

Tribhuvan University

**Universality of Traumatic Experiences in *All Quiet on the Western Front* and
*The Yellow Birds***

**Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of Humanities and Social Science, T.U.,
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Degree of
Master of Philosophy in English**

By

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this dissertation entitled “Universality of Traumatic Experiences in *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *The Yellow Birds*” submitted to the Office of the Dean, Faculty of Humanities and Sciences, Tribhuvan University, is my original work. I have acknowledged all ideas and information borrowed from various sources in the course of writing this dissertation.

The results represented herein have not been submitted elsewhere for the award of any degree or for any other purpose. Furthermore, no part of this dissertation has been published in any form prior to this submission. I take full responsibility if any evidence is found contradicting this declaration.

Minarva Shrestha

Letter of Recommendation

This research entitled “Universality of Traumatic Experiences in *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *The Yellow Birds*” has been completed under my supervision by Minarva Shrestha in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Philosophy (M.Phil.) in English. I would like to recommend that this research be examined by an external examiner.

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Anju Gupta
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Approval Letter

This research work entitled “Universality of Traumatic Experiences in *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *The Yellow Birds*” submitted to the Central Department, Tribhuvan University by Minarva Shrestha, has been approved by the undersigned members of the Research Committee.

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Abstract

My dissertation explores the universal nature of war trauma experienced by soldiers. The study presents Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* and Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds*, to unfold the intensity of traumatic experiences on soldiers participating in war from two different timelines. Remarque narrates traumatic experiences of soldiers from the World War I (1914 to 1918) while Powers recounts those of soldiers from the Iraqi War (2003-2011). Through vivid depictions of physical and psychological destruction, these novels show pointless human cost at the face of war. Set in two different wars with almost a century apart, the protagonists Paul Baumer and John Bartle from *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *The Yellow Birds* respectively undergo similar devastating psychological scars unpacking the reality that the essence of war trauma on soldiers remains the same across the world over times. Both novels exhibit the enduring and timeless experience of trauma in terms of soldiers' alienation from the self, their disconnection with civilian life, emotional numbing, survivor's guilt and fragmented narratives in the light of the theoretical framework of trauma studies. Moreover, the explicit depiction of acting out and implicit presentation of working through in both narratives intensify the difficulty of dealing with shell shock and traumatic scars which have remained similar across generations. So, through the lenses of trauma proposed by Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman and Dominick LaCapra, traumatic experiences undergone by soldiers are mapped out in this research work. Through the shared patterns of psychological impact, both novelist Remarque and Powers make a compelling case for understanding trauma as a universal human consequence of organized violence. Both these books share striking similarities in their portrayal of war trauma, dehumanization, psychological fragmentation, desensitization that define soldiers'

bittersweet role of camaraderie. These shared elements highlight on the timeless nature of war's traumatic impact. Both the novels focus on war's universal capacity to annihilate identity enduring the psychological wounds. This dissertation has the power for cross-cultural empathy surpassing languages, uniforms, or even ideologies. This approach can be a radical step towards recognizing the importance of global solidarity and peacebuilding.

Contents

Chapters	Page No.
Declaration	ii
Letter of Recommendation	iii
Approval Letter	iv
Acknowledgement	v
Abstract	vii
Contents	ix
Chapter I: Narratives of Trauma in <i>All Quiet on the Western Front</i> and <i>The Yellow Birds</i>	1-20
1.1 General Overview	1
1.2 War and Consequences in <i>All Quiet on the Western Front</i> and <i>The Yellow Birds</i>	5
1.3 From Shell-Shock to Silence: Paul's War Trauma	9
1.4 Witness, Survivor and Sufferer: Bartle's Trauma Narrative	12
1.5 Problems in <i>All Quiet on the Western Front</i> and <i>The Yellow Birds</i>	15
Chapter II: Theoretical Lenses of Trauma in War Narratives	21-40
2.1 Recognition of Trauma	21
2.2 Critical Echoes of War: Scholarly Reflections	26
2.3 Futility and Dehumanization of Warfare and <i>The Yellow Birds</i>	31
2.4 Manipulation and Failure of Government Agencies	36
Chapter III: Navigating the Intensity of Trauma	41-77
3.1 Mapping out Trauma in <i>All Quiet on the Western Front</i>	41
3.2 Exploring Trauma in <i>The Yellow Birds</i>	49
3.3 Echoes of War Trauma on Soldiers	56
Chapter IV: Conclusion	78-80
Work Cited	81-84

