The Use of van Dijk's Ideological Square in The Construction of In-Group and Out-Group Dichotomy in Dunya Mikhail's Poetry

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Abstract

This study applies van Dijk's ideological square model to the war poetry of the Iraqi poetess Dunya Mikhail to identify the discursive strategies that construct an in-group/out-group dichotomy and represent the multifaceted impacts of war on Iraqi society. A qualitative analysis of sixteen purposively selected poems was conducted, focusing on the four mechanisms of the ideological square: emphasising positive self-representation and negative other-representation while de-emphasising their opposites. The analysis reveals Mikhail's consistent deployment of these strategies, augmented by rhetorical devices such as stark imagery and ironic personification. This approach vividly portrays civilian estrangement and the devastation of war, creating a discourse that scrutinizes the ideologies of war perpetrators. Mikhail's poetry offers a compelling counter-narrative that not only documents civilian suffering but also serves as a critical tool for challenging dominant conflict narratives. The study concludes that Mikhail has succeeded in systematically employing the model's four strategies of emphasising "our" good and "their" bad, while deemphasising "our" bad and "their" good—to construct a powerful artistic expression and moral critique.

1. INTRODUCTION

War poetry has historically been defined by a rigid "Us" versus "Them" dichotomy, a tradition established in foundational texts like Homer's *Iliad*, where ideological lines sharply divided the Achaeans from the Trojans. As Hornblower (2007) notes, such narratives typically construct the in-group ("Us") as noble defenders of honour and the out-group ("Them") as destructive antagonists. In modern war poetry, however, this binary is often destabilized. The focus shifts from clear military alliances to a broader, more ambiguous reflection on shared human suffering, blurring the distinctions between friend and foe (Kendall, 2018). It is within this contemporary tradition that the poetry of Mikhail emerges, yet it represents a significant evolution. Moving beyond mere category blurring, Mikhail actively reconfigures the paradigm through a humanistic and ironic lens. Her work systematically deconstructs the binary moral structures of traditional war narratives, centering not on heroic combatants but on the shared vulnerability of civilians—the women, children, and displaced individuals whose voices are often silenced (Al-Karawi & Bahar, 2013; Dibas, Rabab'ah, & Haider, 2023). Through devices

such as stark imagery, irony, and personification, she dismantles nationalist heroism to forge a universal moral consciousness grounded in empathy and remembrance (Mikhail, 2005).

While critics have effectively situated Mikhail within this humanistic turn, the specific discursive mechanisms through which she deconstructs and redefines in-group/out-group dynamics remain underexplored. This study argues that van Dijk's (2006) ideological square model provides a powerful analytical framework to illuminate this process. By examining how Mikhail's poetry manipulates the four strategies of the square—emphasizing and de-emphasizing positive and negative representations—this analysis will elucidate how she subverts the very logic of ideological polarization to articulate a potent discourse of collective humanity and a critical testimony of war-torn Iraq. This study contends that Mikhail's poetry performs a literary reconfiguration of war, transmuting it from a geopolitical conflict into a universal moral struggle pitting collective humanity against the forces of destruction. In her poetry, the traditional in-group/out-group dichotomy is subverted; the victims of war—transcending nationality—are constituted as a global "Us," while war itself is positioned as the ultimate alien "Them." This poetic project not only memorializes the specific suffering of Iraqis but also extends a profound solidarity to civilians across conflicts, creating a shared identity rooted in common vulnerability.

The potency of this redefinition can be systematically analyzed through van Dijk's (2006) ideological square model. This framework elucidates how discursive strategies of selective emphasis and omission construct social polarities. The model's four strategies, namely: (1) emphasizing positive in-group attributes, (2) emphasizing negative out-group attributes, (3) de-emphasizing negative in-group attributes, and (4) de-emphasizing positive out-group attributes, provide a robust analytical lens for examining Mikhail's method. She strategically employs these strategies to valorize the resilience and solidarity of civilians (the in-group) while demonizing the abstract, destructive nature of war (the out-group). This discursive construction aligns with Mehta's (2010) observation that Mikhail's verse penetrates the unconscious to revive repressed memories, expose psychological wounds, and ultimately forge a commemorative discourse of survival. By applying van Dijk's model, this study moves beyond identifying these thematic concerns to explicating the precise linguistic and rhetorical mechanisms through which Mikhail's poetry documents catastrophic reality and shapes a universal moral consciousness.

