

RESEARCH ARTICLE

War Traumata in Literature: From Homer to Sahar Khelifeh

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Abstract

In this paper, I identify and describe pain, its signs and symptoms, as manifested in various fictional combatants and noncombatants (civilians) in literary texts that span across few millennia and different cultures and literary genres. Since literature is imitation/representation/simulation of reality, it does give insight into the minds and souls of the characters populating it. From the writings of Homer in ancient Greece to the writings of Wilfred Owen, W.B. Yeats in Britain, Randal Jarrell in America, Ghassan Kanafani in Lebanon, Sahar Khelifeh in Palestine, and others, one can discern war tormented and traumatized characters exhibiting all sorts of symptoms, such as the Agamemnon and Achilles' syndrome, and the Ulysses-Rambo syndrome. The symptoms exhibited by such tormented characters are similar to and go beyond those inscribed in the scholarly and professional literature in medicine and psychiatry. The paper affirms that war traumas, and pain in certain cases and under certain conditionality that involve occupation of territories and dislocation of civilians, become contagious and dangerous as the plague where the infected becomes either very sick and dies or very sick and lives.

Keywords: trauma, war, identity, Homer, Sahar Khelifeh

1. Introduction

We all know that fiction is an imitation of life, mimesis, i.e. a representation of life, or a simulation. Depending on which philosophical or theoretical background one endorses, one is likely to see literature one way or the other: For Plato and his adherents, literature is an imitation of reality; for Aristotle, it is mimesis or a representation of reality; and for Baudrillard literature is a simulation of reality: not that Baudrillard was concerned with literature *per se* but one can easily adapt his views to literature. What I want to arrive at in short is that literature equals life in its various and complex forms. Thus, the situations created by the poet, the novelist, the playwright should be taken as expressive of some truth that can be both subjective and human.

In view of this, the paper will examine individual figures, warriors and non-warriors in various literary and popular culture texts, and will describe their problems, wounds, and traumata to show how art reflects and informs reality. Indeed, from ancient times to the present, artists (bards, poets, authors, playwrights, directors, etc.) find themselves embroiled in the realities of their societies. Homer in the

Iliad and the *Odyssey* depicts war and the aftermath of war and their wounds in a salient and loud manner that calls to mind Churchill's statement: "the problems of victory are more agreeable than the problems of defeat, but they are no less difficult" (Freeman, 1994, p. 395). Homer in both epics shows how terrible war is and how more terrible the consequences of war and victory are, too. He shows us sturdy heroes like Agamemnon, Ulysses, Hector, Achilles, and many others losing their nerves at various occasions in the war. He shows some of his heroes interacting with their traumas and either survive or die.

Achilles, the sulky warrior who could not make up his mind at the beginning of the war as whether to go on living for long in peace away from the war or go to fight and die young with all the medals of honor, resolved his dilemma in favor of dying victorious rather than prolonging his existence away from the war.

here If stay, before the Trojan town,

Short is my date, but deathless my renown:

If I return, I quit immortal praise

For years and years, and long-extended days. (Homer, 1836, p. 224)

The implicit meaning of Achilles' myth is that there is long life in peace without war and its traumas. Had Achilles opted to remain away from the war, he would have led a long and peaceful life. This is what Thetis told her son. Thetis, being a goddess, a mother, and a clairvoyant, knew very well that the burdens of fighting, looting, killing are traumatic and would symbolically kill her child.

Though Homer presents Achilles as an illustrious fighter with almost invincible body, his presentation betrays Achilles' psychological traumas. Achilles is first tormented by his king's capriciousness. Let's not forget how Agamemnon seized away Briseis, Achilles' beautiful slave girl which resulted in the warrior's frustration and abstinence from fighting for quite a long time: "By this I swear, when bleeding Greece again / Shall call Achilles, she shall call in Vain" (Homer, 1836, p. 46). Achilles is also traumatized by the death of his beloved ones in the battlefield, especially that of Patroclus which left deep scars on his psyche, and drove him, in Shay's (1994) term, "berserk". Furthermore, psychologically speaking, Achilles' attachment to women, as Briseis' episode shows, is indicative of a traumatic situation that drives him towards remaining immured in the pleasure principle. As a matter of fact, Achilles' hatred of Agamemnon (as the king and father figure) solidifies this view. It is no coincident that the woman desired by Achilles is confiscated by Agamemnon. Therefore, Achilles is a unique case of a traumatized soldier lost between his desires for the symbolic womb (pleasure principle) and his anxious hatred for the cold womb of the state as represented by his rigid king. Symbolically, Achilles dies for his failure to deal in a balanced way with his desires and anxieties.

