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The Impact of the American War on the American Soldiers: An Examination of Survival Psychology in Scranton's *War Porn* and Powers' *The Yellow Birds*

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Abstract: This research explores fictional representations of the Iraq War by American writers, focusing on how neglecting soldiers' individuality renders their psychological suffering invisible. This theme is especially prominent in American literature on the Iraq War, where protagonists — often American soldiers — experience deep psychological crises and struggle to reintegrate into civilian life. Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds* and Roy Scranton's *War Porn* portray the war's devastating consequences and lasting impact on soldiers. Even after returning home, these soldiers face ongoing psychological battles. Using theories of Survival Psychology and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, this paper analyzes how these novels illuminate the American war in Iraq and its far-reaching effects. The war affected not only Iraqi civilians but also American combatants, inflicting enduring psychological harm. This study identifies a recurring pattern of destruction that affects both the external environment and individual identity. By highlighting the psychological trauma and the depersonalization of soldiers' suffering in *War Porn* and *The Yellow Birds*, the paper exposes the complex and often baffling aftermath of war. These narratives reveal how war continues to shape the lives of American veterans long after combat ends, offering a deeper understanding of the hidden psychological toll of modern warfare.

Keywords: Survival Psychology; Post-traumatic Stress Disorder; Iraq War; Modern War Novel.

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1. Introduction

Writing about war implicates a deep moral paradox: the act of altering genuine human anguish and suffering into literature and art may risk trivializing that agony, or even transforming it into a spectacle that is voyeuristically consumed by its audience. For many war writers, articulating the trauma is almost impossible, especially in the immediate aftermath, and yet the allure of violence and the need to give voice to the unutterable anguish of war create a literary and artistic genre that is replete with guilt and psychological urgency. Kate MC Loughlin in her introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to War Writing* explains the linguistic failure in war literature: "frequently encountered in war writing is the proposition that war defeats language, as though words themselves have been blasted to smithereens or else suffer from combat fatigue"(17). However, the unutterability of war paradoxically renders the attempt to articulate its trauma both inevitable and necessary.

Cathy Caruth explores the enduring nature of soldiers' trauma after war, manifested not only in nightmares but also in everyday experiences and interactions, all of which are tainted by the persistent replay of war trauma. This haunting continues throughout the soldiers' lives. Caruth approaches war trauma from a reflectively hopeful perspective, emphasizing the new possibilities it can generate (181-82). Consciously living and reliving trauma may allow for a reinterpretation of human suffering and history. The disruption of a linear, chronological narrative caused by trauma can offer alternative historical accounts that might otherwise remain untold. In war literature, a traumatized account of history can enable the emergence of painful stories that defy conventional grammar and narrative logic. The importance of discussing war trauma lies in its ability to reveal a deeper, often unspoken reality of the human condition, which makes it crucial to confront, despite the difficulty.

Like Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra is deeply engaged with the relationship between trauma and writing. He highlights the complicated and often edgy association between historiography and literature in the context of trauma. While historiography seeks to reorganise the past as accurately and objectively as possible, literature—and particularly what LaCapra refers to as "writing trauma"—offers a more capacious and affective space to get involved with the delayed, disconcerting nature of traumatic experience. While historical writing aspires to write about trauma, writing trauma involves a performative, often disjointed process of reacting to trauma's lasting effects through acts of reiteration, emotional intensity, and critical reflection. Literature and art,

in this light, do not merely reflect reality but may problematize, reconstruct, or shed light on it through surreal or disorienting forms and distorted imagery. LaCapra invites us to see trauma writing not as an isolated aesthetic exercise but as a deeply ethical and historiographical act (185-86).

In this context, war literature becomes not just a space for personal or aesthetic exploration, but a vital means of documenting, questioning, and making sense of real historical conflicts. Over the last 20 years, the United States of America has participated in two Middle Eastern battles as part of the "War on Terror." Many American troops were sent to war and spent several years in Iraq and Afghanistan. The wars were launched in response to the September 11 attacks, which claimed the lives of nearly 3,000 people, mostly Americans, and injured thousands more. Despite this, no evidence was found linking Iraq to the attacks or confirming its possession of weapons of mass destruction. Images, videos, and stories of the victims, their families, and friends circulated globally for several months, placing Americans at the centre of a widespread narrative of victimhood.