While van Dijk's (2006) ideological square model has been extensively applied to the analysis of political speeches, media discourse, and propaganda (e.g., Richardson, 2004; Breeze, 2011; Abid & Abdul Manan, 2017; Kharbach, 2020; Dibas, Rabab'ah, & Haider, 2023), its application to literary texts, and particularly to poetry, remains comparatively underdeveloped. This study thus addresses this gap by employing the ideological square to analyze the war poetry of Mikhail. Her work presents an ideal case study, as its foundation in the lived experience of conflict and its reliance on condensed, symbolic language serve to intensify its ideological underpinnings. The ideological square framework is uniquely suited for this task, as it conceptualizes language as a form of social practice, thereby facilitating the excavation of deeper discursive structures beyond surface-level meaning. The model posits that ideological polarization is discursively constructed through four strategic maneuvers: (1) the emphasis on in-group virtue, (2) the emphasis on out-group vice, (3) the de-emphasis of in-group culpability, and (4) the de-emphasis of out-group virtue (van Dijk, 2006). Applying this framework to Mikhail's poetry reveals how it articulates both explicit and implicit protest. Her work systematically constructs a positive "Us" comprised of ordinary civilians, familial bonds, and a pastoral past, juxtaposed against a negative "Them" embodied by war itself, political authorities, and faceless forces of destruction. Consequently, the civilian identity in her poetry is increasingly defined not by its own agency, but in opposition to the pervasive, all-consuming

threat of the out-group (van Dijk, 2006), a dynamic the ideological square is precisely designed to illuminate.

This study contributes to the field by systematically analyzing the discursive construction of complaint and protest in Mikhail's war poetry. It investigates how she forges a foundational dichotomy between a positively framed in-group ("Us"), embodying morality, legitimacy, and shared humanity, and a negatively framed out-group ("Them"), representing danger, immorality, and dehumanizing force. To guide this inquiry, the study is structured by the following research questions: (1) What specific ideological strategies, as delineated by van Dijk's (2006) model, does Mikhail employ in her poetry? (2) How do these strategies function to construct the identity and attributes of the in-group ("Us") and the out-group ("Them")? And (3) What is the broader rhetorical and political purpose behind Mikhail's strategic construction of these categories?

1.1. Iraqi Wars: Complexities and Impacts

War constitutes a complex phenomenon, inflicting profound psychological, physical, and emotional trauma upon civilians and their environment. During conflict, civilians are subjected to unpredictable violence, the trauma of witnessing injury and death, and a profound loss of agency, a powerlessness often exacerbated by distant, hierarchical decision-making structures (Hamadneh, 2024). In the Iraqi context, these wars are not mere historical episodes but enduring catastrophes that have scarred the national psyche. The relentless cycle of violence has transformed the fabric of daily life, replacing the rhythms of peace with the pervasive fear of bombs and the weight of collective grief. As noted by Al-Abboodi (2025), this reality constructs a fundamental dichotomy: a victimized "Us," embodied by the civilian population, and a predatory "Them," represented by the abstract, relentless machinery of war itself. The conflict's true legacy lies not only in the physical ruins but in the erosion of cultural and social foundations—the stolen laughter, silenced lullabies, and shattered dreams of generations.

A succession of devastating conflicts has defined Iraq's recent history: the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), the Gulf War (1990–1991), and the 2003 U.S.-led invasion, which collectively precipitated enduring social and environmental collapse (Krieger, 2013; Kurzman, 2010). As *Abid and Abdul Manan* (2017) note, the widespread obliteration of neighborhoods led to the mass displacement of millions, leaving ordinary citizens to bear the consequences of political decisions over which they had no control. The nation's infrastructure and environment were severely degraded, resulting in contaminated soil and unsafe water supplies. Consequently, generations have inherited a legacy of devastation, marked by profound psychological and physical trauma, while exiles endure the persistent grief of displacement and the erosion of pre-war memory (Lieberman, 2008). Reflecting on this shattered landscape, the poetess Mikhail stated in an interview about her years in Iraq:

> The fact that I was born in Iraq, for example, means waking up every day to the sounds of sirens and explosions…the coffee shops for men only …discussions about art and poetry…using metaphors to hide the true meanings from censors, [and] the death of my father due to lack of medical treatment (Khan, 2015, p. 10).

The profound destructiveness of war often compels intellectuals to document its harsh realities, giving voice to the experiences of civilians who are otherwise powerless to prevent such tragedies. As Busfield (1994) and Showalter (1989) argue, such intellectual engagement frequently manifests as a form of complaint or disguised protest. Within this tradition, ultimately, Dunya Mikhail's poetry serves as a deliberate articulation of grievance and a vehicle for covert resistance against the atrocities of the Iraq wars.