2. The Return Shock: Agamemnon and Ulysses

In the *Iliad*, Homer presents one of the first major wars in world history where a huge coalition of kingdoms fought under the leadership of king Agamemnon against the kingdom of Troy and the

forces of king Priam. Agamemnon won the war and went home at the end of the ten-year siege of Troy to die in Mycenae. He got assassinated by Aegisthus, his wife's lover. Regardless of the plethora of scholarly discourses on Agamemnon's tragic life and death, I strongly believe that his death masks a potential failure to cope with the stress of homecoming after an active and violent existence in battlefields for so long. His return home puts him face to face with his worst act of atrocity, and that is the killing of his daughter, leaving aside the other atrocities committed out in the battle fields. As a result, his death is nothing more than a symbolic suicide and a violent end to a deeply traumatized warrior: "Great Agamemnon grieved above the rest: / Superior sorrows swell'd his royal breast" (Homer, 1836, p. 210). Rosanov and Carli (2012) in a study about suicide among war veterans conclude that it is not uncommon that veterans with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) commit suicide or seek it to put an end to their anguish. Though it is known that Agamemnon was killed by his wife or her lover, symbolically speaking, the wife or the lover can be taken as an extension to Agamemnon himself.

Another traumatized war veteran is Ulysses, the backbone of the war and the master mind of Troy's destruction. He fought the Trojans for ten years and fought the gods for survival in his homecoming journey for another ten years. He is a fighter, a shrewd man, a leader, a sailor and a lover, too. He went through various battles, received injuries, interacted with heroes like himself, suffered a lot and had a life full of action. It would not be easy for a man like him to find himself suddenly back into sedentary life in Ithaca with a loving and chaste wife who most likely would want to cash on her fidelity for all that patience and chastity! Instead, the stressed, but shrewd Ulysses got lost. In the epic we know that he got lost in spite of himself as it was the will of other gods against his. But the truth is that he subconsciously does not want to go home. He fell into a state of denial, which is one of the symptoms of (PTSD). He is not ready yet to settle down in a domestic environment. It is the latent desire in the fighter to go on the fighting that made him veer away from home.

During his prolonged homeward journeys, Ulysses went simply through a lengthy process of detoxification letting the venoms of war fade away gradually. His journeys across and along the Mediterranean with their passionate and also violent encounters are tantamount to acts of therapy and cleansing. For him, the prolonged return is a gradual process of adaptation to what is awaiting him at the final station: The Ithaca Terminus. By doing so, he most likely was pursuing a cure for his war habits that got him addicted to scheming and committing atrocities: after all the violent ransacking of Troy and the holocaust of sources that was wrought there had been his own. In his detoxification process, he moved from one adventure to another. Some of the encounters were deadly like the ones with the Cyclopes and the huge monsters of Scylla and Caribides. Others were domestic and of quasi erotic nature that subscribe to a return to the pleasure principle like his hesitant and shy encounters with sirens and Circe, the stunning *femme fatale*. A research paper on combat-related posttraumatic stress by Anticevic and Britvic reveals that "war veterans with PTSD had less sexual activity, hypoactive sexual desire, and erectile difficulties" (2008, p. 499) This, in fact, may explain why Ulysses delayed his home arrival for so long. Before exposing himself to Penelope, he apparently needed the other sexual encounters (vaguely fantasized or otherwise) and the time to test and may be restore the functionality of his romance weapon.

However, Ulysses knew that he cannot go on detoxifying forever away from home. He had to go home because returning home is a sign of achievement for him. Otherwise, he will be counted dead. Yet, in spite of the detoxification processes he has been through, his return home was not peaceful. He returned home with a big bang. We should not forget that he is a fighter coming home after 20 years of absence. His war traumas that might consist of over inflated ego, on the one hand, and the fear of the encounter with the chaste female (the vestal) on the other hand have prevented him from a peaceful entry into his home. So he had to destroy the suitors of his wife who are in essence his wife's guests as the tradition stipulates. Had he had no trauma associated with identity and ego he could have settled the issue of the suitors peacefully. There are always ways to get rid of the suitors other than the way of war where he killed men of his own race most likely to intimidate those of his household, including Telemachus, his young son. Plato (1991) was aware of the destructive nature of posttraumatic stress without naming it as such. In the *Republic*, Plato had Socrates raise the problematic issue of how to educate warriors to be both destructive towards the enemy and yet kind and domestic at home. Apparently, Ulysses proves to be a bad example here as he fails to deal with his post-traumatic stress disorders.

