

## **Zoom Chat Week 9: Omar El Akkad, *American War* (Parts I & II)**

**Samantha:** How was break y'all

**Taylor:** My book of American War has wildly different page numbers; was the middle of the book basically just up to part 3? Break was so good

**John:** Yes

**Lina:** Yes, Taylor! Mine is the same. Break was great!

**Sierra:** Yes! My book is the same way also

**Whitney:** break was so nice much needed how about you?

**Samantha:** I did absolutely nothing and it was the greatest thing

**Sierra:** My break was good, caught up on some much needed sleep

**Taylor:** Yeah my book only has like 300 ish pages lol

**Alexis:** I went to Zion national park. it was so beautiful :"))

**Josie:** hey guys :)

**Samantha:** oof

**Maria:** Zion National Park?? Amazing!

**Tim:** Visited San Antonio, Texas. It's such an amazing city.

**Samantha:** Ooh San Antonio is great. I feel like the "apocalypse" in this book was caused more by war than in the other novels where disease was the primary culprit

**Kyle:** Similar to Future Home of the Living God in that the cause of the apocalypse is slow.

**Whitney:** the war was kind of caused by climate change right? didn't the south separate because diesel was outlawed?

**Samantha:** Yeah fossil fuels became banned

**Kyle:** Yeah, that's right

**Taylor:** I think it was the combination of the fossil fuels and the disease that struck

**Whitney:** I thought the diseases were like man made for weapons

**Samantha:** A bioterrorist from the south released a plague as a weapon from what I remember

**Josie:** I am already really starting to like this book. It's different

**Sierra:** I have two sets of questions for you: 1. What is the significance of Sarat's changing of her name? How does that sense of agency and identity develop as she gets older? What does this have to do with her having a twin sister? 2. The novel presents many different laws, agencies, and other government entities for future America. Which did you find to be the most plausible for political conflict that would escalate to war? Are any of these similar to real-life politics?

**Maria:** This novel is organized with a post-war and pandemic introduction from the perspective of a war historian. The bulk of the narrative occurs in the "past" starting near the beginning of the war, structured in four parts. Each chapter ends with a piece of historical documentation of the war nodding back to the war historian of the introduction. Why does El Akkad structure the novel in this way? Is there anything else that is important to the structure of the novel and how does this organization affect the reader's perspective of the story?

**Reed:** Would it require the willingness for us to go to war to enforce the prohibition of using fossil fuels? Would anyone actually be willing to go to war to reduce climate change?

**John:** How have other countries and unions, such as the Bouazizi Empire reacted to the growing threat of climate change? Is there disagreement within their countries like the United States? Have they banned fossil fuels? Or have they maintained fossil fuel use? Could this lead to an Axis-Allies style power struggle leading to a new World War between the global factions? What would be the irony of such an occurrence?

**Alexis:** I was really interested in the contrasts between the archival documents with the story telling surrounding Sarat and her family. What function does this have in telling this apocalyptic tale? What is the value in including both of these together? Is one more valuable than the other?

**Kyle:** American War is speculative fiction reflecting a possible outcome of increasing climate change. The primary driving force is due to the southern states rebelling at the banning of fossil fuels. Historically, the northern states benefit more from industry and nonrenewable fuels such as coal. Do you think their prediction is accurate that the southern states would be more dependent on fossil fuels?

**Grant:** Do you think Gaines had anything to do with the attack on the camp Sarat and her family were staying at that took place near the end of our assigned reading for this week? Why do you think Gaines smiled when Sarat said she wanted to kill the members of the militia that attacked and killed her mother?

**Taylor:** What would be the tipping point to start a war between the North and the South in a place like our country, today? As far as I understand, in the book, the policy against fossil fuels was the last straw. We are seeing a lot of changes as radical as that one, especially with the latest presidential election. What would be our “last straw?” Also, with a Free Southern State so small as the one seen on the map on the first page of this novel, how have they not been taken over completely yet? The war has gone on for a few years, and the opposing team to the North seems to take up barely a fifth of the map. Side note... Do you trust Gaines?