1.2. van Dijk's Ideological Square as a Theoretical Lens

van Dijk's (2006) ideological square model provides a robust framework for analysing how discourse reproduces ideology and shapes social perception by constructing group identities. The model posits that this is achieved through a systematic polarization between "Us" (the in-group) and "Them" (the out-group), which serves to reinforce existing power relations and social hierarchies. The core mechanism involves four complementary discursive strategies as proposed by van Dijk (2006b) which are: (1) Emphasizing positive in-group attributes through highlighting the virtues, achievements, and moral superiority of "Us." (2) Emphasizing negative out-group attributes by focusing on the threats, flaws, and harmful actions of "Them." (3) De-emphasizing negative in-group attributes through mitigating or justifying the mistakes and wrongdoings of "Us." And (4) De-emphasizing positive out-group attributes by ignoring or minimizing the achievements or goodwill of "Them". These strategies collectively frame the in-group as legitimate and morally superior while delegitimizing the out-group (Hamed, 2020). They are operationalized through specific linguistic techniques, including: (1) Lexicalization by using loaded terms (e.g., "freedom fighters" vs. "terrorists"); (2) Emphasis and Omission by foregrounding of supportive information and the backgrounding or suppression of contradictory details; (3) Presupposition by implying information as accepted common sense; (4) Omission by systematically excluding disruptive details; and (5) Metaphor & Imagery through associating groups with potent symbolic meanings. By applying these strategies, discourse actively constructs social identity, political stance, and collective memory rather than merely reflecting reality. This research employs the ideological square to analyse how these processes manifest in Mikhail's poetry, offering a structured method to uncover the ideological underpinnings of her war narrative.

War poetry offers a productive site for applying van Dijk's model. While traditional patriotic verse often reinforces a national "Us" versus an enemy "Them," modern war poetry, such as Mikhail's, subverts this binary. She redefines the in-group as civilians and the out-group as war itself—a reframing that universalizes the conflict and fosters cross-cultural empathy. The analysis demonstrates that Mikhail operationalizes the ideological square by consistently attributing positive traits (innocence, endurance) to civilians and negative ones (cruelty, destruction) to war, while mitigating civilian culpability and denying war any legitimacy. Through rhetorical devices like irony and personification, she not only employs this square but also exposes its mechanics, rendering her poetry a politically charged discourse that resonates emotionally while systematically delegitimizing war.

2. METHOD

Through an analysis of selected poems, this study investigates Dunya Mikhail's distinctive use of van Dijk's (2006) ideological square to construct a dichotomous representation of civilians and war. The examination focuses on how this discursive framework is mobilized to articulate a critical protest against the conflicts in Iraq.

2.1. Purposive Sampling

This study examined (16) poems by Mikhail as presented in (Table 1). This selection aims to attain a deeper understanding of social and ideological beliefs, and vividly reflects the poet's firsthand experience as a war witness and the ability to redefine her identity. This study is qualitative in nature, as it relies on existing information rather than conducting practical experiments or using statistical data. It is based on abstract ideas, primarily using descriptive information. The selection of relevant sources followed a purposive process, involving the use of specific keywords and phrases such as 'Dunya Mikhail's poetry,' 'The Iraqi Wars,' 'discursive theory,' 'categorization in discursive psychology,' '*the war works hard*,' 'van Dijk CDA,' and 'Polarization' among others. However, this study adopts the purposive sampling method as this helps in selecting suitable information based on the researcher's own judgement

(Patton, 2002). This sampling method allows for selecting information, deepening the study. Furthermore, selecting purposive sampling helps in understanding the problem and enables answering the research questions (Creswell, 2003). Therefore, this study uses samples that are seen as relevant to solve its problem and are in line with the scope and the focus of the study.

Table 1

List of selected poems

Poet	Poems selected
Mikhail	*The War Works Hard* (2005), *Bag of Bones*, <u>*Another Planet*</u>, *I Was In A Hurry*, *the Iraqi Nights* (2014), *Tablets*, *Tablets II*, *Tablets IV*, *Inanna*, *in Her Feminine Sign* (2019), *America*, *Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea* (2009), *Song Inside the Fossil*, *The Prisoner*, *Pronouns*

Moreover, the study sample is deliberately selected based on predefined criteria and themes, such as violence complexities and impacts on Iraqi people in the War in Iraq. At the same time, heterogeneous sampling was employed to capture as many variations in the data as possible, in accordance with the study's main relevant criterion. Therefore, the chosen poems offer profound insights into the multifaceted impact of violence on individuals and communities. Moreover, the study's samples capture not only the physical and emotional toll of conflict but also the psychological and societal repercussions that often go unspoken. In addition, the poems illuminate questions of identity, portraying how war shapes, fractures, and at times strengthens personal and collective senses of self. A striking feature of the chosen poems is their use of poetic ambivalence, in which contrasting images coexist, such as the glorious versus the gruesome, the heroic versus the hellish, and the romantic versus the realistic. These juxtapositions do not merely create aesthetic tension; they underscore the contradictions of human experience, with moments of courage and resilience intertwined with despair and horror. As such, the chosen poems invite readers to confront the ethical and emotional complexities of conflict, compelling them to grapple with the dualities inherent in both the external world and the human psyche.