Chapter I: Narratives of Trauma in *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *The Yellow Birds*

1.1 General Overview

As its primary texts, this dissertation examines *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) by Erich Maria Remarque, a German-born novelist, and *The Yellow Birds* (2012) by Kevin Powers, an American novelist and poet. By analyzing these novels, written nearly a century apart, this study seeks to comprehend the traumatic experiences undergone by soldiers from two different wars belonging to two different time periods and explore the similarities in psychological scars and extremity of trauma they go through. In *All Quiet on the Western Front*, the protagonist Paul Bäumer, nineteen years old soldier and his school friends are inspired by patriotic speeches and enlist in the German army but quickly become disillusioned by the atrocities of trench warfare. The daily horrors of war make them witness constant fear and death. As Paul loses his friends one by one, he becomes numb to life resulting his sense of alienation and despair. These similar concerns strongly resemble *The Yellow Birds*, where the protagonist, Private John Bartle, twenty-one-year-old American soldier goes through emotional and psychological blemishes after experiencing the brutality of war. When he loses his fellow soldier Daniel Murph, he is overwhelmed with guilt and trauma and ultimately alienates himself from everyone. The horrifying experiences of war shatter the protagonists completely in both novels and it becomes too heavy for them to carry the psychological ordeal they go through. *All Quiet on the Western Front* depicts the World War I (1914- 1918) and *The Yellow Birds* portrays the Iraq War (2003 to 2011) but the experiences of trauma on both young soldiers as portrayed surpass time and age sharing the same intensity of psychological and emotional toll of war on them.

Even when the world has surpassed today in many sectors with remarkable achievements and progress till date, war has long been a reagent for profound psychological upheaval, leaving indelible marks on the minds of both combatants and civilians. While the weapons and tactics have evolved over the decades, the core human cost which is manifested in trauma, anxiety, depression, and moral injury remains hauntingly consistent. The psychological scars received by those who endure the horrors of war are not limited to a particular era or geography. Tracking down the history from the trenches of World War I to recent prevalent conflicts in the Middle East and Ukraine, the psychological toll of warfare has transcended time, context and space highlighting the universal vulnerability of the human psyche in the face of violence and destruction. World War I marked a turning point in the recognition of war-induced psychological trauma. Linden SC and Jones E write, “World War I witnessed the admission of large numbers of German soldiers with neurological symptoms for which there was no obvious organic cause. This posed a considerable challenge for the military and medical authorities and resulted in active discussion on the etiology and treatment of the disorders” (627). Soldiers returned from the front lines exhibiting symptoms such as uncontrollable tremors, nightmares, emotional numbness and disorientation- many of which align with today’s understanding of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). “Many psychiatrists regarded war as a vast laboratory which would enable them to conduct experiments into mental disorders and the relative influence of constitution and exogenous factors on the development of psychopathology” (Linden SC and Jones E 628). From that time to now, in contemporary warfare, despite advances in military technology and medicine equipment and methods, the psychological consequences remain strikingly similar to those observed during World War I. Veterans returning from Iraq, Afghanistan, and

other conflict zones frequently report symptoms of PTSD, anxiety and depression. However, the understanding of trauma has been more nuanced at the present time. Concepts such as moral injury which means the emotional and psychological damage that results from actions that violate one's ethical beliefs has been a part of studies of trauma and has added depth to our comprehension of soldiers' inner conflicts. Modern veterans also face the challenge of reintegration into civilian life that results into alienation as the civilian world cannot fully comprehend the experiences of war. This disconnection can exacerbate mental health issues, leading to higher rates of homelessness, depression, and suicide. An example can be drawn from the case of a veteran from Iraq War John Bartle, the protagonist of *The Yellow Birds*, who goes through an extreme psychological toll as a soldier from World War I Paul Baumer, the protagonist of *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Both of them are traumatized witnessing the dehumanizing nature of war and find impossible to reintegrate into civilian life and suffer with PTSD.

