

“Our Life is a Movie”: The Portrayal of Iraqi
Intergenerational Trauma In Mohamed Al-Daradji’s Films

Jannat Musawi
Psychology, Social Welfare
March, 2026

Faculty Adviser: Vern Harner, Ph.D.

Essay completed in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Global Honors,
University of Washington, Tacoma

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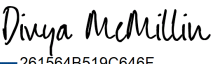
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“Our Life is a Movie”: The Portrayal of Iraqi Intergenerational Trauma In Mohamed Al-Daradji’s Films

Iraq has had an extremely turbulent history, involving economic sanctions, dictatorship, violence, and terrorism. The country’s struggles and political turmoil have caused the citizens severe trauma, which has been passed down to younger generations (Darya, 2022). To heal this, film therapy can be used to help people process emotions, reducing anxiety, and improving self-esteem (Capitani et al., 2025; Mekhakyan & Szulc, 2025). One Iraqi director, Mohamed Al-Daradji, has made significant contributions to contemporary Iraqi film. This analysis will examine three of Al-Daradji’s films in order to examine how various kinds of trauma and grief are portrayed. Practice and mental health implications of trauma portrayal and generational trauma will also be discussed.

Background

Historical Context

Iraq has gone through various and social challenges throughout history, giving it a unique sociopolitical context. Between 1918 and 1979, Iraq was under the British Mandate, turned into a monarchy, went through a revolution overthrowing the monarchy to make it a republic, and underwent two other coups that put the Baath Party in power (Holden, 2012; Isakhan, 2016). This political instability placed the country in a vulnerable position. Then, in 1979, Saddam Hussein gained power, which led to years of dictatorship and a series of wars, including the Iraq-Iran war from 1980 to 1988, the Gulf war from 1990 to 1991, and the 2003 US-led invasion that ousted Saddam Hussein’s government (Marr & al-Marashi, 2018).

Many events and political turmoil occurred in the years that Saddam Hussein was in power between 1979 and 2003. In 1988, Saddam Hussein killed thousands in the Kurdish town

of Halabja using poisonous chemical weapons (Palkki & Rubin, 2021). This was part of the Anfal campaign, an operation aimed at suppressing and silencing the Kurdish population, and fitting the definition of a genocide (Kelly, 2007). Although the operation was originally framed as a counterinsurgency operation to oppose certain Kurdish rebels, it quickly became clear that the target was not only rebels, but all Kurdish civilians and non-combatant villagers (Leezenberg, 2012). Additionally, following the 1990-1991 Gulf War, Iraq was subjected to 13 years of severe economic sanctions, leading to widespread poverty, malnutrition, destruction of infrastructure, systemic infanticide, and hundreds of thousands of deaths (Doran, 2012; Scherrer, 2011).

After the Saddam Hussein regime fell, Iraq continued to struggle severely. In response to the U.S. invasion, an uproar of violent insurgencies occurred, mainly by religious extremist groups that the Baathist regime was secretly controlling and suppressing while in power (Helfont, 2018). This included severe sectarian violence, littering the streets with dead bodies and causing families to lose many loved ones due to being on the “wrong road at the wrong time” (Kukis, 2011). Those years of political turbulence and instability continue to impact Iraq and Iraqis today in a myriad of ways.

Iraq’s film industry struggled constantly throughout its turbulent history, developing slowly and constantly getting disrupted due to economic sanctions, wars, governmental control, and destruction of infrastructure (Aljubori, 2024). However, following the 2003 war and the turmoil that followed it, Iraqi cinema has been slowly rebuilding and reviving, with more films being made, film festivals being hosted, and more investments focusing on film (Battaglia, 2018). Regardless, the Iraqi film industry is still facing challenges, such as lacking infrastructure, Western influences, and limited press freedom (Ginsberg, 2018; Kim, 2011).

Framework, Theory, and Approaches

Social Ecological Model

Through political turmoil and instability, it is important to think about the impact that it had on people, human development, and interpersonal relationships. Bronfenbrenner's (1994) Ecological Systems Model posits that human development is shaped and guided by five socially organized subsystems, ranging from the microsystem, which describes a child's interactions with their immediate environment, including their family and friends, to the macrosystem, which refers to the institutional-level changes and impacts surrounding a child, such as the economy and politics. Bronfenbrenner (1986) also places an emphasis on the impacts of external environments – such as the child's school, parents' workplaces, and community structures – on a child's development and family functioning.