Kevin Powers and Roy Scranton, who served as machine gunners in the U.S. Army in Iraq, relied on their wartime experience to write the critically acclaimed novels *The Yellow Birds* and *War Porn*. The two novels effectively portray the auditory, olfactory, and visual aspects of battle that are seldom described with such remarkable lucidity and genuineness. Their understanding of the conflict's psychological and moral consequences extends to all parties concerned, including troops, local militants, medical personnel, and nonviolent civilians. *The Yellow Birds* chronicles the experiences of Private John Bartle, a member of the U.S. Army stationed in Al Tafar, Iraq, alongside his fellow soldiers, Sergeant Sterling and Private Daniel Murphy (Murph). Through a retrospective exploration in Iraq, Germany, and the U.S., the narrative depicts the backdrop and consequences of Bartle's wartime experience. *War Porn* depicts the narrative of a soldier who has personally observed the atrocities of war and endures severe suffering as a result. He is the one who has experienced the physical and emotional pain of sorrow and loss after seeing the death and suicide of his colleagues caused by depression (Brazeal 238). Psychoanalytical theories can help us understand the mental struggles of the traumatized characters we come across in war literature.

Survival psychology is divided into three levels based on the three primary phases during disasters: pre-impact, affect, and post-impact (Leach 11). The three phases focus on how human beings, whether armed or civilian, react in dangerous situations.

Furthermore, the narratives' analysis helps the readers to comprehend the author's surviving experience and, as a result, recognize the psychological consequences of an active engagement in the war. The protagonists of the novels serve as the expression of the writers' awareness of the devastating consequences of war on both military personnel and civilians from a psychological dimension.

The investigation of this study also offers valuable insights into the responses of individuals, whether they are military or not, during potentially hazardous situations. Ultimately, the explanation of the story enables readers to understand and value the author's survival experience and, after that, recognize the psychological consequences of actively participating in the war. The American war has left a severe toll on each member of the American society. As for the veterans, life after the war is not as much affected by the economy, social welfare, or any physical settings as it is heavily impacted by the traumas they have undergone during the war. Stress and trauma, as represented in many texts, have been the subject of a bulk of research, but the fate of returning soldiers remains a less central issue. This study will focus on two literary texts that are comparable in many ways, particularly in terms of trauma and survival psychology that most of the soldiers have faced after their return. The post-war psychological status of the veterans is marked by the powerful feeling of unexpected or disastrous occurrences as the reaction to the incident takes the form of hallucinations that are often delayed and uncontrollably recurrent.

2. Literature Review

Considerable literature has been produced about the conflicts of war in the United States, including notable novels such as Phil Klay's *Redeployment* (2012), David Abrams' *Fobbit* (2012), John Renehan's *The Valley* (2016), and Brian Van Reet's *Spoils* (2017). Prominently white American combatants who participated in these wars and consciously chose to turn their experiences into artistic endeavors wrote many of these works. The plot of these novels centers on the triumphs and the military campaigns for liberation in Iraq. However, the narrative space allocated to the struggles faced by locals in Iraq and Afghanistan was minimal, and the tales of American troops were not recounted, nor were their tragedies stressed (Alosman 2021). Iraqis primarily held a passive and secondary role in the narrative space, with the exception of the army's interpreters (Peter 2016). Powers, and Scranton, who were veterans of the American invasion, made the deliberate decision to include the accounts of the American people in their debut novels, *The Yellow Birds* (2012) and *War Porn* (2016).