This study shows that the universal nature of war traumatic experiences emphasizing that psychological responses to war-related stressor such as PTSD, depression and anxiety are observed across diverse cultures and historical periods and beyond boundaries within. The exposure to armed conflict may lead to psychological consequences in the same intensity regardless of cultural or geographical context. However, the literature review on *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *The Yellow Birds* has not shown this universality of trauma. Various works have been done on both texts individually or pairing with other texts. Mapping out the universal nature of trauma in both texts in a comparative level, may provide a better understanding to explore the nature of trauma and its consequences. This dissertation offers a powerful lens through which one can explore the enduring psychological impact of war across

time and context. Though the novels are from nearly a century apart timeline and based on different wars (World War I and Iraq War), they both portray trauma as a universal human response to extreme violence, loss, and moral disintegration. By juxtaposing depictions of trauma from World War I and modern warfare, the study highlights how psychological wounds persist unchanged despite advances in military technology, tactics and medical care. It also integrates literature, psychology, history and trauma theory and shows how literary texts can complement psychological research by capturing subjective, fragmented, and non-linear experiences of trauma that clinical language might miss. Moreover, both novels function as literary testimonies that bring personal pain to public discourse. Analyzing these narratives, one can advance the understanding of how literature serves a medium for processing and communicating trauma.

This study can be taken as affirmation that trauma is not confined to time, nationality, or the specifics of a given war. Soldiers across generation face similar psychological consequences including guilt, dissociation, and post-traumatic stress. The findings might strengthen trauma theory's claim to universal applicability. Moreover, since both novels subvert traditional heroic and patriotic war narratives, highlighting their thematic convergence helps to challenge cultural myths about war as glorious or heroic that can urge readers and scholars to confront the devastating human cost of war.

To sum up, this research work presents a few key implications. First, it aims to contribute to more comparative trauma studies across different cultures and conflicts, encouraging scholars to explore whether similar patterns appear in non-Western war literature. Second, it raises questions about how trauma is remembered and transmitted across generations which, scholars call transgenerational or cultural

trauma. Additionally, by applying trauma theory to two distinct literary periods, the study tests the flexibility and scope of trauma frameworks and encourages refinements or new models that can bridge historical and cultural gaps. In addition, this research work exposes the fragile nature of human mind under violence which remains constant even when weapons and war changes by strongly advocating a more empathetic and humane approach to conflict resolution that leads societies to address the full spectrum of war's consequences and perhaps work toward for its prevention.

1.2 War and Consequences in *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *The Yellow Birds*

All Quiet on the Western Front and *The Yellow Birds* depict World War I (1914 to 1918) and Iraq War (2003 to 2011) respectively. Through the plots, characters and their dialogues, both of these writers seem to have provided what and how the particular war was. Drawing the major references from the real wars, both of these works of fiction seem to be highly convincing since both novels have been able to display the exact scenario of war and its cost. One of the reasons behind such credibility of war context might be the authors and their real-life experiences in the battle field.

Erich Maria Remarque, born in 1898, was drafted into the German army at the age of 18 and served on the Western Front during World War I. He was wounded by a shrapnel in 1917 which removed him from the front lines but his experiences in the trenches deeply affected him which later became the profound foundation of his work. World War I, often referred to as the Great War, was one of the most significant and devastating events in the human history. Fought for around four years which involved over 30 nations, the war resulted in the death of millions of people. The war left an indelible mark on the cultural, psychological, and economic landscapes of the

twentieth century however the most enduring legacy of World War is considered to locate in its psychological impact. Along with the countless number of deaths, soldiers who returned home had high psychological fever. The term “shell shock” was introduced to describe and analyze psychological scars of soldiers which we now recognize as PTSD. This psychological trauma of war could be seen in literature, art and philosophy. Referring to the impact and consequences of this war, so many literary pieces emerged such as *A Farewell to Arms* by Ernest Hemingway, *The Return of the Soldier* by Rebecca West, *Johnny Got His Gun* by Dalton Trumbo, *Regeneration of Trilogy* by Pat Barker, *Birdsong* by Sebastian Faulks etc. along with *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Remarque. All these novels just do not recount horrors of battlefield actions but investigate the psychological scars, moral ambiguities, disillusionment, anti-war sentiment and personal cost of a global catastrophe by dismantling the traditional narratives of heroism. These writings heavily criticize the rigid military hierarchy and blind nationalism preached by Generals and Politicians for sending men to die in senseless battles and using them as machines to fight against machinery weapons while they themselves remain far from the frontier. Referring to the same horror of this war, in the introductory part of the book *World War I*, it is mentioned:

Most murderously efficient of all World War I weaponry was the machine gun, the emblematic military innovation of the age. A tool for industrial-strength killing, aptly described as “concentrated essence of infantry,” the machine gun hugely amplified the firepower of stationery forces and thereby conferred nearly insuperable advantages on the defense. Its withering fire consumed attacking troops wholesale, forcing the fighting on the Western Front into a

grisly deadlock. In the face of such awesome implements of slaughter, 10 million men perished; another 20 million maimed. (Marshall viii)

The machine gun played a transformative and devastating role in World War I, fundamentally reshaping military tactics, trench warfare and casualty rates. The deadly efficiency of machine guns ended the era of open battlefield charges and troops were forced into trenches, leading to long stalemates. And though it has already been more than a century since it ended, the impact might be somehow always there. Indicating the same, Davis, in his article “Experience, Identity, Memory: The Legacy of World War I,” writes “...this war set the pace for the most murderous century in human history, and it continues to matter” (3).