**Samantha:** When Martina is trying to find sanctuary for her family after her husband is killed, she is denied entrance to Camp Patience by the commander. She says, “So we’re not Northerners because we’re from the South, and we’re not Southerners because we tried to move North. Tell me what we are then.” I really liked this line because it shows the complexity and irony of war. In such a situation, is it better to pick a side of the war, or distance yourself and try to live?

**Tim:** Why would states like Wyoming and the Dakotas be part of the North. Obviously, they are geographically in the North but they are more rural and very dependent on fossil fuels like coal and natural gas. Why would they tolerate the banning of fossil fuels and not join the South?

**Zoe:** The civil war started because of the use of fossil fuels and moving to renewable energy, trying to preserve the earth and its resources. I think it is odd how El Akkad presents renewable resources. He talks about how you have to take care of the solar panels and wipe them off, the boats powered by solar panels move slower, etc. I wonder why El Akkad presents renewable energy as a sub par alternative rather than “the life changing technology that will save our world” which is usually what we hear about renewable energy?

**Lina:** What does the sharpening of the knife and Sarat mistaking the ragged, unevenly sharpened knife for a sharp one mean? How could the knife be an analogy with Sarat and her transformation at Gaines's teaching?

**Brooke:** What do the two epigraphs suggest about the conflict in the novel? How significant is it that the author used quotes from texts such as The Book of Songs and the Bible? Also, I really liked the departure from the time-jumping format that is common in these types of novels.

**Josie:** Out of all the major cities to remain during an apocalyptic novel, why was Columbus chosen? What is the specific significance of this city to the story? Maybe it’s the name “Columbus” referring to the massacre of Native American populations, colonialism, etc.

**Natalie:** What do we see that's being lost in American War, especially with Sarat and her family? Could this book parallel some of the issues going on in the Middle East?

**Rhi:** 1. In the novel, Sarat considers cowardice, silence, and submission to be another form of violence. Do you agree with this statement or do you think that it is too harsh? 2. Part II ends with an excerpt of a final compensation ruling archive from the war office. What do you think

about the act of compensating people for their losses with money? Can any amount of money make up for injury/death? Should the government offer more in these situations?

**Robert:** What real world experiences or parallels do you note between our world and the world created by the novel? What is the significance of these connections?

**Taylor:** @Sierra I like your question about Sarat's name. At first I thought it was strange that literally NO ONE questioned that her name is kind of strange, or a strange morphing of the name Sara. I think it gives her a unique identity apart from what her family thinks of her

**Alexis:** I also want to highlight the themes of identity connecting with home. Home is multidimensional, especially for immigrants like Omar El Akkad or refugees like Sarat, so how does the concept of home play out in this novel and impact the characters and the dimensions of apocalypse?

**Whitney:** What did you all think of the connections between this story and the civil war? I couldn't help but think this book could be a reality if we become more divided or have another economic depression.

**Victoria:** The "slow burn" apocalypses like in American War, and like Kyle said FHOTLG, seem to be more complex than intense ones. Is it more damaging to feel society collapse around you, than it happening overnight?

**Kyle:** Her not being able to tell the difference between a sharp and dull knife might symbolize her relationship with Gaines in that he is more dangerous than she believes?

**Maria:** There is certainly a connection to Sarat becoming a weapon herself. It is interesting how El Akkad points out the error in Sarat's understanding of the jagged knife for a sharp one which leads to the inference that Sarat is being molded in an immoral or incorrect worldview.

**John:** @Lina This may be a simple way to interpret it, but I interpreted it as the progression of the radicalization of terrorists or insurgents.

**Taylor:** I have so many thoughts about Gaines honestly

**Rhi:** I think it also goes to show how young and naïve Sarat is. There is a lot about the world that she does not know and she is still fairly young and innocent, which makes it easier for her to trust the teachings of Gaines and be exploited

**Alexis:** I was going to say, a weapon of ideology

**Tim:** @Josie It is interesting to think of why Columbus became the Capital. Much of the Eastern USA is at a greater risk of being swallowed by ocean. Ohio has a large number of people as opposed to the more sparsely populated western states.