Intergenerational Trauma

Intergenerational trauma is trauma that is passed down from ancestors and previous generations to younger generations through epigenetics, parenting styles, and systemic injustices (Bowe et al., 2025). Research has shown that exposure to trauma can alter DNA and be inherited by future generations (Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018). Whether the person experienced the trauma directly, was in utero when the mother experienced it, or was born years after the mother experienced it, their DNA can still be altered, and they can be affected (Mulligan et al., 2025). Generational trauma may also be passed down through parenting styles and the immediate environments surrounding a child, such as their extended family, peers, and education systems (Adams et al., 2023). Moreover, systemic injustices that are experienced by children under occupation may cause the trauma to transmit down to them (Barron & Abdallah, 2015). Examples of systemic injustices that may transmit down trauma include traumatic loss, micro-aggressions, extended subjugation, and geographical division, which have all occurred in Iraq.

The Role of Language and Culture

Additionally, trauma has been associated with “loss of language” and silence; thus, many cultures that experience trauma avoid discussing it or healing from it (Connolly, 2011). In Iraq, for example, there is heavy cultural stigma surrounding trauma, with the general idea of “we don’t talk about it” (Bolton et al., 2013; Saied et al., 2023). This suppresses the feelings of trauma and hurt that people experience due to the events that they have been through, and it also prevents them from moving forward and healing properly.

Iraq is extremely diverse ethnically, religiously, and culturally, which has made it historically difficult for its citizens to find one shared identity (Bourouh, 2007). This also impacted how different cultures and ethnicities experienced the events that occurred throughout Iraqi history. For instance, Kurdish people and children had unique traumas and struggled with severe PTSD following the events during the Anfal operation (Ahmad et al., 2000; Bolton et al., 2013). Therefore, it is extremely important for mental health treatments and approaches to be culturally sensitive and relevant, accounting for cultural differences and cultural barriers, including hierarchy, stigma, and varying beliefs (Kornwachs et al., 2024).

Mental health is still a prevalent and pressing issue among Iraqis, with high levels of depression, PTSD, anxiety, and stress (Darya, 2022). Over the years, there has been an increase in the development and implementation of mental health treatments in Iraq, including Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT), Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT), and psychotherapy (Böge et al., 2022; Kaysen et al., 2013; Wagner et al., 2012). However, cultural barriers and stigma remain a challenge, including religious beliefs, limitations for women, and stigma around therapy and mental health (Kaysen et al., 2013). Regardless of the constraints, Iraqi healthcare and research are increasingly turning their attention toward mental health services and care (Sadik et al., 2011; Saied et al., 2023).

Art-Based Therapy

Art-based therapy, particularly centered around watching film, can be used as a mode of therapy to help people cope and deal with traumatic situations. Some scholars define film therapy as the making of films with clients, as opposed to “cinema therapy”, which is when individuals watch films for healing (Cohen, 2023). However, for the purposes of this paper, “Film Therapy” will be defined as the act of watching films in psychotherapy related to one’s situation or trauma to cope or heal (Portadin, 2006). This type of film therapy helps clients through the ability to identify with characters, project their feelings onto them, reflecting on one’s life, learning from the characters, and experiencing catharsis (Capitani et al., 2025). Film therapy also reduces anxiety, improves self-esteem, and improves overall quality-of-life (Mekhakyian & Szulc, 2025). Therefore, films can be used for post-traumatic growth and resilience-building, through “mirroring” (or reflecting) traumatized individuals’ traumas, and “guiding” them to help with recovery (Cohen, 2026).

Research Questions

Though there is scholarship about generational trauma and about Iraqi history, little is known about intergenerational trauma and grief in Iraq specifically. This is particularly true for how it is portrayed in films and media. Researching this is important as it brings attention to the impacts that war and trauma have had on Iraqi people, while showing how film and media can be used to express that trauma and simultaneously heal from it. One director that stands out is Mohamed Al-Daradji, due to his multiple contributions to the Iraqi filmmaking industry, and his focus on post-war Iraqi experiences and their impacts on interpersonal relationship (Ng, 2010). Thus, this study will address the following research questions:

1. How are Iraqi grief and generational trauma represented in the films of Mohamed Al-Daradji?

2. What role do parents, caregivers, and other family members play in the films, particularly in terms of healing, kinkeeping, and the transmission of generational trauma?