Unlike previous works that question the legality and justification of the Iraq war, *The Yellow Birds* and *War Porn* are perceived to expose realities about the war in a manner that is beyond the capabilities of any psychological book or essay (Marzillier, 2013). They offer specialists a unique contribution that academic psychological data cannot deliver, namely, the personal histories of individual combatants (Marzillier, 354). The primary accomplishment of Powers and Scranton in *The Yellow Birds* and *War Porn* is their compelling capacity to elicit the psychological strain experienced by American soldiers during the Iraq War (Nester, 2013). Within a constrained narrative space, the novels also depict the prevailing sorrow that pervades the lives of local inhabitants in the backdrop of conflict. Nonetheless, Laufer argues that while Powers' story has some well-crafted, subdued, and simple prose, it fails to enhance the battle experience and instead diverts it (34). Evers contends that although Powers has a clear skill in composing *The Yellow Birds*, the book isn't coherent or self-controlled enough to fully convey its potential importance (42). It seems that Powers' attempt to combine poetic and prosaic styles is not helping to move the plot forward (Evers 44). Similarly, Beauchamp argues that although Powers' work has much poetic power and serves as a tribute to humanist principles and customs, *The Yellow Birds* fails to acknowledge the complete and devastating magnitude of the war as a distinct occurrence.

We can consider Scranton's novel as one of the greatest and most unsettling modern war novels because it deviates from earlier literary works about the Iraq War (Colla 62). Phil Klay claimed that Scranton's book was the best he had ever seen. He mentioned that *War Porn* had several commendable aspects such as the meticulous craftsmanship, the hysterical comic passages, and the sheer audacity of vision matched at every turn by the innovative skill to carry it out (Klay 70). The story eluded description by words alone; it evoked a profound and shattered feeling, a characteristic of genuinely exceptional writing (Klay 71). Scranton's work distinguishes itself from other war dramas by highlighting how the experiences of American and Iraqi characters intersect and clarifying how the war had a significant impact on their lives. According to Peter, it caused Americans to reconsider how they viewed the 2003 Iraq War and how they treated American military soldiers. The narrative, Peter explains, skillfully explores the war and provides perceptive viewpoints on certain aspects of it that are frequently difficult for most Westerners to understand (42). The novelists' analysis of the Iraq war's repercussions is under ongoing scrutiny and reevaluation. Despite the considerable recognition their work has garnered from a diverse range of literary critics, reviewers, psychologists, and psychiatrists, it is necessary to rectify the novels' portrayal of combat from the point of view of survival psychology.

3. Survival Psychology

Psychoanalysis has been employed as an interpretative frame to analyze fictional works since the turn of the 20th century, primarily focusing on the internal struggles that the major characters encounter. From a different perspective, literature might thus serve as a helpful foundation for psychology as a science. Understanding, perception, literary critique, and artistic innovation have all been greatly influenced by Freud's theory of personality.

Even though literature and psychoanalysis are distinct disciplines within the humanities, they are inextricably linked. Survival psychology is a burgeoning field that focuses on human behavior in the face of dangerous situations, such as disturbances and severe involvements (Leach 28). The psychological difficulties that soldiers have after returning from combat are the main topic of Powers' post-war book, *The Yellow Birds*. The best way to analyze this occurrence is to examine it from the perspective of survival psychology.

Survival psychology benefits from systematic methodologies to apprehend the way people behave in catastrophic circumstances, such as struggles related to wars or any terrifying conditions that intimidate individual existence (Guilbeau Para 2). This framework becomes particularly applicable when examining how characters in *The Yellow Birds* and *War Porn* internalize the trauma of war and how they recall and react to their war experiences. The division into pre-impact, impact, and post-trauma stages provides a useful psychological structure to make sense of the characters' disjointed perceptions of the world and their unpredictable responses throughout the narratives.

The pre-impact phase happens just before a real occasion and starts when a forthcoming danger occurs (Fogo 54). Throughout this phase, although specific intimidating conditions may happen without notice, leaving no probability for groundwork, other incidences transmit marks of peril that warn human beings of the possibility of hazardous incidents. Particular recognizable signs anticipate dangers and produce sentiments of worry and angst in people. Leach explains that risk arises when people are aware that adversity is likely to occur (11). Dormancy is the primary indicator of people's behavior throughout this phase (Leach 12). When it comes to implementing effective countermeasures and creating emergency procedures, this state is ineffective. This time is pretty overwhelming, and very little can be done about the overall endurance policies (Fogo 55). Even equipped combatants, who are continually qualified to act in dangerous circumstances, are susceptible to the results. Leach argues that no extent of

exercise can entirely exterminate the mental reaction to hearing the sound of bullets flying close by or the psychological disorder instigated by explosives going off near or straight behind a soldier's unit (23). While the pre-impact phase technically precedes direct combat, in both *War Porn* and *The Yellow Birds*, its psychological traces persist long after the war ends. The characters continue to relive moments of anticipatory dread, suggesting that their trauma is not confined to the battlefield but carried into their postwar existence.