2.2. Data Collection and Analysis

Gathering the data proved challenging due to the overlapping nature of information about poems about the Iraqi wars. However, the data collection followed reading the primary and secondary sources selected from e-journals, research papers, eBooks, Google Books, printed books, and online libraries. All the sources collectively contribute to data acquisition. In sum, through a close reading of the selected poems as the main source, the preliminary data are identified to achieve the results needed, and the process is constantly conducted until satisfactory findings (Kerr, 2010). In other words, the initially extracted data are workable to facilitate the consequent steps of the analytical process of this study. The data was discussed critically using van Dijk's ideological square (2006) to achieve the study questions and objectives.

In addition, the use of the ideological square model as proposed by van Dijk (2006) allows us to analyse the data to delve more into the selected poems and elucidate how the in-group "Us" and the out-group "Them" dichotomy was constructed. More importantly, this model serves as a guide for conducting the research, offering a theoretical lens that promotes coherence and structure in the analysis process. As such, the selected poems were analyzed using the main strategies of the ideological square model, which are: (1) Emphasize positive information about

"Us" such as highlighting virtues, achievements, and moral superiority; (2) emphasize negative information about "Them" through focusing on the threats, flaws, and harmful actions; (3) de-emphasize negative information about "Us" by downplaying mistakes and justifying the wrongdoings; (4) de-emphasize positive information about "Them" through ignoring or minimizing their achievements or goodwill (see table. 2).

Table 2

Examples of Using van Dijk's Ideological Square Strategies in Mikhail's poems

No.	Quadrant of van Dijk's Ideological Square	Description Stake and Interest Established	Example Poem & Lines
1	**Emphasize Our Good Things**	Highlight the morality, humanity, and dignity of the in-group (civilians). The poet's stake and interest is to establish the in-group.	*Another planet* "comfortable world, and beautiful" (line 4), "gentler creatures" (Mikhail, 2014, p.73-74), and "peaceful and kind" life (lines 33-34). "Passport smile/ lost slipper" (*The Iraqi Nights*, 2014, 32)
2	**Emphasize Their Bad Things**	Portray the out-group (war, aggressors) as destructive, immoral, and relentless.	*The War Works Hard*: "It wakes up early" (Mikhail, 2005, p. 1). *I was in a hurry*: "rising with the smoke of war/ rolling in a helmet on the sand/ disguised in the uniform of a policeman who stirred up the prisoners and fled" (Mikhail, 2005, p.46). *Diary of A Wave*: He sets off on tiptoe/ over the graves, / on his way to another war. (Diary of A Wave, 1995, p. 32)
3	**De-emphasize Our Bad Things**	Downplay or contextualize the flaws of civilians, framing them as consequences of war.	*The War Works Hard*: Civilians depicted as "dreamers" and "workers" rather than flawed agents. *Another planet*: "But still hesitates/ to go alone" (lines 37-38) *Bag of Bones*: "What a good luck!" (Mikhail, 2005, p. 3) *The Pronouns*: "they declare war" ((Mikhail, 2005, p.87)
4	**De-emphasize Their Good Things**	Remove or reframe any positive aspects of the out-group, often through irony or inversion.	*The War Works Hard*: "Encourages industry" (p. 1) — industry here refers to war production and graves. *The War Works Hard*: "it wakes up the sirens/ and sends ambulances /to various places" (lines 5-7)

The analysis reveals that Mikhail employed some techniques and rhetorical arguments to associate groups with positive or negative symbolic meanings and ultimately to frame the in-group and out-group dichotomy in her poems. Furthermore, the use of these techniques helps in the implementation of the ideological square strategies in the poems. For instance, Mikhail used the lexical choices through loaded or evaluative words to frame events or actors. In addition, she emphasised certain facts in prominent positions while burying others in less noticeable contexts. More specifically, she presupposed and suggested information indirectly,

so it appears as common sense. Finally, she was able to leave out details that could disrupt the desired ideological framing (see Table 3).