Methods

Sample

To address the above questions guiding questions, this analysis uses the films of Iraqi filmmaker and director Mohamed Al-Daradji. Since 2003, Al-Daradji has created and directed 9 films. After immigrating to the Netherlands and studying in the UK for his master's in cinematography, Al-Daradji has dedicated his career to making films about and in Iraq. He uses external funding to complete his projects, since the filmmaking industry in Iraq is not built, and he ensures that his films are filmed in Iraq regardless of security concerns to ensure authenticity and representation (Short, 2010).

The films selected had to meet the criteria of being related to war and political turmoil in Iraq, while showing representations of trauma, generational trauma, grieving, and transgenerational grieving. However, due to limits in funding and access, not all of Mohamed Al-Daradji's films were available for viewing in the United States at the time of this study. After briefly reviewing the descriptions of available films for relevance to the focus of this study, the following films were selected to be included: 1) *Ahlaam*, 2) *War, Love, God, & Madness*, and 3) *Son of Babylon*. Detailed summaries of the films can be found in the appendix

Released in 2006, *Ahlaam* was one of Al-Daradji's first films, and was filmed during 2004 Iraq, amidst heavy political turmoil following the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime. Upon its release in 2006, the film won the Spirit Award for Best Feature at the 2006 Brooklyn International Film Festival. Additionally, the second film, *War, Love, God, & Madness*, released

in 2008, is a documentary directed by Mohamed Al-Daradji showing his return to Iraq in 2004 after years in exile, and documenting the process and struggles of filming *Ahlaam*. It shows the behind-the-scenes and battles fought by the crew to bring *Ahlaam* into fruition, as well as documenting the trauma and horrors of the war and political climate that was occurring at the time. The third film, *Son of Babylon*, released in 2010, follows the story of an elderly Kurdish woman who takes her grandson and goes on a journey to the south of Iraq in search of her son and her grandson's father, who disappeared in war over a decade earlier. The film gained international recognition and won many awards at several film festivals, including the Berlin International Film Festival, British Independent Film Awards, Cairo International Film Festival, Hawaii International Film Festival, Karlovy Vary International Film Festival, International Film Festival Rotterdam, Seattle International Film Festival, Raindance Film Festival, Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival, Nuremberg International Human Rights Film Festival, and Seville European Film Festival (Son of Babylon Awards, n.d.).

Analysis

The films were watched over the course of three months, with notes taken about common themes and representations of trauma, intergenerational trauma, and grief. A psychological criticism approach to content analysis was used, wherein the characters were treated as simulated humans with their own psychological dimensions (Ryan & Lenos, 2020). Abductive coding was used, in which preexisting concepts (transmission of trauma, portrayals of grief and trauma, and silence and loss of language) were used to analyze the films, while new codes that described music and distrust and hopelessness were also applied. Then, these codes were grouped under broader themes. Resulting themes were discussed and revisited through regular meetings with a faculty advisor during the second watching of the films.

Results

The qualitative analysis resulted in four themes: 1) Silence and loss of language, in which film characters who have gone through a lot of trauma or generational trauma tend to be silent and ignore people, including their loved ones; 2) Portrayals of grief and trauma, in which film characters communicate their grief verbally, physically, or otherwise, and this includes portrayals of trauma and grief being transmitted from caregivers to children through their interactions with each other; 3) Distrust and hopelessness, in which characters share sentiments of hopelessness about their lives, futures, and country, and show distrust in the individuals and systems around them; 4) Music, in which music is repeatedly used to communicate the various themes, emotions, and messages in the film while weaving in culture and tradition.

Silence and Loss of Language

The first theme is silence and loss of language, which examines moments where film characters portrayed their traumas through being completely silent, ignoring people around them, or losing their language. One way that this is shown is through caregivers ignoring their children. In *Son of Babylon*, Ahmed's grandmother repeatedly ignores him at various parts of the movie. In the beginning of the movie, there is a scene of Ahmed asking his grandmother if they are far from their destination, and she completely ignores his question. Then, later on in the movie, there is a scene where Ahmed asks his grandmother what Anfal is after hearing the driver mention it, and his grandmother ignores him again, thus leading the driver to step in and explain it to him. Although this is a reflection of the grandmother's pain and grief, which had led her to be silent, it also shows the generational cycles being passed down. By ignoring Ahmed, the grandmother is passing that pain and grief down to him, rather than processing it or working through it with him.