The main symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) include altered mood and cognition, a persistent sense of impending danger, hypervigilance, disrupted sleep, and acute, upsetting, and feared avoided responses to recollections of a triggering incident (Shalev et al. 2459). Indicators of PTSD severity in individuals diagnosed with the disorder can vary over time; symptoms worsen when exposed to concurrent stressors, sickness, and life changes in a safe setting (Shalev et al 2459). Suitably processing detailed facts enables individuals to either freeze or run. Accordingly, individuals who have been diagnosed with PTSD exhibit hypervigilance, displaying inappropriate behavior in various circumstances and misinterpreting signals as threatening even when the environment is safe (Shalev et al. 2459). Survivor's guilt is a trauma response that places a psychological burden on soldiers who have witnessed the horrors of war and managed to survive. It creates a deep psychological struggle to comprehend why so many were killed while they remain alive. Lifton refers to the function of survivor's guilt that can create accountability in people: "This guilt seems to subsume the individual victim-survivor rather harshly to the evolutionary function of guilt in rendering us accountable for our relationship to others' physical and psychological existence. This experience of guilt around one's own trauma suggests the moral dimension inherent in all conflict and suffering"(172).PTSD and survivor's guilt as one of the responses to PTSD, are important issues traceable in both *War Porn* and *The Yellow Birds*, as the protagonists in both novels exhibit classic symptoms of PTSD—particularly hypervigilance, emotional detachment, and a distorted sense of safety. Their inability to adjust to postwar life and the constant re-experiencing of combat-related memories, as well as the guilty recalling of the horrifying violence in the battlefront mirror the diagnostic patterns described in Shalev's and Lifton's study.

Profound exposure to deadly combat situations during conflict adversely affects the psychological well-being of all those involved (Donoho et al. 1311). The continued participation of the American military in Afghanistan and Iraq has raised concerns for the enduring psychological well-being of service personnel (Donoho et al., 1311).

Engaging in direct and indirect combat with enemy troops can result in soldiers experiencing significant levels of severe stress (Donoho et al, 1312). While most troops display resilience even after enduring conflict, combat deployments significantly affect their mental well-being (Donoho et al. 1312). Even highly skilled troops might have physical and mental debilitation following their deployment in areas of conflict. This observation is related to the narratives of *The Yellow Birds* and *War Porn*, where extended exposure to warfare inflicts long-lasting psychological wounds. Both novels explore how the battlefield experience can disconcert the soldiers' sense of identity long after they get back home, showcasing the durable impact of modern warfare on mental health. To further understand how trauma reshapes individual identity and memory, the narrative perspectives of veterans in both novels deserve closer attention.

4. Analysis

4.1. Narrating Trauma: PTSD and Post-War Identity

In *The Yellow Birds*, Powers introduces a soldier who participated in the Iraq War. Bartle's psychological well-being is disturbed by his experience in the Iraq War, which brought about a lot of unfavorable predicaments, such as death and destruction. Bartle's post-traumatic stress disorder is partly caused by hostile events from the Iraq War that caused harm to others he knows. When Bartle ultimately comes home, he will be unable to overcome his mental illnesses, which were mostly triggered by Daniel Murphy's death, "A few others scattered over the year. A mortar on the FOB killed one from HQ Company. A sniper killed another I did not know but had heard. Ten more? Twenty?" (Powers 105).