Ulysses' homecoming with a bang makes him a prototype for some postmodern Hollywood war-movie characters. Rambo, in the Rambo film series, is among the best movie characters who somehow bear a resemblance to Ulysses in his ire and desire for continual detoxification through committing acts of violence. Rambo, a Vietnam War veteran - not without war traumas, large ego and identity problems - goes on fighting forever. We see him in the "*First Blood*" letting a volcano-like rage loose over the town and its marshals. For Rambo, the explosive anger he has is his self-therapy. Rambo has the physical strength and ire to react in a way that shows contempt of civil order and civil laws. The question that the film does not pose is how physically less capable characters would react to their war traumata. Would they react like Forrest in Robert Zemeckis' "Forrest Gump"? Run and keep on running, then conformation and adaptation to civil order follows. Or simply die of cancer and other illnesses like John Rambo's less endowed friends.

As can be seen, the return shock is a serious trauma on its own right. Some active soldiers who spend a long time in service carrying arms and having command over life and death find it extremely difficult to deal with life in peace time. The trauma of leaving one's arms behind is more intense for the victorious than that of the loser. For such warriors, war and arms become symbols of masculinity and virility and the loss of these is a subconscious loss of what they stand for. As a result, these warriors either die in the battle field, like Achilles, to avoid the return shock; or are killed instantly upon their return like Agamemnon, to avoid dealing with postwar and post return traumata. As pointed earlier, Agamemnon's death is a symbolic signifier for suicide as an extreme symptom and outcome of traumata. Another type of warriors tends to compensate for their symbolic emasculation by putting on extreme shows of virility through aggression such as Ulysses, Rambo and their ilk.

Alfred Lord Tennyson, seems to have understood the effect of the return shock on surviving warriors and therefore in a poem titled "Ulysses" he had Ulysses call upon his old comrades urging them to take to sea with him to die in action rather than waiting passively for death at home: "There lies the

port; the vessel puffs her sail: / There gloom the dark broad seas. My mariners” (Tennyson, 2004, p. 88). The same syndromes of highly exaggerated masculinity, and inability to adapt to home after returning are exhibited by Rambo in the various film series produced so far. In these movies, we still see Rambo fighting at home and overseas in spite of his advanced age.

3. Shell Shock, Fatigue Shock, Trench Shock and Weight Shock

Though soldiers are usually trained to deal with existence under extreme conditions, it seems, however, that this may not apply to all. In Wilfred Owen’s poetry, we see soldiers suffering from what modern warfare therapists describe as shell shock, fatigue shock, trench shock and weight shock. In “Dulce et Decorum Est” the soldiers described clearly suffer from two types of traumas: physical and psychological: “Bent double, like old beggars under sacks, / Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,” (Owen, 1994, p. 30). This stanza shows the physical conditions of the warriors: they are sick, exhausted and traumatized by the burdens they carry on their backs and are compared to beggars under sacks. This image may bring to mind Ulysses’ entrance into his home disguised as a beggar, but the difference between both is so huge. The latter was supported by Athena, a goddess with a hefty weight among the Olympians, while those poor soldiers are left to their own destiny with no god behind them “and towards our distant rest began to trudge” (Owen, 1994, p. 30).

Psychological trauma is another companion of soldiers who are exposed to war. The following stanza explicitly reveals this:

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
 Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
 And watch the white eyes writhing in his face, (Owen, 1994, p. 30)

Here is a case of a soldier who cannot sleep not only because of his physical wounds, but because of the emotional and psychological scars of what he saw and lived during the war. Such repeated violent visions or memories of the traumatic events recurring in the form of dreams, nightmares, or just simple intrusive memories may lead to melancholy, depression, somatization, and loss of faith and in extreme cases to self-termination.