This silence is again portrayed in *War, Love, God, and Madness*, when Mohamed tries to tell his parents that he will begin filming *Ahlaam*, and the scene simply shows his parents sitting

there completely silent, even after he asks them for their feedback and thoughts, only for us to later find out that it was because they were strongly opposed to the idea of him filming due to the dangers. Again, rather than openly communicating their pain and worries, Mohamed's parents remain silent and ignore his requests for their opinions or feedback. Although Mohamed is an adult and his parents are no longer necessarily his "caregivers", these scenes are still representative of the impacts that trauma and loss of language have on parent-child relationships. It may also be indicative of a pattern of interactions from an early age, where his parents leaned toward silence rather than communication and clarity.

The films also portray silence and the loss of language through literal, physical manifestations of silence. In the beginning of *Son of Babylon*, when Ahmed and his grandmother need a car to pick them up, his grandmother just stands in the middle of the road and blocks a car silently to have it pick them up. Although the driver tries to talk to her and tell her to move, she does nothing but stand silently, blocking his car. This physical act, of using her body as a still force to communicate her needs rather than using language, is indicative of the loss of language and silence caused by trauma. People can communicate using a myriad of avenues, but trauma erases language and verbal communication, which is represented by the grandmother using her physical body to communicate and stop a car rather than using her voice and language.

Additionally, in *War, Love, God, and Madness*, when Mohamed is kidnapped three consecutive times — first by Al Qaeda, then by another militia group, and then by the U.S. forces — we are shown scenes of his mother crying, praying, and worriedly talking to herself, while his father is a complete opposite in that he is silent and still, showing the viewer that he is still worried, but expressing it differently. Again, the loss of language is expressed in a physical sense through the stillness of the body, showing how loss of language can manifest physically.

Moreover, throughout the film, as the viewer sees Mohamed's friend, Muntathar, get sucked deeper into his PTSD, he gets more silent as time goes by. He spends a long time by himself, silent, and when he does speak, he speaks quietly. The scenes show his voice physically getting quieter, and his body moving slower and becoming stiller. His physical body and actions show how PTSD causes him to lose his language and become more physically still, following the same theme of physical stillness as a manifestation of silence and loss of language. In *Ahlaam*, when Ali loses his hearing due to the air raids that injure him and kill his best friend, Hasan, the sound in the scene is just the muffled sounds of what is happening around him covered by the ring in his ears. This silence can be viewed as a product of the shock that one can go through after a traumatic event, in which it feels that the surrounding world is muffled and extremely far away. It also shows another physical manifestation of silence, in Ali's physical deafness and loss of hearing, symbolizing just how severe his trauma was.

Ahlaam portrays this theme in more creative and abstract ways, featuring cultural symbolism and allegories. In one of the scenes, as Ali sits in a jail cell, an inmate sings a melancholy traditional song while Ali is sitting silently, and the scene flips to what he can hear, showing the viewer that he can only hear the ringing in his ears. This can be symbolic of the traumatic events that occurred to Ali causing him to feel distant and isolated from his culture and traditions, since he physically cannot hear the traditional song being sung by his cellmate. It can be representative of the loss of connection to one's culture, language, and ways of communication due to trauma and severe shock. Additionally, another scene portrays loss of language by showing Ahlaam in her room at the mental hospital, talking in a completely different language than Arabic. This is shown in multiple scenes, and it can be indicative of the impacts that trauma has on our language and how it can cause it to be lost or regressed. It can

also again be representative of the loss of connection to culture and heritage that is caused by severe trauma, causing her to forget her mother tongue and speak a completely foreign language. Both of those scenes used abstract and symbolic messages to show trauma's ability to erase language, communication, and connection to heritage.

Across the three films, characters who have experienced trauma repeatedly portrayed it through their loss of language and their silence. This was particularly represented in silence by caregivers toward youth, physical manifestations of silence, and symbolic loss of language and heritage. Such portrayals of silence can be indicative of the shocked state that the characters may be in, the complete exhaustion that trauma may cause, and the huge impacts that trauma has on language and communication.