Murph serves as an example of how war is a powerful force that wears out the mental faculties of both troops and civilians. According to Powers, he "surrender[s] fully to the war" after what he has witnessed in Iraq (80). Local Iraqis saw him wandering "naked," his hands and face "tanned" by the sun (195). "He walks as a ghost, his feet and legs bleeding from his walk through the wire and detritus" (195). Murph makes "bloody footprints" on the dust of the roads as he travels to the Iraqis (196). When he gets to them, he lifts "his head absently to the sky" and pauses (196). He scuffles "his feet at them and sways gently from side to side, his body flecked in sweat. He shows no awareness of their presence [. . ;] a quiet stroll through an enormous museum gallery" (196). Murph's eyes capture "the shape of an old beggar" as the Iraqis try to break his "stance" by yelling and begging (196). Murph succumbs to madness and loses his psychic abilities. Psychosis is one of the mental illnesses that some war survivors experience (Leach 74). Murph has encountered similar situations with certain American soldiers in Iraq. Soldiers are exposed to startling events in an overtly dangerous setting after living in a comparatively safe one (Hinnebusch 210).

The war seems to have shattered the social life and the career of the characters. In the following novel, *War Porn*, illustrates the symptoms of PTSD which is a psychological ailment that might arise after going through outstandingly intimidating or dismaying incidents ((Brazeal 195). In *War Porn,* “He’s [Aaron] a soldier who just got back from a war zone. He’s a person” (34). Dahlia is one of the more relatable characters in the book. She is among the young Americans in Utah. When Matt asks Aaron about the war, even though some of the anguish stems from the soldier's involvement in transgressions, Dahlia's response supports the notion that the soldier is a traumatized victim. In the past, she had wondered about Aaron: "How would it feel... [to] split a universe in two and leave? Would you alter as a result? (9). Dahlia expresses worry about the effects of the conflict on American troops like Aaron even though she acknowledges that the Iraq conflict is a tragedy for the Iraqi people: "[e]verything seemed changed. Not familiar. Disengaged” (324–328).

In fact, the most prevalent portrayal of conflict in *War Porn* appears to be meant to subvert readers' presumptions that violence serves as a basis for radical change. SPC Wilson finds himself reprimanding an Iraqi subordinate prior to the conflict, and he subsequently considers, “This wasn’t who I was, who I was meant to be. I was sensitive. I’d been a poet” (Scranton 118). Impact phase based on the happenings and cultural vicissitudes after the war may change insights about any given war. However, in most circumstances, these effects would be hard to differentiate from the first two types of impact, pre-impact, and post-impact stages.

4.2. The Psychological Weight of Survival in *The Yellow Birds* and *War Porn*

In Power’s *The Yellow Birds*, Bartle's anxiety brought on by the startling results of the war in Iraq was the main cause of his post-traumatic stress disorder. In addition to the number of his friends who had died, which seemed to be signs of the depressing effects of the war, Bartle began to comprehend the extent of the devastation caused by the conflict he was living through. Despite not being a direct victim of the upsetting war he endured, Bartle's mental state was greatly impacted by the terrible events of his friends' deaths, which ultimately led to the development of his post-traumatic stress disorder.

War has many effects, including melancholy. Bartle passes a day in Rhineland-Palatinate, Germany, on his journey back to the United States; while he constantly attempts to grab his weapon, which is not there, his thoughts are consumed with conflict "My fingers closed around a rifle that was not there. I told them the rifle was not supposed to be there, but my fingers would not listen..." (Powers 54). This incident happens a lot

to him and other soldiers. Through his home flight, he utters: "My hands went close around the stock of the rifle that was not there. An NCO from the third platoon sitting across the aisle saw it and smiled. it happened to me twice today. I didn't feel better" (Powers 101). He can still hear the noises of falling mortars and the conflict when he is in his hometown, "... the caws might strike in perfect harmony with the memory of the sound of falling mortars, and I, at home now" (Powers 134). Bartle is haunted by the war.

In what amounts to a monologue, this also could be seen in the *War Porn*, the main narrator, Aaron explains to himself—through the guise of speaking to Matt—why he did what he did and what the value of his acts was. He alternates between extenuating factors and condemnations, explanations, and defences "before I fucking did it" compared to "before it got done" (315). Aaron is pouring out his trauma, sorting through the mire of uncertainty, duty, responsibility, and exculpatory evidence.