Table 3
The primary techniques used in the analysis

No.	van Dijk Strategies (Ideological Square)	Techniques Used to Implement van Dijk's Strategies in Mikhail's Poetry	Implications & Explanation
1	Emphasize our good	Lexical choices: Words and pronouns highlighting civilian resilience and morality (e.g., "He," "She," "plays," "endure," "remember") Framing & emphasis: Opening poems with intimate civilian scenes— He plays a train, she plays a whistle (The Pronouns) Irony & metaphor: Simple desires or domestic routines highlighted as virtuous – "Birds don't know/ what coming to this world means, / but the bird who survived sings" (In Her Feminine Sign, 2019, pp. 13-14) Symbolism & imagery: trembling hands, skull, bones symbolize memory, dignity, and human continuity (Bag of Bones)	Reinforces civilians as morally central and humanized; fosters empathy and identification with the ingroup; universalizes the concept of innocent suffering.
2	Emphasize their bad	Lexical choices: Negative descriptors for war and soldiers (e.g., "urges families to emigrate," "sow mines") (*The War Works Hard*) Framing & emphasis: Placing war's destructive actions prominently (*The War Works Hard*, *The Iraqi Nights*) Personification & imagery: War as laborer, or bureaucrat (*The War Works Hard*) Irony & metaphor: Skeletons, destroyed homes, stolen dreams symbolize cruelty (*Bag of Bones*, *The Iraqi Nights*) Presupposition & implication: War's destructiveness appears universal and inevitable	Highlights the outgroup as destructive, immoral, and absurd; positions war as morally opposed to civilians; and emphasizes the threat and alien nature of the outgroup.
3	De-emphasize our bad	Omission & silence: Avoiding civilian mistakes; only suffering and endurance highlighted (*The Prisoner*, "My daughter's small shoes are waiting by the door" (Mikhail, 2005, p. 35) Framing & emphasis: Minor civilian flaws are placed at margins or briefly mentioned. Presupposition & implication: Civilians' actions are morally justified; suffering is innocent	Minimizes civilian responsibility; maintains moral integrity of ingroup; strengthens audience perception of ingroup innocence and victimhood
4	De-emphasize their good	Omission & silence: No heroic or positive traits attributed to war or soldiers (*Bag of Bones*)	Suppresses potential positive traits of war; ensures clear moral

		Framing & emphasis: Focus remains on civilian suffering and the absurdity of war. Presupposition & implication: Outgroup lacks morality or virtue	contrast between civilians and war; reinforces ideological polarization between ingroup and outgroup

By employing van Dijk's Ideological Square, Mikhail upholds the perspective followed by the majority, that violence is a failure of humanity. Thus, she actively shapes collective memory, political stance, and social identity and effectively uncovers her genuine feelings to convey her ultimate desire to readers. Ultimately her aim to construct the in-group and out- group dichotomy as a way to demonstrate her complaint or/and protest against the wars in Iraq is achieved. More importantly, she strongly advocated avoiding any form of violence, as it leads to widespread suffering. As such, the main objective that she attempted to perform is established. Besides, her tone was serious and assertive through the portrayal of the truthful realities of war and of those who encouraged the war. In brief, Mikhail raised her voice to clearly reflect her strong opposition to the destructive war and indicate her discontent of violence through associating groups with positive or negative attributes and ultimately framing the in-group and out-group dichotomy in her poems.

3. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Applying van Dijk's (2006) ideological square, this analysis reveals that Mikhail's selected poems strategically construct a dichotomous framework to recast the realities of the Iraq wars. She consistently emphasizes the positive attributes of the in-group—civilians, including survivors, the displaced, and victims, who are portrayed with empathy, resilience, and a search for meaning. Concurrently, she emphasizes the negative attributes of the out-group—war itself and its agents (authorities, oppressors, systems of violence)—which are depicted as entities that devastate lives and perpetuate suffering. This discursive strategy recontextualizes collective suffering from an abstract condition into intimate testimony, humanizing the victims and inscribing their voices into the poetic record. The resulting polarized schema aligns with the ideological square: positive self-representation legitimizes the moral integrity and grief of the in-group, while negative other-representation systematically delegitimizes the out-group. Ultimately, the ideological square provides the mechanism for Mikhail's protest. By amplifying civilian virtue and war's absurdity, her discourse not only exposes the illegitimacy of power but also reduces war to a cyclical structure of dominance and erasure. Through this framework, Mikhail articulates a universal critique that transcends the Iraqi context, condemning the global inhumanity of conflict.

3.1.In-group Construction: Civilian as victims

Mikhail's construction of the in-group is defined by an intimate focus on the civilian experience, foregrounding figures such as mothers, widows, prisoners, and children. This strategic selection, centered on vulnerability rather than agency, directly operationalizes van Dijk's (2006) ideological square by systematically emphasizing "Our Good" and de-emphasizing "Our Bad." The in-group is consistently portrayed through a lens of innocence, endurance, and dignified suffering, thereby solidifying their moral position against the abstract forces of war. This is powerfully illustrated in her poem *The Prisoner*, where Mikhail captures a captive's memory of his daughter: "My daughter's small shoes are waiting by the door" (Mikhail, 2005, p. 35). The image of the "small shoes" functions as a potent symbol of domestic fragility and interrupted continuity. This representation aligns with the ideological square by accentuating the civilian's humanity and familial bonds—positive in-group traits—while

implicitly framing his suffering as an unjust imposition by the out-group (the war and its perpetrators). A parallel strategy is evident in her poem *I Was in a Hurry*, where Mikhail frames the collective loss of a country as an innocent and accidental tragedy (Ibrahim & Jaf, 2023). The speaker's admission, "I was in a hurry, and didn't notice when it fell from me" (Lines 2-3), serves to de-emphasize "Our Bad." This carelessness is not presented as a moral failing but as a metaphor for the helplessness and inevitability of displacement. The subsequent imagery of a country "wrapped/ in the blankets of emigrants" (Lines 11-12) or "squatting in the mind of a woman who tries to smile" further emphasizes "Our Good" by stressing innocence, suffering, and human fragility in the face of overwhelming external forces. Through such devices, Mikhail absolves the in-group of culpability, reinforcing their identity as victims of circumstances beyond their control.