Portrayals of Grief and Trauma

The second theme identified is portrayals of grief and trauma, which examines how various characters express their trauma or grief, including physically, verbally, or otherwise. *Ahlaam* focuses heavily on portrayals of grief, since Ali lost his best friend, and Ahlaam lost her fiancé. In the scene where Ahlaam's fiancé is taken from their wedding, she runs down screaming and sobbing and then passes out on the ground, showing the extreme emotions of fear, grief, and trauma experienced at that moment. Meanwhile, after Ali loses his best friend, Hasan, and ends up being in the mental hospital, he repeatedly says, "Hasan is still here, I did not abandon him", showing his denial and his inability to move on from that event, replaying it in his head endlessly. Additionally, in *Son of Babylon*, as Ahmed's grandmother speaks to their driver about the loss of her son and his daughter, she says, "If we lose a child, a part of us dies." This statement is representative of the deep grief that is felt when one loses a child, and in this case, it is portrayed as a grief so huge that it is a loss of oneself. Another portrayal of grief and trauma in

this film was when a man working at a mass grave told Ahmad that his father's name is not there, causing Ahmad to scream at him, calling him a liar, and run away. This shows a different angle to how trauma and grief can be portrayed – anger. Ahmad portrayed his grief and trauma by being angry and expressing it by screaming at the man, which could also be symbolic, with the man representing his father, and Ahmed unleashing his misplaced feelings of abandonment, anger, and grief at him.

The films also include various scenes showing Iraqi traditional and cultural portrayals of grief. In one of the scenes in *Ahlaam*, a mother comes up to the mental hospital after the fall of the Baathist regime and asks about her daughter. Upon finding out that her daughter was one of the patients that escaped, she begins hitting her face and screaming to express her grief and despair. Additionally, *Son of Babylon* includes many scenes of women standing in a circle, wailing, singing, chanting, and hitting themselves – on the face or other parts of the body – to grieve their lost ones. The act of hitting oneself is reflective of expressing one's emotional pain in a physical manner, causing them to feel that pain physically as well. It also reflects a connection to heritage and culture, since this is the way that most Iraqis have expressed their grief throughout history.

In *Son of Babylon*, there were also many examples of caregivers' transmission of trauma. In one of the scenes, Ahmed wears his father's jacket, and upon his grandmother seeing him, she immediately starts hitting him and yelling about how his father (her son) should not have become a soldier: "Your dad was forced. He wanted to be a musician." Although she is traumatized from losing her son to war, through this action, she is transmitting this trauma down to Ahmed, who simply wants to connect with the memory of his father by wearing his clothes. Additionally, in many of the scenes, Ahmed is seen comforting his grandmother and trying to do things to make

her feel better. This is particularly shown toward the end of the movie when Ahmad and his grandmother are at a mass grave site, and she begins sobbing because she could not find her son anywhere. Upon seeing this, Ahmad begins to cry as well and runs, looking at the names attached to the corpses scattered around, and telling her their names, begging her to stop crying. Since Ahmed's father disappeared when he was a baby, and his mother died while he was young, his sole caregiver was his grandmother, which shows just how crucial she is to him and his life. Therefore, a young child experiencing many horrors and having to comfort their only caregiver shows a significant way that generational traumas can be passed down from caregivers to youth and future generations.

Meanwhile, in *War, Love, God, and Madness*, there is a larger focus on portrayals of trauma than grief. For example, in one scene, Bashir – who Mohamed is casting to play Ali in *Ahlaam* – describes the torture that he went through in Abu Ghraib and how they would wrap electric wires around his ears and electrocute him repeatedly. While describing it, with a distant expression on his face, he said, “The problem is, everything I face in life, brings back the painful memories of the past. Even good things remind me of painful memories.” This scene portrays trauma as a haunting presence, settling into the traumatized individual's mind and taking hold of their life and thoughts. Another portrayal of trauma in this film is through the witnessing of Muntathar – Mohamed's close friend and partner in the film – slipping deeper into his PTSD as the film went on and drifting away from people around him, until eventually dropping out of the film. Throughout those scenes, Muntathar is seen spacing out, ignoring people around him, being disengaged from conversations around him, and being unaware of his surroundings. It is a stark contrast to how he was at the beginning of the film when Mohamed first came back, showing just how strongly old traumas can drag one back into them.

Mohamed Al-Daradji uses a variety of scenes, dialogue choices, and symbolism to portray grief and trauma in his films. It is important to emphasize that *War, Love, God, and Madness* is a documentary-style film, thus the portrayals of grief and trauma in it are genuine, raw, and unscripted. However, while analyzing the various portrayals of grief and trauma in his films, it is clear that they are shown in many ways, such as crying, screaming, dissociating, pulling away, denying, spiraling, and much more. It truly shows the myriad of ways that trauma and grief can be expressed and shown, while also showing that Al-Daradji's films portray them skillfully.