The overwhelming recollections of battle are one of its aftereffects. In Scranton's *War Porn*, the civilian world has already been infiltrated by the lingering trauma of the war that Aaron has returned from. "The thing with Aaron," Wendy says, "I think he had a hard time in Iraq" (308). When asked what she means by that, Wendy says she does not know: "He won't talk about it. He says he just wants to put it behind him. But he's really tense now, and I think . . . I think something happened." Rachel asks if he has PTSD, and Wendy's response, "I don't know how you know. He says he doesn't" (308). The conversation between two women in the novel illustrates Aaron's wartime experience as trauma. The effects of the war on Aaron's conduct were evident in his unwillingness to communicate, his denial, and his extreme readiness to accept the truth that he saw and experienced in Iraq.

4.3. Broken Narratives: War Trauma, Memory, and the Limits of Expression

The fragmentation of memory and the inability to fully articulate the horrors of war are central to how trauma is represented in war literature. Devastation of both physical and psychological aspects is another effect of conflict. In *The Yellow Birds*, Powers portrays the occupied Baghdad as a demolished and prehistoric city with blasting cars, bursts, shots, troops, and terrorists that have malformed it. Iraq is labelled as "all marking places where a vehicle had been surprised by an explosion or a barrage of a small-arms fire. Shards of broken glass, burst tires, and metal fragments lined the highway on both sides" (156). In chapter thirteen, he writes about the crimes and slaughter scenes owing to the attack, "I watched ambulance driver picking pieces of flesh from sidewalks, firemen

evacuating blasted buildings …" (Powers 26). Bartle continues, "Murderous attacks were the order of the day" (Powers 27) at another point. After the incident, the narrator understands that everything has changed and is in a stupor when he leaves for Baghdad. The book is filled with mystery and distressing recollections of the traumatized soldier. For example, in chapter three, Sergeant Sterling appears in a German pub with Private Bartle on the journey home, and in another scenario in chapter nine, it sounds as though he shoots himself and dies. Other times, the events are a mix of memories and fantasy. No serious accusations of being real or creative are made:

> I closed my eyes. When I closed them, I saw Sergeant Sterling on the side of a mountain. Saw the rifle barrel in his mouth. Saw the way he went limp, so limp in that impossible moment when the small bullet emerged from his head. Saw his body slide a few feet down the mountain, the worn soles of his boots coming to rest in a clot of pine needles. Then I opened them. (Powers 188)

When the C.I.D. detectives examine him in Virginia, he recalls or visualizes this scenario. The debate is whether Bartle killed himself to rid himself from his agonizing recollection or if Sterling committed suicide. Sgt. Sterling is one of the many unpleasant memories that plague Bartle's mind. He may have contributed to Bartle's PTSD and mental illness as well as Murph's death. The officer's foul, filthy remarks, suffering, and even instructions to fabricate Murph's death are too much for Bartle to forget, and doing so would result in Bartle's imprisonment.

There is a "fixation" in a developmental stage regardless of the harshness and warlike conditions, which create a void in the inner self. Sterling is the cop who has severe mental disorders in addition to high levels of "neurosis." And seemingly he kills himself in the book. In such instance, it may be justified since he is unable to reconcile with himself and is unable to love himself because he is experiencing the early phases of love renunciation. Because the abhorrence would lead to suicide, the destructive energies in his ego would cause self-destruction (31).

According to Yakoub, certain cases of PTSD are associated with what he refers to as "unification with the dead" or "survivor's complex," in which the sufferer feels guilty about their existence. He draws on the work of American psychotherapist Robert Jay Lifton on the fallout from the nuclear accident in Japan (20–21). The PTSD that John Bartle experiences is reflected in such instances. Following Murphy's passing and his breach of his mother's trust, the emotions of dishonor and guilt that exacerbate his illness worsen. As a result of his failure to fulfill his commitment to Murph's mother, John Bartle feels undervalued, rejecting and avoiding the thought of Murph's death.

Even when Sterling attempts to recall Murph's crash, Bartle denies any memory. He couldn't even tell the priest about his remorse and misdeeds. But he's still bothered by the memories: “It only comes faster and with more force when I try to put it out of my mind” (Powers 61). After returning home, he experiences melancholy, loneliness, and self-loathing as a result of the supposed crimes, the mistreatment by his superiors, and his failure to defend his companion.