Mikhail further solidifies the in-group's moral standing by consistently emphasizing its virtuous qualities while framing its vulnerabilities as marks of humanity, not failure. In her poem *Another Planet* the in-group's desires are defined by an innocent yearning for a "comfortable world, and beautiful" (line 4), inhabited by "gentler creatures" (Mikhail, 2014, p.73-74). This vision of a "peaceful and kind" life (lines 33-34) emphasizes "Our Good" by associating the in-group with universal values of love, openness, and harmony. Simultaneously, the speaker's admission that she "hesitates/ to go alone" (lines 37-38) mitigates "Our Bad" by reframing vulnerability as a deeply social and compassionate trait, not a moral flaw. This strategy of universalization is extended in her poem *America*, where Mikhail emphasizes "Our Good" by defining the in-group's core property as a shared, egalitarian humanity: "People are grass / They are born everywhere" (Lines 24-25). The refusal to categorize people by nationality or appearance underscores a commitment to inclusivity and innocence (Mihsin, & Jasim, 2025). Here, the speaker's claim that she "doesn't remember" (Mikhail, 2005, p.34) bureaucratic details functions as a powerful de-emphasis of "Our Bad." This forgetfulness is not a cognitive failure but an act of discursive resistance against dehumanizing systems. This transformative approach to vulnerability resonates with psychological practices that treat trauma by embracing, rather than concealing, personal fragmentation (Stickley, 2019, p. 26). Mikhail's metaphor of the "cracked jar" (*The Iraqi Nights*, 2014, p. 11) epitomizes this. The crack ceases to symbolize brokenness and instead becomes a site of new identity formation, granting access to a voice forged through pain and resilience. Through this consistent discursive pattern, Mikhail constructs an in-group whose perceived weaknesses are re-signified as the very sources of its moral integrity and strength.

Mikhail's strategic construction of the in-group continues through a consistent pattern of emphasizing collective virtue and mitigating culpability. In her poem *Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea*, the collective "Us" is depicted as passive and discarded by war, a portrayal that emphasizes "Our Good" by underscoring innocence and undeserved suffering. This representation simultaneously mitigates "Our Bad" by removing any suggestion of complicity, framing civilians as entirely powerless within a cycle of destruction they did not create. This duality is further nuanced in poems where survival itself becomes a form of active resistance (Mikhail, 2005; van Dijk, 2006). In her poem Song Inside the Fossil, the in-group is defined by its fragility, yet its endurance is framed as creative resilience. The "bird who survived" and continues to sing (In Her Feminine *Sign*, 2019, pp. 13-14) emphasizes "Our Good"—the persistence of hope and memory. The potential "bad" of survival, such as elegiac grief, is de-emphasized by transforming mourning into purposeful testimony and "a way of coming back to life." Mikhail further reframes perceived vulnerabilities into sources of strength. In her poem *The Iraqi Nights*, loneliness is transformed into a "creative, visionary force," a quality that emphasizes "Our Good" by attributing unique perception and the ability to find value in desolation to the exiled (2014, p. 11). What could be construed as a negative condition is thus

mitigated and presented as a wellspring of insight and resilience. Finally, in her poem *Pronouns*, the in-group's identity is anchored in innate humanity and creativity. The playful, nurturing actions of "She"—aligned with natural and innocent objects like a whistle, tree, and feather—emphasize "Our Good" by associating civilians with guidance, rootedness, and fragile freedom (Al-Abboodi, 2025). The poem mitigates "Our Bad" through a clear causal structure: "they declare war" (line 12), while "her" actions are reactive. This absolves the in-group of instigation, framing any involvement as a consequence of external, oppressive power.

Mikhail's construction of the in-group extends to the intimate roles of witness and cultural preserver, a strategy clearly articulated in her series of *Tablets*. In her poem *Tablets*, the pronoun "She" embodies an active, empathetic force. Her yearning "to hear everything he never told her" and the gesture of cradling a head to her chest emphasize "Our Good" by framing the in-group—particularly women—through profound care, emotional depth, and a resistance to silence. Any potential vulnerability in her longing is mitigated as it is reframed not as weakness, but as the strength of a persistent human connection in the face of loss. This duality is further developed in her poem *Tablets IV*, where the experience of exile defines the in-group. Mikhail emphasizes "Our Good" by aligning "She" with cultural endurance and memory. The "passport smile" and domestic symbols like "cardamom" and "Cinderella's slipper" become emblems of a preserved identity and tenderness amidst displacement. Here, the fragmentation of exile is mitigated; it is transformed from a sign of loss into evidence of resilience and an unwavering will to sustain cultural continuity. At the end, Mikhail defines the in-group as the poet-witness whose empathy finds grandeur in the minute. The shift from the ambition to write "an epic about suffering" to the focused attention on "a tendril of her hair" emphasizes "Our Good"—the group's profound capacity for empathy and their commitment to preserving human dignity. This shift simultaneously mitigates "Our Bad" by rejecting abstract, potentially detached narratives in favor of a moral engagement rooted in tangible, personal experience.