Distrust and Hopelessness

The third theme examined in the films is distrust and hopelessness, which focuses on the characters feeling hopelessness about their lives, futures, and country, as well as feeling distrust toward other people and the systems surrounding them. The films emphasize a sense of hopelessness about the general future of the country and about life. This is shown in *War, Love, God, and Madness*, when Mohamed asks a random man selling gas on the street about what he thinks of Iraq's conditions, to which he responds: "It's rotten... we have nothing... no work, no electricity, and we're running out of petrol." Additionally, when Mohamed's friend, Nazar, is threatened and decides he must leave Iraq, he tells Mohamed: "A man has three choices in his life: Kill himself, kill his family, leave the country, what will you choose?" Those comments show the state of hopelessness that one can reach when their country is falling apart, and how such systems can heavily weigh on individuals and impact their personal views about their lives. Ahlaam portrays hopelessness through one key character: Hasan, Ali's best friend. Before dying of an airstrike, Hasan is shown often talking to Ali about how he cannot no longer serve the military or stay in Iraq. He talks about how he has an issue with his hair that he needs to leave

the country to get treated for, and how he wishes he was like other normal people. In one of the scenes, he states that he would rather die than stay in Iraq. It shows the general hopelessness that he had about the government that he was serving and the future that he knew they were heading toward.

Another way that the films portray hopelessness is through personal hopelessness that the characters feel about themselves or their personal lives and goals. Again, Hasan from *Ahlaam* serves as a perfect example of this hopelessness, as he often felt hopeless and heartbroken due to the condition he had with his hair, and feeling that he will not get treated or recover from it. Before he died, he often talked to Ali about how he felt that he will never have his hair fixed and wondering if he will ever be a normal person. Additionally, throughout *War, Love, God, and Madness*, Al-Daradji himself is seen becoming hopeless about the political conditions and his project, *Ahlaam*. In one scene, after almost getting caught up in a firefight, Mohamed sits his partners down and talks to them about how he cannot finish the film and how he will stop filming and go back to London. His friends manage to convince him not to give up on the project. However, later in the movie, Mohamed and some members of his crew get kidnapped while filming, and he again sits down his partners and tells them that he cannot proceed and that it was extremely traumatizing. He gets convinced to continue again, but it still shows the levels of hopelessness and helplessness that can be reached in such difficult and turbulent conditions, and how even the most determined and hopeful people can have that hopefulness drained out of them due to repetitive and severe violence and harm.

Al Daradji's films also discuss themes of distrust, focusing on distrust of other people as well as distrust of the government and systems. This is first shown in *Son of Babylon* when the driver asks Ahmed for a fare that he considered too high, to which Ahmed got extremely angry

and yelled at the driver, calling him a deceiver. Later on in the movie, Ahmed also demands that he get his fare back from a bus driver after the bus breaks down, and calls him a cheat. This shows the lack of trust that can nestle in a child's mind when they are raised in a community and a system that they feel they cannot trust. Ahmed's first assumptions were to accuse the drivers of cheating him or lying to him. Additionally, on the bus, Ahmed and his grandmother meet a kind man named Musa. Later, by the fire, Ahmed's grandmother asks Musa where he learned Kurdish, and he tells her that he was forced to be in the army and confesses that he's had to attack villages and kill Kurdish people. This causes the grandmother to get extremely angry and distrustful, thus not allowing Ahmed to go near Musa. Although Musa had to serve the military as a requirement and against his will, and the grandmother knew that, distrust still festered between them due to his history and actions, and the two sides of history that they stood on. This is reflective of the bigger picture of distrust developing between civilians and normal people due to the actions of governments and the process of successfully dividing and conquering, by turning people against each other. Distrust is also shown in Hasan's scenes in *Ahlaam*, but it is more focused on distrust toward the government and governing systems, as Hasan talks to Ali about wanting to leave and escape from the military, posing the question of "who are we even serving?" This shows the awakening toward corrupt systems, and distrust felt toward them even as one is serving under them.

In these movies, hopelessness and distrust are reoccurring themes and appear often. In a way, hopelessness and distrust can be viewed as side effects of trauma and grief. Through that lens, it can be seen that most of the hopelessness and distrust in the films could be traced back to some form of trauma or grief, whether it is individual trauma or shared, historical trauma shared by the nation.

Discussion

Through examination and analysis of Mohamed Al-Daradji's films, this study identified themes about generational trauma and grief in Iraq. Through a psychological criticism approach to content analysis (Ryan & Lenos, 2020) and an abductive coding approach, the following themes were identified: silence and loss of language; portrayal of grief and trauma; distrust and hopelessness; and music. These themes both coincide with and add to current scholarship.

