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## THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED: A PEEK INTO SYRIAN CONFLICT THROUGH THE LENS OF MARWAN HISHAM'S *BROTHERS OF THE GUN*

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### ABSTRACT

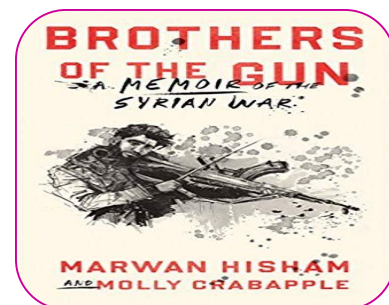
*The given research paper attempts to analyze the conflict and trauma that resulted as a gory outcome of the Syrian civil war. What started as mild protests against the president Bashar al-Assad's regime in 2011 resulted in a violent civil war which is still under way. The Syrian government formed by Bashar al-Assad's regime, various rebel groups, Islamic militant groups such as Al-Qaeda, and international allies have been the monstrous architects of this mayhem. Marwan Hisham, a Syrian himself presents the harrowing tale of Syrian war ridden society through his memoir. He depicts the plight of people who are entangled in this conflict and the traumatic experiences he himself have had during his years in Syria. Hisham, through his memoir intends to present the harsh realities of this ongoing conflict from a Syrian's point of view who has been a witness to such myriad traumatic experiences.*

**KEYWORDS:** Al-Qaeda, rebel, mayhem, Syrian war, trauma.

### INTRODUCTION:

Syrian civil war, one of the bloodiest wars of the century is unique in its kind which marks its inception from the year 2011, when a group of people started pro democracy protests against the president Bashar al-Assad's regime. The reasons behind these protests were many. People wanted to end the authoritarian practices of Assad regime and have political and economic development. Also, between the years 2006-2010, Syria faced the worst kind of drought that forced people to migrate. It was in one such poor drought stricken village named Dara that the first protests erupted against the Syrian government. The government arrested and tortured the protestors including children for writing anti-regime graffiti on the walls. Something that started as peaceful protests, therefore, turned into a violent civil war between the Syrian government and dissatisfied public. Later on, rebel groups, militant organizations and international allies also got involved which resulted in a highly complicated and conflicted situation.

Marwan Hisham, Syrian freelance journalist, presents the harrowing tale of Syrian crisis through his memoir on Syrian war, *Brothers Of The Gun: A Memoir Of The Syrian War*. A memoir as a form of writing is slightly different from autobiography as "the emphasis is not on author's developing self but on the people and events that the author has known or witnessed" (Abrams, 27). Hisham gives the firsthand account of such a conflict that took several lives, destroyed families and put a question mark on the identity of its residents. In his



memoir, Hisham recollects the traumatic experiences of Syrian conflict. He expresses his thoughts and feelings with the intent to let others know what all the Syrians have been through. It is story of a man who comes through conflicting and traumatic experiences of Syrian civil war from its inception to the present.

He witnesses the conflict, the airstrikes, regime warplanes that have become a routine happening in the war torn Syria. He talks about an incident when he first witnesses the regime warplanes bombarding the city:

Regime warplanes have started to bomb the city. No metaphor captures that sound a plane makes when it dives, the moment before releasing its load. It is its own-a pure creator of horror. You anticipate the consequences. You hold your breath as you imagine where the bombs will fall. The planes circles above the city to taunt us, then flew closer, making our tables tremble from the force of their sonic booms. (81)

Recounting diverse real life happenings through his writing, the author has made an attempt to portray how a handful of small scale protests turned into a civil war and over the years turned into a complicated sort of proxy war masterminded by various groups including military organizations and international powers in their attempt to gain power. The Syrian conflict is a conflict between various sections of the society in which the youngsters like Nael and Tareq are nothing more than a speck of dust.