**Brooke:** I think that's a dangerous way to think. Never changing your mind? That really leaves no room for progress

**Zoe:** Its like an “act now think of consequences later” ideology

**Taylor:** It's the ideology of those suicide bombers

**Whitney:** but it's useful if you are trying to create a soldier

**Robert:** Not being willing to change your mind is often what causes conflict.

**Victoria:** I was thinking of the suicide bombers too Taylor

**John:** It reminds me of radical Islamic terrorism and their interpretation of Jihad.

**Samantha:** Conflict leads to growth. Without room for change, the ideology is flawed. But it is good for transforming people into weapons.

**Sierra:** @Robert I think many real world experiences are paralleled in the novel, from climate change, to the treatment of people in the refugee camps. The novel states that all of hardships happen when the eastern coast and side of the U.S is flooded and become inhabitable due to climate change, this happens because climate change was ignored. Like in real life many politicians are ignoring this problem and are ignoring people like Gretta Thornburg who are trying to say we need to change. Then there are the refugee camps, in the novel families are treated poorly, Martina even gets killed and Simon get shot in the head. This ment to show how people in real life are treated in these camps.

**Whitney:** I think she was definitely groomed though

**Zoe:** What I found interesting was the suicide bombers were people who were suicidal, or had a history of self harm - and I wonder how many of those people actually wanted to be part of the southern cause and how many just saw a way out of life

**Sierra:** @Whitney I agree, it seems has if she has been groomed and product of her environment

**John:** Perhaps people who share the same values as you

**Tim:** @John Yeah, I agreee

**Kyle:** Do nomadic people have a sense of home? Sometimes I think people who are on the road a lot feel like their home is the road (think bikers).

**Robert:** I think Sarat's loss of a home is what makes her so susceptible to influence and indoctrination. May be why cults are so prevalent in times of hardship.

**Alexis:** Or the WSU student who's traveling the US in a van rn!

**Zoe:** I think yes and there home is with the people they migrate with

**Taylor:** Didn't Sarat literally say at one point that she doesn't have people there, because if her brother weren't with the rebels and such that their tent would be mowed down by thieves

**Sierra:** @Zoe I also found that very interesting as well. I think these people where chosen because they already want to die and they are already in a dark place and can be easily manipulated. I think these people more just wanted a way out and saw this as a way to do so. I don't really think they were for the southern cause. Some of them might have been, but I think most weren't

**Maria:** Home changes a lot in the apocalypse--very evident in Station Eleven and the Travelling Symphony

**Rhi:** That is interesting. To me it seemed like Sarat and her family weren't really seen as Northerners or Southerners. The officials with Camp Patience didn't really want to accept Sarat's family because they had plans to go North and the father had been killed while he was in the North. Yet, there also seemed to be a division within Southerners themselves - those who supported the government versus those who supported the militias like the Virginia Cavaliers. So that division of land and ideology is certainly confusing

**Brooke:** I think when people get displaced as Sarat has, they tend to find home in the people around them. This may feed into the easy radicalization of young people's minds because they feel more connections to people rather than a geographical place, depending on the ideology of the people they know

**Grant:** This lack of home and feeling alone was shown through Julia Templestowe when they found her drunk and alone. They exploited her brain illness and sense of not belonging to forge a weapon and eventually a suicide bomber

**Taylor:** Sarat found home in Marcus, and he left, so she had nothing. Her real sense of loneliness showed when she stabbed the heck out of that Northerner

**Tim:** Even the United States today seems quite different than it was 10 years ago.

**Rhi:** @Zoe & Sierra I think another part of that could also be that those individuals want to feel like their life was worth something or that they had an impact with their death. So that need to feel significance could definitely be taken advantage of and manipulated by terrorist organizations. Even if they did not believe in the causes that they would die for, maybe they would feel like at least they did something significant that had an impact, even if it was bad

**Samantha:** Alexis this is off topic but I love your mask collection

**Kyle:** As an aside I went to the Cherokee reservation over break and I was surprised to see how many solar panels they had. I'm not sure if it was because we were in the mountains or if they were just environmentally conscious.