According to Leach, this kind of conduct "follows a structural pattern and a pattern which is transferable across different types of disaster and post-trauma phases" (4). As Elaine Scarry puts it, “Pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it” (8). In terms of his mental state, even Bartle was in an unfamiliar environment that helped him to improve a little. However, the past events that continue to haunt him have a negative impact on his life: “It made me feel fine to be walking alone in the rain that day, alongside the tall… no reason to speak, he will not understand the words, and I thought, Thank you, I am tired and do not know what to say” (Powers 59). It is essential to include this element of war writing in order to concentrate more on the concept of devastation brought about by both psychological and physical aspects in the *War Porn*. It shows that a large portion of the suffering that the troops endure throughout the conflict is psychological in nature. For returning soldiers, trauma is often intensified—or at the very least left unhealed—through interactions with a generation that knows war only through mediated images and secondhand narratives.

4.4. Unbridgeable Distances: Veterans, Civilian Gaze and the Incommunicability of War

The unsettling curiosity of civilians –especially that of the younger generations shaped by media portrayals of war—often manifests as a desire for graphic details, a form of civilian gaze that seeks spectacle rather than understanding. The worst-case scenario between civilians and a shattered (and soon to be revealed as traumatic) soldier returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is presented to readers as they enter "strange hells" during the preparation for a barbecue in a world where "nothing changes." Aaron, the roaming veteran who is “just sort of travelling around right now” (26), is challenged by Mel after the dull chats in the civilian–veteran communications. Matt offers a canned saying, “Thank you for your service” (27), but rapidly takes up the role of war porn-hungry inquisitor alongside his friends, asking questions both regarding the spectacle of war such as "was it dangerous?" (28), and "did you kill anybody?" (31)—and regarding the philosophical vision of the veterans, asking if Aaron defended his place in the war.

Aaron at first attempts to navigate the discussion away from Iraq and deemphasize his role in the war by saying, "Let's talk about something else, okay? Because Iraq is a fucking disaster. The whole thing. Staying is a disaster. Leaving is a disaster" (Scranton 29). Aaron's reply is both protective and trivializing. He tries to validate his attendance (and subsequent non-attendance) instantaneously, denying any capability to change the circumstances of the nation. Rachel, one of Matt and Dahlia's friends at the barbeque, calls Aaron out on his "pretty negative worldview" (29), something that is anathema to the twenty-something liberal hosts of the summer party. However, Aaron's answer again reveals the depths of his trauma, "Yeah, well, I'm all traumatized and shit. You know what it is like. You saw the movie" (29). What Scranton is indicating in this part is the cycle that constantly brings young people to war and absenteeism, which is felt as a loss that can only be filled in the "authenticity" that war brings. Of everything in the novel, this feels like the sturdiest anti-violence demand, a demand that questions our incentives for entering a war rather than the effects of having gone to war.

The difference is none-too-subtle, as Scranton himself argues in depth in his article, where our reverence of the traumatized hero is called into question for favouring that experience over the other predicaments that soldiers have undergone. The conclusion of *War Porn* brings the reader back to the non-combatant world of "strange hells," though, as we have previously realized at the start of the novel, the civilian world has formerly been penetrated by the persistent trauma of the war that Aaron has returned from. "The thing with Aaron," Wendy says, "I think he had a hard time in Iraq" (308). When asked what she means by that, Wendy answers that she does not know: "He won't talk about it. He says he just wants to put it behind him. But he's agitated now, and I think . . . I think something happened" (309).