On being asked in an interview as to what motivated him to come up with such a piece of writing, Hisham asserted

I think it's important to show the interested reader outside of Syria how wars affect people and what it means to live in a situation like that. We're also in a kind of rhetoric war, and it's important to shed light on things that are completely neglected, to fight stereotypes and try to show people the complicated reality. Because it's not a normal situation, it's an extraordinary experience and I've experienced many things in a very short time, I felt I was obligated to convey the story, and the written form is the best way for me. I wanted to portray people who had their own political views, their own understandings of life, and who changed over time. They were people just like other people in other countries. Their environment was probably different, but they're still complicated people. There are no simple people. (Simple people)

There are various strains of violence and ruthless killings depicted in the text. One such incident is the murder of a young boy named Ali al-Babinsi at a protest. Hisham says about the boy that, "his lips were parted, his face dehydrated and lean" (41). Also, Hisham's close friend Nael who always aspired to become an artist and "wanted to live a beautiful life, creating beautiful, immortal pieces of art" (28), ends up joining one of the rebel groups, Ahrar al-Tabga. Nael considers it to be his duty to fight for the collective cause of Syrian people but all that he gets rewarded with is a brutal death. The news of his friend's death reaches Hisham, who being traumatized by such a happening realizes the futility of war. Recounting the incident that had its impact on Nael's family and friends, Hisham says that, "I leaned my head on my basement's craggy wall and closed my eyes, a moment of emptiness passes, and I said, "This cannot be." I wept. It had been years since I last wept. I was naked to the waves of grief" (101).

But death does not put an end to everything. Nael's brother Tareq gets deeply wounded by his brother's untimely death. The bomb that has landed on Nael also leaves its marks on Tareq who feels lost and drastically changed. Deep in his heart he vows to avenge the death of his brother and finally, "after two years spent studying Arabic literature and writing tables at Beirut's cafes, Tareq came back to Raqqa resolved. From the moment he passed the last checkpoint onto the city, he was a soldier of revenge" (107).

Such incidents throw light on the inner realities of Syrian conflict. People get massacred for no fault of theirs, youth of the country like Nael, Tareq and many other nameless ones who could have had a brighter future get entangled in the dirty game of war and end up losing their lives. Many others like Hisham himself face identity crisis while leaving their homeland in the hope to escape death. While leaving the city of Raqqa for Turkey in order to save his life, the author is caught in a dilemma. He has two choices, to stay or to leave his homeland. If he stays, he would probably become a terrorist like many others, taking up arms, for whom what awaits at the end of this journey is doom. Contrary to this, if he leaves, he would be a nameless, rootless coward who was not brave enough to stand tall with his brothers and fight for his people. Syria, at present is politically chaotic and economically crushed.

Damascus, the capital of Syria, which used to be a city full of historical richness and cultural abundance is now in ruins. The once peaceful city has now become a haunted land and this is the reality that the author portrays through his story. It is an attempt to acquaint the outer world with the gory tales of Syria's inside reality. Hisham chose not to take up arms and rather chose journalism and sought to share the inner reality of the war with the outer world while staying inside the ISIS territory. He presents a portrait of the bloodiest war with its many facets. The general public of Syria has been a victim of not merely Bashar al-Assad's regime but also of many other militant groups, the most brutal among them being the ISIS who in, "its ecstatic embrace of cruelty, it would destroy every standard and value outside itself, and so give its adherents the authority to negate, or at least ignore, the rights of others, including the right to privacy" (132). It shows that Syrians were left with only two choices, of being subservient to the dictators or facing death and humiliation and so Hisham writes about it that, "Subservience-if in appearance only-was one way to go. On the other path lay humiliation, torture, and death" (132)

This is the only choice that a Syrian has in this complicated scenario. Many of them succumb to the idea of fighting for themselves and their people, and some others like Hisham join the exodus of refugees seeking escape from death and doom.

The conclusion of all this is that a peaceful nation is being destroyed. The youth of the country who could have worked for a bright future are caught in this quagmire, struggling for their mere existence. Many of them are taking refuge in foreign lands, thus losing their homes and identities. Writing about the futility of such war and an urgent need to work towards a solution, VP Haran's comment in this regard is crucial,

A peaceful and secular country is getting destroyed. Half the population is displaced; nearly one-fifth are refugees abroad; an estimated 1 per cent of Syrians have died; and over half the population desperately requires humanitarian assistance. Whatever may be the reasons for the crisis, whoever may be responsible, the immediate need is to find a way to stop the violence. This is going to be a herculean task, given that there are groups, supported from abroad that are beyond the purview of international law. (Roots, 14)

Finally, Hisham decides to leave the city of Raqqa for Turkey for the fear of not becoming one of those who have been preying on each other. He abstains from getting into the blood bath and thus leaves with the higher aspiration of sharing his experiences and presenting the raw reality of war torn Syria to the outer world.

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