Kevin Powers, born in 1980, enlisted in the U.S. Army at the age of 17 and served as a machine gunner in Iraq from 2004 to 2005, primarily around Mosul and Tal Afar. His firsthand combat experience profoundly shaped his later work especially *The Yellow Birds*. The Iraq War, also known as the Second Gulf War or the U.S Invasion of Iraq, was a prolonged armed conflict that began in March 2003 with the invasion of Iraq by a U.S-led coalition. Though the war, marked by widespread controversy, extensive civilian casualties, long -lasting geopolitical repercussion ended in December 2011, violence and instability continued long afterward. The estimated civilian death was over 200,000 with millions of Iraqis displacement and U.S military death was over 4,400 along with thousands returning soldiers with PTSD, traumatic brain injury, and long-term psychological trauma. According to the *Associated Press*, a total of 4, 419 troops had died in Iraq since the beginning of the 2003 Operation Iraqi Freedom military campaign, including 3,482 combat deaths and 937 non-combat deaths. The news further tells that the record does not include all the military forces who returned from war with wounds and injury which surfaced later as

PTSD. With the view to capture the impact of this war, various literary work was brought to light such as *Spoils* by Brian Van Reet, *Fives and Twenty-Fives* by Michael Pitre, *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* by Ben Fountain, *Redeployment* by Phil Klay along with *The Yellow Birds* by Kevin Powers. All these novels dealt with psychological trauma, moral injury and survivor's guilt, alienation and reintegration into society, critique of U.S. military policy and patriotism etc. to challenge traditional heroic narratives of war and expose the brutal reality of warfare. Criticizing the projection of an individual white male voice to narrate wars in non-Western world, Jennifer Haytock writes:

As the United States faces the aftermath of two wars with and among nonwhite, non- Western populations, American war fiction continues its formal evolution. In one vein is the literature of what Roy Scranton calls the "trauma hero," a tradition he traces from Stendahl and Leo Tolstoy through Ernest Hemingway and Tim O'Brien to Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds*, Phil Klay's *Redeployment* and the movie *American Sniper*, in which the white male soldier goes off to war only to come home having learned bitter lessons that he cannot share. (336 -37)

Haytock demands that American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan should be attended from the perspectives of Iraqi and Afghan civilian with a critique to the trauma hero tradition and appreciates some American authors who have thought of providing enough space to the civilian experiences to represent causes and consequences of violent conflicts.

However, the focus of this study is not on the historical facts of political and economic impact of these two wars nor on the geographical redrawing caused by them nor on the analysis of why these novels do not include the voices of civilians.

So, with the little information provided above about both the wars, I have centered the study on the universal nature of psychological impact on soldiers showcased by both the texts by delimiting other areas of these combats.

1.3 From Shell-Shock to Silence: Paul's War Trauma

All Quiet on the Western Front (1929) by Erich Maria Remarque narrates the journey of a young soldier who enlists as a German soldier in World War I along with his school friends with full of enthusiasm blended with patriotism but soon realizes the destruction of youthful identity and humanity by the trauma of war. Paul Bäumer, the narrator, a 19-year-old German soldier and his schoolmates- Kropp, Muller and Tjaden rest behind the front lines after enduring a heavy fighting on the Western Front of World War I as their first encounter to war under the cruel Corporal Himmelstoss. Over their first good meal in weeks, Paul and his friends bitterly recall how their school master Kantorek convinced them to join the army with his idealistic and glorious ideas of war. Paul remembers, "During drill-time Kantorek gave us long lectures until the whole of our class went, under his shepherding, to the District Commandant and volunteered" (10) but he knows remembering and blaming Kantorek will not help them to survive at the front because the soldiers have already received very deadly experiences not only of trench warfare as continuous shelling and bombing but also of starvation, lice, mud, inadequate medical aids and omniscient presence of death. They even laugh at Kantorek calling them "Iron Youth". When Paul with other fellow soldiers visit Kemmerich, a friend dying in the hospital, Muller wishes to have his boots and checks his watch thinking he may miss to get them. The boots become of a symbol of the brutal reality: they are valuable, durable and necessary for survival. Referring to that, Paul says, "We have lost all sense of other considerations, because they are artificial. Only the facts are real and important for us.