Global Considerations

Many countries, cultures, and populations all around the globe have experienced generational trauma. It has been experienced in various ways among Palestinian citizens, Vietnamese Americans, Jewish Holocaust survivors, Syrian refugees, and more populations (Barron & Abdallah, 2015; Nguyen, 2024; Mulligan et al., 2025; Chou & Buchanan, 2021). With an issue this important and urgent, it is crucial that it is analyzed and interventions to it are found. Additionally, when generational trauma is researched in one country or among one group of people, the findings can often be applied to global contexts and other communities that are struggling with similar issues. Therefore, findings from this study may help with analysis of other films around the world and how they may be representing generational trauma and grief, since film helps with learning and identifying ways that other cultures deal with trauma (Kaplan & Wang, 2004).

Implications

The findings from this analysis encourage the use of film as a mode of healing and coping with generational trauma. A Malaysian study showed that film therapy can contribute to lowering stress levels and processing emotions (Abdul Rahim et al., 2023). Film can also illuminate about trauma and cultural differences by translating complex trauma into understandable narratives, and through the identification of viewers with characters, thus

deepening their understanding of suffering (Testi Melgarejo, 2025). While films from other cultures have been analyzed for this reason, the findings from this study make a unique contribution by analyzing the portrayal trauma and grief specifically in Iraqi film, providing insights into Iraqi culture.

Films can also be used in direct mental health practice, such as in psychological therapy sessions, where clients watch films and reflect on them with a professional to process their emotions and traumas (Hamilton, 2024). This can encourage clients to feel discomfort, thus learning difficult concepts and developing critical thinking (Terblanche & van der Walt, 2019). Additionally, representation of trauma in film can contribute to helping people heal from their traumas. The act of watching a film that includes one's personal trauma makes the individual a witness of that trauma, thus being able to have a collective experience of memory and loss, and working through the emotions (Ashuri, 2010). This may be particularly impactful for Iraqis, given the cultural stigma surrounding discussing mental health treatment and large overall lack of accurate representation in popular media.

Strengths and Limitations

While conducting this study, there were a few factors that limited the scope and findings. One of the most important limitations was the lack of access to all of Mohamed Al-Daradji's films, due to being positioned in the United States and having limited access to Iraqi film and media. Obtaining all of his films would have been achievable with funding. However, this research was not funded and was an undergraduate capstone project. This, along with the timeline associated with it being a thesis project, limited the scope of the study.

However, despite the limitations, there were many strengths to this study. By using film as the sample for analysis, re-traumatization could be avoided since a human sample was not

used. Unlike human subject research, the methods used in this study minimized re-traumatization and ensured the safety of the population studied. Additionally, this study has an interdisciplinary approach, since it blends methods from social work, psychology, and film studies into its analysis and procedures. This makes it applicable and helpful to various fields and disciplines, thus increasing its ability to contribute to improving the issue of intergenerational trauma on many levels. Lastly, I am fluent in Arabic and am Iraqi myself, which was a strength, since it helped with understanding the films, some Arabic articles, and cultural nuances. This allows for more culturally-sensitive research and increases the scope of literature and access since the researcher can access both Arabic and English sources (Suwankhong & Liamputtong, 2015)

Conclusion

This paper explored the portrayals of intergenerational trauma and grief in Iraqi film and media. Through examination and content analysis of Mohamed Al-Daradji's films, many themes emerged – silence and loss of language, portrayals of trauma and grief, and distrust and hopelessness. These themes can help with identifying common tools and factors to portray the issues of generational trauma and grief in films. Additionally, these findings can be used to explore other cultures or communities and how they use film to portray generational trauma and grief. Beyond sheer portrayal, these films can be used as a mode of healing through film therapy or through generally watching them to encourage conversations and acknowledgement of previous traumas (Capitani et al., 2025; Cohen, 2026; Mekhakyian & Szulc, 2025). These findings can be adapted and applied to a global context, since communities all around the globe have faced generational trauma (Barron & Abdallah, 2015; Chou & Buchanan, 2021; Mulligan et al., 2025; Nguyen, 2024). Further research needs to be conducted on trauma and grief in Iraq in

general, to better gauge intergenerational trauma in Iraq and find culturally responsive ways to combatting it.