Mikhail systematically constructs the civilian in-group through an alignment with domestic intimacy and memory, framing their longing for ordinary life as a testament to their inherent innocence. By portraying civilians not as political agents but as individuals whose daily rhythms are violated by external violence, she emphasizes "Our Good" (van Dijk, 2006). Their desires are rendered simple, relatable, and profoundly human, a strategy that elevates them to a position of moral centrality and emotional resonance. Simultaneously, Mikhail de-emphasizes "Our Bad" by entirely omitting any suggestion of civilian culpability in the conflict. This consistent application of the ideological square's first and third principles does more than memorialize the Iraqi experience; it universalizes it. The resulting image of the civilian transcends the specific context of Iraq, extending symbolically to embody a universal humanity vulnerable to the ravages of war, thereby allowing the in-group to resonate across cultures and conflicts.

3.2.Out-group Construction: War as the Ultimate Outgroup

Mikhail systematically constructs the out-group by rigorously applying van Dijk's (2006) strategies to emphasize "Their Bad" and de-emphasize "Their Good." In her poetic universe, war is never portrayed as noble or justified; it is instead characterized by its inherent destructiveness, absurdity, and fundamental failure of humanity. This creates a stark dichotomy where the out-group (war) is dehumanized, while the in-group (civilians) is rendered profoundly human. A quintessential example is her poem *The War Works Hard*, where Mikhail employs biting irony to personify war as a diligent laborer (Mehta, 2010). The poem frames destruction—"shatter[ing] windows," "demolish[ing] bridges"—as industrious toil. This grotesque parody emphasizes "Their Bad" by presenting atrocity as efficient, systematic work,

thereby stripping war of any possible glory and revealing its core absurdity and cruelty. The strategy of de-emphasizing "Their Good" is absolute; no redeeming or legitimate purpose for the violence is ever entertained. This pattern is consistent across her body of work, forming a coherent ideological framework. The central use of irony is not merely stylistic but a core discursive strategy. By ironically praising war's "hard work," Mikhail does not mitigate its evil but rather amplifies it, creating a powerful rhetorical contrast that reinforces the moral distinction between the constructive lives of the in-group and the destructive essence of the out-group.

Mikhail's construction of the out-group achieves its most powerful expression through imagery that enacts a literal and symbolic dehumanization, rigorously applying van Dijk's (2006) strategy to emphasize "Their Bad." In her poem *Bag of Bones*, the reduction of a human being to anonymous remains—"the bag in her hand/ like all other bags"—starkly illustrates the out-group's (war's) ultimate crime: the erasure of individuality and memory. This depiction does not only highlight profound tragedy but also frames existence under such violence as absurd and meaningless. The civilians, by contrast, are defined by their act of carrying the bones—by their memory and grief—which reinforces their moral centrality and fulfills the ideological square by systematically de-emphasizing any potential "Good" in the forces of destruction. This pattern is replicated in her poem *I Was in a Hurry*, where the out-group—comprising war, oppressors, and authorities; is constructed through metaphors of corruption and cowardice. The country itself is corrupted, "rising with the smoke of war" and "disguised in the uniform of a policeman who... fled." Such imagery emphasizes "Their Bad" by associating the out-group with deception, theft (as suggested by the allusion to Ali Baba's jar), and a fundamental lack of integrity. Mikhail simultaneously suppresses "Their Good" by offering no mitigating rationale or humanity for these agents; they are presented solely as faceless embodiments of destruction and betrayal, their legitimacy entirely erased.

Mikhail extends her critique beyond the immediate battlefield to frame systemic power itself as the out-group, a strategy masterfully employed in her poem *Another Planet* (Mihsin, & Jasim, 2025). The poem constructs a utopian "in-group" through its explicit opposition to Earth's governing bodies. By depicting an alternative world where "governments have no secrets" and police are absent, Mikhail emphasizes "Their Bad" by implicitly characterizing earthly authorities as inherently corrupt, violent, and oppressive (Mikhail, 2014, pp. 73-74). The linguistic transformation where "war" loses its 'r' to become "love" is a powerful deconstruction, framing Earth's defining conflict not as a necessary evil but as a chosen path of destruction. The poem systematically de-emphasizes "Their Good" by refusing to acknowledge any legitimacy or redeeming quality in these systems, presenting Earth solely as a site of exhaustion and control. A parallel construction occurs in her poem *America*, where the nation-state is framed as an out-group defined by bureaucratic oppression. The anaphoric plea, "Don't ask me, America," positions the U.S. as an interrogating authority obsessed with categorization. This emphasizes "Their Bad" by aligning America with surveillance and the reduction of complex human identities to reductive labels. Crucially, the poem suppresses "Their Good" by entirely omitting any reference to democratic ideals or prosperity, offering instead a singular portrayal of bureaucratic violence. This resonates with van Dijk's (2006) assertion that hegemonic power operates by constraining identity, thereby recasting America not as a land of opportunity, but as a force that erases individual experience through institutional demand.