And good boots are scarce” (18). This does not only show how war distorts moral priorities but also unfolds the lack of resources needed for the soldiers. The heart of the novel lies in its graphic and detailed descriptions of life in the trenches—the shelling, hunger, lice, filth, mutilation, and the constant presence of death. Paul and his comrades develop strong bond on shared suffering. Once on the front Paul reunites with older, experienced soldier Stanislaus Katczinsky “Kat” who becomes a fatherly figure to him and he learns how to survive even at the mouth of death from Kat.

The war grinds the soldiers down emotionally, reducing them to mere survivors in a meaningless slaughter. Paul is entangled into emotional and mental strain witnessing the dehumanizing effects. He sees the shelling throwing coffins into the air, dead bodies mixing with the bodies of the living and dying. He describes, “But the shelling is stronger than everything. It wipes out the sensibilities, I merely crawl still farther under the coffin, it shall protect me, though Death himself lies in it” (52). Paul cannot figure out any meaning behind such destruction. He realizes that war has destroyed his generation.

After certain time of his recruitment in the war, Paul is granted a short leave to return home, but the visit to his family and hometown becomes very unsettling for him. He finds himself alienated from civilian life. When he takes out his civilian clothes from the wardrobe and put them on, he feels awkward, “I look at myself in the glass. It is strange sight” (122). He discovers more vividly how people who stay behind cannot grasp what he and soldiers like him have to endure. He also understands how it has been impossible for him to connect to the world he once knew. He narrates, “A terrible feeling of foreignness suddenly rises up in me. I cannot find my way back” (128). His experience in the trench and his short return to his home confirms that the war has severed him from his past life permanently. When his leave

is up, he is sent to a camp on the moors for further training. He is given the duty to guard Russian prisoners of war, with whom he comes to identify and sympathize as fellow beings rather than enemies. He thinks, “A word of command has made these silent figures our enemies; a word of command might transform them into our friends” (142). He might be feeling the futility of war which has started not by soldiers who are fighting and killing each other but by those who are standing at safe places in distant.

Eventually, Paul is sent to the frontier. As he hides in a shell hole waiting for the attack to end, a French soldier falls up on. Paul stabs to kill the soldier but he does not die immediately. As the man dies over the next day, he regrets for killing him and does everything possible to confront him. His guilt for taking the soldier’s life so intense that he finds “the silence is more unbearable than the groans” (163). Due to his injury, he is sent to hospital, which lacks everything excepts highly depressing and frightful scenarios for he gets to see soldiers are dying without an interval. When the war drags on, Paul loses nearly all his friends; Muller, Kropp, Albert and Kat. The gradual death of his fellow soldiers torments him completely. After the death of Kat, Paul is completely devastated. His sheer loneliness and emotional numb can be felt when he utters, “I am very quiet. Let the months and years come, they can take nothing from me, they can take nothing more. I am so alone, and so without hope that I can confront them without fear” (214). And just a month before the agreement of the long-awaited armistice, he is killed. His expression at death, as reported by the army, seems to be peaceful and glad that the end has come.

Written in a linear plot, the novel exposes the bitter reality of how the war not only threatens the lives of soldiers but also robs them of their psychological stability and strength, their future and their sense of self. Rejecting the romanticized notions of

glory, honor and nationalism, Remarque presents it in its emotional realism with the depiction of not only physical hardships but also mental disintegration and alienation. Through the eyes of Paul, Remarque presents the exact detailing of war making it one of the most poignant literary representations of war trauma.

1.4 Witness, Survivor and Sufferer: Bartle's Trauma War Narrative

The Yellow Birds (2012) by Kevin Powers portrays the atrocities of war highlighting the psychological fragmentation and moral burden experienced by a soldier before, during and after the Iraq War. Set in the contemporary 21st century political world, the novel opens with the protagonist, John Bartle, twenty-one-year-old recalling a promise he made to Murph's mother, Daniel Murph-his fellow soldier, three years older than him, before their deployment to Iraq but he had no idea how the comforting promise to bring Murph home safely later becomes a heavy burden. As a part of a U.S. infantry unit, Bartle and Murph, under the command of Sergeant Sterling, are stationed near the fictional town AI Tafari, Iraq which marks chaos, violence and uncertainty of life. It does not take a long time to know for both of them the horrific atmosphere of war which kills people without any measures. He recalls, "The war tried to kill us in the spring" (3). The war is chaotic, brutal and morally confusing. Bartle who had thought war would bring soldiers together, understand that the war compels everyone to focus on their survival only and start to count the number of American soldiers when they die. They want to believe that their fellow soldiers are dying means they are spared from death but later Bartle calls this act as a futile one because he understands that "The war would take what it could get" (4). Witnessing death so frequent and unpredictable, Bartle and Murph both decide to detach themselves with the dehumanizing nature of war. They both involve themselves to commit violent acts losing the morality of their actions under the