The dialogue between the two women in the novel's opening demonstrates the profundity of Aaron's wartime experience as trauma. His refusal to talk illustrates what he will come to realize: that Aaron witnessed things in Iraq, took part in them and that they altered him largely. Aaron's beliefs were formed by an earlier war, just like Wilson's, Platt's, and Kyle's. Their expectations have made them susceptible to trauma's unexpectedness, "He thought the war would be over quick and he'd be sitting in the desert twiddling his thumbs the whole time like in that book Jarhead" (308). When the war turns out to be completely different from Aaron's expectations, the disparity between anticipation and experience threatens to overwhelm the characters. In addition, Scranton writes, "We want healing, and we want redemption, but sometimes they're just not possible. Sometimes, the only choices you get are forgetting or understanding. I can't

forget the American war in Iraq, and I don't believe we should, so the best I can do is try to understand, try to help us understand" (Scranton 316). In this concluding statement, Scranton also demonstrates the complexity of trauma and his determination to portray it in his narrative. Building on this, it becomes crucial to examine how war literature engages with psychological wounds such as PTSD and survivor's guilt, embedding them deeply within its narrative structures.

4.5. Entangled Wounds: PTSD, Survivor's Guilt, and the Literary Imagination of War

Among the most persistent psychological effects of war explored in literature are PTSD and survivor's guilt, both of which reveal the enduring impact of combat on soldier's mental health. The psychological health issues that troops may face during or after relocation are mostly apparent to them. Most frequently, the war trauma is associated with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Other threats to the mental health of the troops might be melancholy, nervousness, irritation, sleeping disorders, somatisation, substance manipulation, detachment, sexual hitches, and correlated indications. At present, the literature shows that these supplementary signs, chiefly nervousness and melancholy, are more common in soldiers with PTSD than those without PTSD (Vogt et al 119). Veterans' personal anguish is addressed with a feeling of social responsibility that is prompted (or extolled) by the dominant military-industrial sector to support the war and its failing tactics under the "support-the-troops" doctrine. The public is discouraged from critically examining the subject of war due to the sense of survivor guilt, instead relying on the more persuasive accounts of those who have experienced it. Aaron's survival guilt stems from the loss of his companion and his inability to take any action, much as Bartle's anguish in Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds*. He is not held responsible for his friend's passing despite the fact that he lives with him.

In an article published in *al-Naqed al-Iraqi* (*the Iraqi Critic*), Hassan characterizes survival guilt as a genuinely terrible sensation that anybody, who survives a catastrophic event that claims the lives of those close to them, might experience. The person begins to wonder: why did I survive when they perished? (Hassan 98). Aaron considers ending his life since it has become meaningless (78), "He just got home from Iraq."/"No way. Was he in the shit?"/ ... "Don't be all ... She said he's a little sensitive" (Scranton 11). This scenario sets up the main narrative of the segment, which is the post-war experiences of Wendy's lover Aaron, an Iraq War veteran who was "traumatized." The novel's painful and horrific ending is this: the characters we have grown to love will be exploited and

thrown away: Dahlia was raped and bound in her own home by Aaron, while Qasim was in a torture chamber. Aaron is the specter of trauma and its effects. This is Scranton's *War Porn*, putting on display the foreboding and inevitable scenery of bloodshed. It questions why we are reading such a book in the first place, and it does its best to make us experience the pain of war.

5. Conclusion

By concentrating on the psychological experience of trauma on the one hand and depersonalizing the suffering of soldiers in *War Porn* and *The Yellow Birds* on the other hand, this essay illustrates the mysterious and baffling aftermath of war. Analysis of Powers and Scranton's novels from the perspective of survival psychology allows us to get a deeper understanding of the characters' conduct in the setting of conflict. Anthropogenic disasters, such as armed conflicts, seem to impact a greater number of people than natural catastrophes. Occasionally, they surpass the duration of the battle and exceed its physical losses. Studying fictional characters from war literature, with a focus on their psychological build-up, can enhance our understanding of war experience and the way it is imagined and staged in American literature.

The military protagonists in these American novels will not feel comfortable until they have a platform to tell their stories and share their past experiences in Iraq. Hence, these novels about the Iraq War merit additional literary analysis and scholarly investigation due to their ability to shed light on the realities of war and its psychological aftereffects. They also tell powerful tales of suffering and have the capacity to alter public opinion about the United States' foreign policy. By challenging readers to confront the often sanitized or abstract portrayals of sanitary conflicts in mainstream media and by presenting personal accounts of war, these novels have the capacity to foster empathy and critical thinking and a deeper understanding of the role of the United States in global conflicts.

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