about survival, but also about how violence becomes normalized, how justice remains always out of



Oil painting by: Kazimir Malevich

reach.

Elias Khoury’s *Yalo* (2012) was the hardest to endure. Its pages are filled with torture, humiliation, and the grotesque. Reading it felt like stepping into the abyss left by war—a place where people become creatures of instinct, unable to live outside its stench.

Alawiya Sobh’s *Dunya* (2006), Rabi Jaber’s *Confessions* (2009), and Jabbour Douaihy’s *The Vagrant of Houses* (2010) offer something gentler. They evoke the war with empathy, with compassion. These stories made me feel, rather than recoil. They seemed to belong to what I would call “elevated storytelling.”





Between Questioning and Normalizing Violence

The Civil War has held Lebanese writers captive. To ignore it would be to deny reality itself. But its grip also means much of our literature remains steeped in violence.

So, how much responsibility do writers bear for shaping a less violent imagination? And how much does raw, unflinching storytelling—saturated with

horror—actually reproduce violence instead of dismantling it?

The line between questioning violence and normalizing it is hard to pin down. What is certain, though, is that demanding “more balanced language” risks sliding into censorship. A society’s language is nothing more—and nothing less—than the echo of its lived experiences, a mirror of its reality.