command of Sergeant Sterling. They not only get accustomed to kill the enemies but also accept that part of war involves accidentally killing civilians and watching innocent people die though they do not possess any connection to the war.

One evening, when Murph learns that his girlfriend is breaking up with him, he does not respond the news with anger or sadness but with resignation that he can do nothing about it. When a colonel expresses pride and arrogance at the war to be filmed by a reporter and a camera, he announces that the soldiers are about to take part in a very important mission in the nearby orchard, Bartle notices that the colonel seems unconcerned about the upcoming disaster and destruction which may cost the lives of soldiers.

When the battle takes place, they are suddenly attacked while marching towards the orchard and one of the American soldiers gets fatally wounded and dies. This deeply affects Murph and Bartle but they do not have any choice except accepting. Bartle, who thought that a dying soldier might say something before he closes his eyes forever, notices that death is inherently solitary. He says, “I realized he had been still for a while and he was dead. No one spoke” (119). Murph gets trouble for feeling relief at seeing that soldier die instead of him. Though Bartle tries to console him, he shivers with pain and guilt. This part of the novel marks the beginning of Murph’s mental instability. Even after that situation, they see deaths in multiple numbers and Bartle at a point realizes that he must mentally abandon his memories of home and his previous civilian identity but Murph, on the other hand, becomes unable to comprehend such deadly scenarios and gives up on himself. He isolates with everyone and everything which Bartle notices and just tries to get in touch with life through acts of kindness and compassion shown by a doctor. But when the doctor is suddenly killed in a mortar attack, Murph goes through a complete

emotional breakdown and deserts station which brings his death in a very brutal way by some vengeful locals. Discovering the mutilated body of Murph, Bartle is devastated and guilt-ridden for not being able to keep the words. Instead of reporting it through official military channels, he along with Sterling covers up the brutal death of Murph by throwing his body into a river. He knows how Murph's mother has to suffer after receiving this painful truth and he thinks that his such act will spare her.

However, as a tormented soul, he struggles with psychological instability and guilt. Overwhelmed by his fellow soldier's death and his promise with Murph's mother to bring him back alive, he writes her a letter. He knows it is wrong but he seems to be in dilemma to consider which act is morally correct and which is not.

When Bartle along with other American soldiers leave Iraq and return home, he suffers more with guilt for Murph's death. Up on returning to his hometown, he also realizes that his atrocious experiences of war cannot be comprehended by civilians and it is also impossible for him to reconnect with his life before experiences in Iraq. He gets more traumatized when he is celebrated for his participation in a noble cause as it has been defined. He knows very well that he cannot share the emotions of guilt, pain and grief with anyone which makes him feel isolated and displaced in his own home and life. Upon discovering the truth about Murph's death, he is imprisoned for a few years which in fact gives him peace in the absence of social interactions. Following the long talk with Murph's mother, he finally resigns himself to what has happened and seeks for a tranquil life followed by his release.

Written in a more nonlinear plot, the novel is less about the battlefield and more about what happens after the war. It presents the internal collapse of a soldier grappling with guilt, trauma, and a shattered sense of self. Rather than focusing on battlefield heroism or strategy, Kevin Powers explores memory, trauma and guilt by

illustrating how soldiers bear moral injuries that are harder to heal than physical wounds along with the depiction of dehumanizing and destructive nature of war.