4. War and Loss of Faith

In fact, another war trauma is one’s loss of faith in the system one fights for. The realization that one is fighting in a futile war or for a futile cause, as is the case with most wars, is traumatic. Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, W.B. Yeats and Randall Jarrell among many others reflect such a trauma in the subjects of their poems. For instance, in “The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner” Jarrell contrasts the turret in a fighter-plane with the mother’s womb in a metaphysical conceit where the turret is presented as the cold womb of the State that delivers nothing other than coldness, death and indifference:

From my mother's sleep I fell into the State,
 And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze

When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose (Jarrell, 1969, p. 144)

The flying gunner knew that he is going to die. He has no other choice in averting this, the way a fetus has no choice in being born. The only difference, however, between the gunner and the unborn fetus is that the fetus springs to life out of a warm womb, while the traumatized airborne fighter sees his ironic deliverance into death out of a cold steel womb. This traumatic image is further enhanced with the gunner's assertion of the disrespectful way the system disposes of his body upon his death: he sees himself like dirt being flushed out of the cold steel womb of the state with a hose.

The loss of faith and the departure from the romantic ideals of war as a source of glory accentuate traumas experienced by combatants. Modernism brought with it different representations of war emphasizing its traumas at the expense of its glory. Byron in a poem titled "When a man hath no freedom to fight for at home" cynically or seriously wrote "Then battle for freedom wherever you can, / And, if not shot or hang'd, you'll get knighted." (Byron, 1993, p. 71). In the Romantic age, the implied glory of homecoming for combatants is guaranteed. Another example of the romantic ideals of fighting is seen in Richard Lovelace's "To Lucasta, Going to the Wars" where the soldier emphasizes his dogma-like enthusiasm for and faith in war. If such characters ever experienced traumas, then they should be highly commended on their skill at masking them.

Tell me not (Sweet) I am unkind,
 That from the nunnery
 Of thy chaste breast and quiet mind
 To war and arms I fly.
 True, a new mistress now I chase,
 The first foe in the field;
 And with a stronger faith embrace
 A sword, a horse, a shield. (Lovelace, 1996, p. 78)

With the arrival of modernity and postmodernity these ideals began to wane and a spiritual vacuum shock prevailed. As a result of the decline of the romantic ideals we see another breed of soldiers who fight and die for no ideals whatsoever. In W. B. Yeats' "an Irish Airman Foresees His Death", the pilot-fighter talks of his total indifference to war, life and death. He insists that he fights because he simply enjoys the act of flying. This is a pathetic apathy.

Those that I fight I do not hate,
 Those that I guard I do not love;
 A lonely impulse of delight
 Drove to this tumult in the clouds; (Yeats, 2018, p. 102)

Though we do not see details of war and combat in the poem, the speaker himself is a traumatized subject produced by war and its various contexts. His indifference to life and to death turn him into a zombie seeking pleasure, *à la* “carpe diem”. This apathy syndrome causes the traumatized to lose touch with what makes him human.

5. War Trauma and Non-Combatants

By non-combatants, the paper does not refer to women and men, with romantic ideals, who are prevented from becoming combatants due to age, gender, or physical impairments. In saying so, I have in mind poets such as Cicely Hamilton and Evelyn Underhill, among many others, who in some of their poetry express regret for not sharing in the great wars of their nations. The following stanza from Hamilton’s “Non-Combatants” expresses the speaker’s anger, frustration and a sense of shame at being kept away from the war:

Before one drop of angry blood was shed
I was sore hurt and beaten to my knee;
Before one fighting man reeled back and died
The War-Lords struck at me
They struck me down an idle, useless mouth,
As cumbrous nay, more cumbrous than the dead,
With life and heart afire to give and give
I take a dole instead. (Hamilton, 2018, p. 137-38)

Contrary to this, by non-combatants I mean to refer to civilians who are victimized and tormented by war. This category of people had their share and representation in literature across the world map. Literature produced civilian war victims who are raped, violated, and dislocated. These victims develop traumas that are contagious, and if not healed, they are inherited to the next generations. Ghassan Kanafani’s *Men in the Sun* is a novella that shows such war tormented characters. In his novella, he presents a group of immigrants from different ages and social backgrounds, in search for a future life with work and temporary home, attempting to get across the borderline of Iraq to Kuwait.