**Tim:** @Kyle Speaking of renewable energy, there are a ton of windmills in Southern Texas.

**Samantha:** Maybe it's symbolic for the idea that if we want to stem climate change, it's going to take work? Like it won

**Robert:** I think by presenting it this way, it sets up the conflict between the North and the South. One side views it as reliable, while the other side does not trust it.

**Samantha:** It won't change with the passage of a document

**Victoria:** The south also makes a lot of money from oil from the gulf.

**Josie:** I also think it hints at a generational difference. Younger generations are more likely to look out for the environment; Trying to fix what happened during past generations

**Alexis:** even in texas right now tho we're seeing the damaging effects of privatized energy sources 0\_0

**Samantha:** green new deal lol. Why's it always Texas

**Zoe:** Yeah as soon as I was reading about the solar panels I was automatically reminded of Texas and the snow

**Whitney:** Don't you dare take the name of texas in vain-Sandy Cheeks

**Alexis:** I was thinking that too!!

**Whitney:** sorry lol

**Sierra:** @Zoe I thinking along the same lines. While reading the novel I was questioning why the south would be so against using solar energy. But when I really began thinking about it, it could be because the solar pannels would take over framing space. Not only that, but with the outlawing of fossil fuels, the south loses alot of money. The south gets most of it's money from things like oil, so the new laws passed threaten their livelihood.

**Kyle:** I was always confused as to why climate change of all things fell under contention between ideologies

**Zoe:** I wonder if Oar El Akkad had a bad experience with renewable energy and that's why he presented it that way?

**Samantha:** @Sierra that reminds me of the actual US Civil War when the South became resistant because their economy, reliant on cotton, was threatened

**Reed:** solar energy is not actually entirely up to par yet compared to fossil fuels.

**John:** Here's a question that I wondered. Is the term "miraculous generation" satirical or serious? it seems to me that being born during the time period of the Second Civil War would not be miraculous at all. If it is satirical, why the use of such rhetoric? I considered it satirical.

**Samantha:** It was also because we were gaining more states and there was huge debate over if those states would be slave or free

**Alexis:** at the root it was still about money and control over people and land

**Samantha:** ^^^

**Tim:** You could probably make that argument about most wars, even those unrelated to the US.

**Whitney:** @John I think its a miracle that they survived their environment and that they can live to tell the stories it does surprise me when people are happy to have kids in turmoil with such low chance of survival but I get it. We have a natural urge to keep our population growing

**John:** @Whitney. That is an interesting point. It is miraculous to live through such violence and cataclysm. However, the fact that such cataclysm occurred at all is not miraculous.

**Taylor:** One of my questions was why is the Free South so small in the first place? They take up barely a fifth of the map, they'd probably lose if the whole North took up arms and decided they didn't want to deal with the south anymore

**Whitney:** @John I agree! I would be so mad if I was born in the middle of something like that lol That goes back into people's pride too though I think southerners really thought they had a chance so why not have kids who experience the benefits of a southern victory

**Kyle:** I thought about this as it's similar to my question. I feel like the war in this novel has been building for a while. It likely seems to the southern states that the North was only interested in adopting renewable energy when it benefited them globally while the southern states are feeling the effects even today.

**Whitney:** that's what my question was about. did the mag in this book stand for make America great?

**Tim:** @Whitney It stands for Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, but it does seem to have MAGA undertones.

**Whitney:** Oh thank you!

**Samantha:** The victors write the history books: That's not scary at all..

**Kyle:** Isn't general Lee still considered to be a good leader?

**John:** @Kyle As far as military battle strategy, I think he was quite exceptional. As far as ideology, it obviously depends on one's own beliefs.

**Samantha:** I was just about to say that John

**Alexis:** i think defaulting to believing these white men as leaders is also a result of bias and part of the problem. it's also why american war is such an important novel to give her agency in this narrative as an extension of continued history

**Whitney:** there wasn't a big focus on race I think that was intentional but maybe I just missed it

**John:** Growing cancel culture will be another eventual force of revisionist history.

**Tim:** @John You're spot on.

**Brooke:** See you!

**John:** Have a great day!

**Rhi:** Bye!

**Tim:** Have a great day!