1.5 Problems in *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *The Yellow Birds*

The effect of war is generally picturized in terms of death, bloodshed, wounded combatants and non-combatants, malnutrition, illness and disability etc. These are direct images resulted from war but while talking about the effects, they are both physically and psychologically alike. Along with physical consequences of war, there are emotional upshots. When we mention about psychological effects of any war, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression and anxiety are some of the commonly heard terms. The psychological impact of war is in fact unfathomable because trauma is an individual experience and various factors contribute to the intensity of anyone's psychological suffering. And war literature, in this context, can be taken to play a pivotal role to examine the force of psychological scars left on combatants and non-combatants which are, most of the time, more destructive than physical scars. In fact, war narration emerged after the end of World War I. Regarding this, Jiayi Wang writes:

War narration, with a thematic reference, refers to a series of significance. For a long period after the end of World War I, the shadow of the war lingered, and the impact of the war on people's lives gradually made writer and artists realized that war was not the "great war" portrayed in political propaganda. The soldiers deeply scarred by the traumas of war, unable to reintegrate into society, also promoted these who hadn't experienced the war to recognized its brutality and to begin contemplating its meaning. (95)

So, it is basically after World War I, serious concern began to voice for voiceless suffering and pain given by war and its atrocities. In this regard, Pokharel states: "At

the very turn of the 21st century, as trauma theory became prevalent in literature, theorists like Caruth, Erll, Lacapra, Fellman, Daub etc. came forward with theory and theoretical approach to deal with literary works which would be written about the wars and conflicts and which have engulfed the 20th century very rigorously” (48). It is an undeniable fact that through different war related writings, the psychological impact has been understood more deeply. In reference to the same, Hunt writes, “Literary sources can provide psychologists with rich data from which to develop and test psychological theories. Apart from validating theory, it provides an opportunity to explore responses to war trauma in other times and culture” (489). As the proposed dissertation also attempts to examine and explore traumatic experiences of two different soldiers belonging to two completely different time periods, it sounds logical to start with some specific research on these two texts.

Since the publication of these both novels, they have been examined and analyzed through the lens of Trauma, Marxism and Existentialism. The article “*All Quiet on the Western Front*-Marxist Approach” by Prestwick House views the novel highlighting on themes such as class struggle and the exploitation of soldiers by those in power. Similarly, the young soldier John Bartle and his friend Murphy, in *The Yellow Birds* are working -class men who are recruited into war due to capitalist interests. Al-Khazraji states, “Through the experiences of the characters, it portrays the disconnection between political leaders who make decisions about war and the soldiers who bear the brunt of its consequences” (1090). Likewise, the concept of existentialism and futility of war are focused on these texts. According to Modris Ekstein in his article “*All Quiet on the Western Front* and the Fate of a Generation”, the novel brutally shows senselessness of devastation of war since it provides only disillusionment and despair of a generation of young soldiers. Ekstein claims, “*All*

Quiet clearly triggered the explosion of war material in 1929 and unleashed a bitter and acrimonious debate on the essence of the war experience” (346). Jiayi Wang too speaks up about the novel through the same perspective and says, “*All Quiet on the Western Front* is a war narrative literary work born precisely in this context, depicting the cruelty of war and the trauma it inflicts on humanity through the author’s firsthand war experiences” (95). Highlighting the atrocities of war and how soldiers become the victims of it, Alosman and Omar in their article “The Making of War Victims in Kevin Powers” write, “American soldiers are innocent youngsters, Bartle is nineteen and Murph is eighteen, whose circumstances have placed them in a hostile place: they are the blameless casualties of war” (7). The soldiers participating in war are compelled to take part in the act of hostility and the question whether they wish to get involved in such act does not even have any space. In the article “Critique of the Cruelty of the Iraq War: The Symbolism in Kevin Power’s *The Yellow Birds*”, Aihua Chen along with other two authors combinely write:

Although everyone knows that killing is wrong, war proves to be the great exception to this rule that leads people to celebrate killing instead of condemning it. Even through this moral inconsistency deeply troubles Bartle and condemns him to solitude, by the end of the novel he is forced to accept that he can do nothing to change the moral weight his actions since these actions have already been committed and belong to the past. (481)

Although killing is universally seen as wrong, war creates an exception where killing is not only permitted but praised and this contradiction deeply affects Bartle, who feels isolated and haunted by guilt. Thus, the first and foremost analysis on these texts heavily lies on the psychological toll of soldiers eventually becoming traumatized ones.