Mikhail's construction of the out-group extends to abstract, systemic forces, which she frames as antagonistic entities that silence and constrain life. In her poem *In Her Feminine Sign* (2019), the "silent" birds and the metaphor of "life in a cage" emphasize "Their Bad" by portraying death and oppression as powers that impose silence and imprisonment. The image of the

"fossil" further solidifies this, depicting life and love as frozen relics, stripped of vitality by these controlling forces. The poem systematically de-emphasizes "Their Good" by offering no justification for this oppression; it is presented not as a necessary evil but as a purely destructive imposition. This aligns with critical theories that analyze how power operates through the constraint of agency and voice (Foucault, 1977; van Dijk, 1998). This critique is historicized in her poem *The Iraqi Nights* (2014), where Mikhail recontextualizes a foundational cultural narrative to emphasize "Their Bad." The imagery of the "cracked jar" symbolizes the ruin inflicted by war and greed. More profoundly, the allusion to Gilgamesh subverts the epic hero, reframing his quest for immortality as an emblem of futile striving by rulers and conquerors. The poem de-emphasizes "Their Good" by stripping these figures of any legacy of glory or legitimacy, instead highlighting how their pursuits are rendered meaningless. This inversion elevates the marginalized and critiques the destructive obsession with power, aligning with perspectives that dismantle traditional heroic narratives (Jameson, 2005; van Dijk, 1998).

Across her poetry, Mikhail consistently frames the out-group not as a specific nation or army, but as the abstract, systemic forces of oppression, patriarchal neglect, and the institutional roles that perpetuate violence. This is achieved through a rigorous application of van Dijk's strategies to emphasize "Their Bad" and de-emphasize "Their Good," denying these forces any legitimacy. In Pronoun, the escalating pronoun "he" moves from controlling objects ("a train," "a rope") to abstract human domains ("a dream") and finally to the institutional role of "a general." This progression emphasizes "Their Bad" by revealing violence as a systemic endpoint of unchecked control, not an innate trait. The poem systematically suppresses "Their Good" by omitting any heroic or strategic qualities, framing the general's power solely as a vehicle for domination. This critique extends to patriarchal structures in her poem *Tablets*, where "he" embodies passive silence and neglect. The figure's disengagement, "He watches TV," and ultimate unresponsiveness in death are starkly contrasted with the speaker's active search for meaning. The poem emphasizes "Their Bad" by framing this passivity as a form of violence and de-emphasizes "Their Good" by refusing to grant the figure any redeeming communication or tenderness. In Tablet VI, the out-group is the faceless force of war itself, present only through its devastating effects—the "ruins of her mud house." The discovery of a single "tendril of her hair" personalizes the loss, but the perpetrators remain entirely absent and dehumanized. This emphasizes "Their Bad" by focusing on the aftermath of destruction and suppresses "Their Good" by offering no justification for their actions. By integrating van Dijk's ideological square with literary analysis, this study demonstrates how Mikhail's poetry functions as both artistic expression and moral argument. Her systematic construction of the out-group memorializes the victims of violence while unequivocally condemning the oppressive systems responsible, denying them any narrative redemption.

4. CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated the efficacy of van Dijk's (2006) ideological square as a framework for analyzing the discursive strategies in Dunya Mikhail's war poetry. The analysis confirms that Mikhail systematically employs the model's four strategies—emphasizing "Our" good and "Their" bad, while de-emphasizing "Our" bad and "Their" good—to construct a powerful ideological critique. Through this framework, she forges a stark dichotomy: a humanized in-group of civilians, defined by resilience, empathy, and a search for meaning, is positioned against a dehumanized out-group encompassing war itself, its agents, and oppressive systems. By consistently applying these strategies, Mikhail's poetry performs a dual function: it memorializes the specific suffering of Iraqis while simultaneously universalizing the civilian experience of war. This moves her work beyond a singular historical testimony, establishing it as a significant contribution to postcolonial, trauma, and peace literature. The

success of this analytical approach suggests that van Dijk's model is a valuable tool for literary criticism, particularly for unpacking how poetry constructs ideological positions. Future research could productively apply this framework to a wider corpus of war poetry, further illuminating the discursive mechanisms through which literature shapes perceptions of conflict, solidarity, and resistance.

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