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Appendix

Film Summaries

The film *Ahlaam*, released in 2005, follows the stories of three characters: a soldier named Ali, a medical student named Mehdi, and a college student and bride named Ahlaam. The movie begins by showing the characters' lives and shows moments where they feel joy or love, introducing the viewer to what matters most to them. Ali is sent to a different province for the military, and he spends most of his time with his best-friend Hassan, who is desperate to leave Iraq and move abroad to get treatment for a hair problem that he has. Mehdi is finishing medical school and applying to a master's to avoid military service. However, due to his father's history as a communist, the Baathist regime does not allow him to pursue a master's degree. Lastly Ahlaam is finishing up university while preparing to marry her fiancé, Ahmad, whom she is deeply in love with and planning a future with. However, in a turn of events, everything changes. Ali and Hassan are caught in an airstrike that kills Hassan and leaves Ali disoriented and wandering into the Syrian border, where he is captured and considered a "runaway soldier", for which he is punished by having his ear cut and being put in the mental hospital. Meanwhile, on her wedding day, Ahlaam's fiancé gets kidnapped right in front of her by Saddam Hussein's forces, which shatters her and also lands her in the mental hospital. The film then shows the inside of the hospital, with Mehdi being the psychiatrist, as the Saddam Hussein regime falls and chaos ensues outside. The patients then escape, and the rest of the movie documents their experiences as they are on the run, showing war-torn Baghdad amidst chaos.

The second film, *War, Love, God, & Madness*, released in 2008, is a documentary directed by Mohamed Al-Daradji showing his return to Iraq in 2004 after years in exile, and documenting the process and struggles of filming *Ahlaam*. The film shows Al-Daradji landing in

Baghdad and seeing his family after years in diaspora. He then meets with his friends from university and discusses his idea for the film, *Ahlaam*, and they agree to help him and make it together. However, as the story progresses and they begin work on the movie, they run into many obstacles. For example, the hyper surveillance by the American and Iraqi forces makes recording an extremely dangerous activity for them, since the U.S. military and the many militias can harm or imprison them for recording, even though they have permission from the Ministry of Culture. This obstacle causes issues since Al-Daradji was recording the majority of the time for his documentary. Additionally, they realize that it is difficult to find female actresses to play Ahlaam's role since women were worried for their lives and did not want to participate, particularly since there was a rape scene in the film. Mohamed's friend also drops out of the project midway through due to extreme PTSD that he experienced from being a prisoner at Abu Ghraib. Toward the end of the documentary, Mohamed and a few of his crew get kidnapped and tortured three times, first by Al Qaeda, then by another militia group right after they escaped Al Qaeda, and then the militia group turned them over to the U.S. forces, who held and interrogated them for six days, with accusations of their film being propaganda for Al Qaeda. The end of the film shows Mohamed Al-Daradji discouraged and considering giving up on *Ahlaam* and leaving Iraq, but ends up pushing through and completing the film.

The third film, *Son of Babylon*, released in 2010, follows the story of an elderly Kurdish woman who takes her grandson, Ahmad, and goes on a journey to the south of Iraq in search of her son — her grandson's father — who disappeared in the Gulf War over a decade earlier. The film is set right after the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime, in which the grandmother receives a letter from a former inmate that shared a cell with her son during the Gulf War, telling her where they stayed together. However, as she travels through Iraq with her grandson, there are many

depictions of grief and loss from her as well as people surrounding her. She constantly grieves her son by crying, being silent, or yelling at her grandson. Meanwhile, while on the road and visiting mass graves in search of her son, the viewer sees scenes of other mothers and family members crying, screaming, hitting themselves, and otherwise grieving. Additionally, the conversations and interactions with people that Ahmad and his grandmother run into on the way reflect the public views about the political climate and the ways that people tried to cope. On their way to their destination, they meet a man named Musa, who Ahmad befriends, and who helps them in their search for Ahmad's father. However, at some point, the grandmother finds out that Musa was part of the army operation that slaughtered thousands of Kurds, which makes her extremely distrustful and weary of him, and makes her keep Ahmad away from him. However, this fades away as Musa continues to try to help them, and Ahmad gets attached to him. By the end of the film, the grandmother tells Musa that she forgives him for what he did. When they arrive to their destination, she does not find her son in any of the prisons or mass graves, and she grieves by crying, screaming, and singing mournful songs. Then, when Ahmad and his grandmother start their journey back to the north to go home, she ends up passing away in her sleep, leaving Ahmad alone and grieving.