Unfortunately, the characters involved are not Rambo-like fighters pushing their ways with sheer force across the rank of their oppressors; instead, they died of excessive heat and suffocation inside the empty water tank of their smuggler at the Kuwaiti border checkpoint. According to Hopper, Bassuk and Olivet (2010), there is a strong correlation between homelessness and posttraumatic stress. Such stress manifests itself in various forms such as the loss of one’s esteem, inability to think clearly, irrational behavior, fear, self-alienation among many others. *Men in the Sun* shows characters suffering from an assortment of such symptoms caused by homelessness.

The main characters in the novella are so vulnerable and scared to the extent that they lurked mutely in a furnace-like empty water tank till their death. They could have saved their lives had they knocked at the walls of the tank to alert some guard. Their fear to be found out, their fear of jail, their hope that the ordeal at the border cross point will be over soon, their enfeebled wits, their waiting silently out of fear prevented them from emerging out on time to breathe. One of the surviving characters in *Men in the Sun* is the smuggler who mans the water-tank truck. This smuggler himself suffers from both physical and psychological wounds as he lost his penis in a bomb explosion while fighting for his homeland: he lost his land and with it he lost the emblem of his masculinity and virility. The smuggler's physical loss shows how war and occupation emasculate their victims and render them ineffective. After all, the smuggler, in spite of his good intentions to deliver his human shipment safely to its destination, failed. His failure, no doubt is emotionally traumatizing because it accentuates his losses and his ineffectiveness.

Such loss and ineffectiveness is seen among other war victims in the writings of Sahar Khalifeh. In *The Sunflower*, she presents civilians tormented physically and emotionally by the sheer presence of occupation and its oppressive martial laws and measures. The most poignant part in the narrative is the trauma resulting from confiscating the dreams of innocent and peaceful civilians under occupation, and thus rendering them homeless and defenseless. Sa'diye is one of the most memorable characters in *the Sunflower*. She is depicted all through the novel as a submissive, hardworking, and pro statuesque subject. She admonishes her children to avoid confrontation with the occupation repressive apparatus. She works hard day and night and bears insults and humiliation all for the sake of her dream of building a house on a hill on the outskirts of Nablus. However, towards the end of the novel, Sa'diye turns into a volcano of anger when she realizes that her dream has evaporated into thin air upon the confiscation of her land by the occupation force. Khalifeh's novel in essence does not deal with acts of heroism in the battlefield, it deals with defeated and traumatized characters who in spite of their hard endeavor to make ends meet under occupation, remain helpless in front of the formidable forces of oppression. Sa'diye's frustration and anger will yield nothing in themselves, but as reality shows, they will be inherited to her children and acquaintances; and the struggle, the conflict and the traumas will go on with unabated vigor.

6. Conclusion

Some soldiers, especially those attached to some elite units, develop egos larger than cathedrals while in the military service. When those soldiers suddenly find themselves demobilized, and their arms (a subconscious metaphor or extension for the soldier's penis) are gone, they get into a state of depression that manifests itself in ramified ways: Agamemnon and Achilles' syndrome that results in the soldier's regression into the vacuum of passivity in civil society symbolized by death. Then there is the Ulysses-Rambo syndrome that consists of denial, delaying the process of homecoming coupled with aggressive return followed by escape into the unknown. However, not all soldiers in literature are represented as supermen or invincible fighters with romantic ideals. Bernard Shaw, almost two decades before the first World War, mocked such Romantic war heroes in a play titled *Arms and the Man*. The great wars the world went through during the first half of the twentieth century changed a lot in the

artists' ways of depicting war and its subjects. Literature began to present realistic images of combatants as victims suffering physically and psychologically. This is shown in the writings of Yeats, Owen, Jarrell, Sassoon among many others. Literature also did not confine itself to representing combatants only. Civilians had their good share of representation. More than often, literature shows the negative impact of violence, oppression and deprivation on the subjects of war. In certain cases, and under certain conditionality that involve occupation of territories and dislocation of civilians, war traumata become as contagious and dangerous as the plague where the infected becomes either very sick and dies or very sick and lives with dire consequences manifested in acts of terror and suicidal activities. Finally, people like Ulysses, Achilles, Rambo have at least the physical force, ire and capabilities to hit back and do it with vehemence. Whereas there are people like Sa'diye, the three men in the burning water tank and their driver, the soldiers in Owen's, Sassoon's Jarrell's poetry and millions of others who lack the physical force and capabilities to hit back or retaliate. Great numbers of those traumatized people end dying, surrendering, or eventually passing their traumas to the next generations.

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