The psychological effects of war and how intolerable it gets for soldiers are expressed in both novels. Regarding this aspect for *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Roche suggests, “Paul Baumer’s numbness is not mere stoicism but evidence of emotional death brought on by repeated exposure to violence” (191). The way that the psychological toll of this soldier is shown captures the disillusionment of a generation brought on by war, when the idea of courage and patriotism crumbles beneath the weight of trauma. Similarly, observing the psychological disorientation of the major character in this novel, Ulbrich suggests that Remarque presents a version of manhood which is shattered and dismantled by the psychological trauma and dehumanizing experiences of warfare. In the words of Ulbrich, “Remarque’s depiction of male soldiers reflects a crisis in masculine identity where the psychological demands of war clash with cultural expectations of stoic, heroic manhood” (305). The concept of war and its brutality breaks down the strong masculinity into pieces as argued by Ulbrich. In a comparative study done by J.J. Waham, the depiction of war in Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* and Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, focuses on trauma, disenchantment and the human cost of conflict. He explains that both of these novels explore and examine the psychological rift of war but Remarque focuses more heavily on the inner trauma and loss of innocence. According to Waham, “Hemingway’s characters tend to be more philosophical and action-driven, while Remarque’s protagonist reflects the helplessness and emotional fragmentation caused by prolonged exposure to trench warfare” (15). Highlighting the psychological toll and PTSD in soldiers, Dhaliwal and Somveer in the article “Trauma in Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*” write, “Through Baumer, Remarque discovers the disillusionment that soldiers face, capturing the enormous psychological cost of war. The narrative conveys how war erodes the human essence,

leaving troops emotionally desensitized and disconnected from their pre-war existence and their fundamental sense of self” (97).

Through *The Yellow Birds*, Kevin Powers presents American soldiers as victims who have been morally and emotionally damaged rather than as aggressors. John Bartle’s fragmented narrative and complex internal monologues project how deeply he is traumatized. According to the article of Aziz and Wijaya, “he copes with trauma by emotionally detaching from reality” (2). The novel tries to reframe soldiers not as heroic figures or strong combatant who can triumph over physical and emotional pain but as victims who are shaped by trauma, guilt and moral disillusionment. Alosman and Omar argue, “Kevin Powers portrays soldiers like Bartle as emotional casualties of war, rather than tradition heroes, revealing the psychological burden they endure” (13). The novel focuses on trauma shaping the behavior of soldiers. Bartle’s emotional detachment, fragmentated narrative and guilt show how war shatters identity and mental health. “Although Bartle is at home, he remains preoccupied by the horrible scenes of death he has witnessed in Iraq. Images of death still dwell in his mind. He seems distracted from the present . . .” (Alosman and M.M. 146). Bartle’s attempts to withdraw emotionally and suppress his guilt can be interpreted as a psychological strategy to maintain internal balance amid the moral chaos of war but he fails to do so time and again.

Thus, it can be concluded from examining the various studies of these novels that the majority of critics have read them in-depth within their own literary and historical contexts. Disorientation, alienation, and disappointment have also been the main topics of numerous research publications, either written alone or in conjunction with other literature. Comparing the universality of war trauma as it is experienced by troops in these two novels across different historical eras and geographical locals,

however, has not been the subject of any significant scholarly investigation. In actuality, two soldiers from two distinct conflict eras separated by nearly a century experience similar levels of anguish and suffering. Therefore, by identifying a common psychological pattern across troops, this trauma-based analytical study aims to demonstrate how battle trauma crosses cultural, technological and historical borders. Through the application of theoretical frameworks envisioned by Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman and Dominick LaCrapa, this work seeks to uncover common traumatic experiences of soldiers across different historical eras.

Chapter II: Theoretical Lenses of Trauma in War Narratives

2.1 Recognition of Trauma

Deriving from the Greek word meaning 'wound', the term 'trauma' was first used in English in the seventeenth century in the field of medicine which referred to a physical injury as a result of an external agent. The general concept of this term remained limited to any physical injury. According to the early editions of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the entries for the terms such as trauma, traumatic, and traumatism cite from sources concerning physical wounds. But the broader concept was introduced when it was linked with psychic condition in 1895 by Popular Science Monthly as a morbid nervous condition. Regarding this, Roger Luckhurst writes, "This is an early indication of the drift of trauma from the physical to the mental realm that would start taking place in the late nineteenth century" (13). Trauma is defined as an extremely upsetting or unpleasant event that surpasses a person's capacity for coping, resulting in feelings of powerlessness, a weakened sense of self, and emotional or psychological suffering. Cathy Caruth in her work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* defines, "In its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (11).

A traumatic experience is in fact a disruption to our day-to-day life since this experience may result in anxiety, depression, emotional instability, nightmares, fatigue, withdrawal, etc. It is, that's why, a psychological wound rather than physical wound. Caruth mentions the words of Freud:

But what seems to be suggested by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is that the wound of the mind-the breach in the mind's experience of time, self,

and the world- is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that,.....is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be known and is therefore not available to conscious until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor. (3-4)

Freund contends that the linear logic of injury and recuperation does not apply to psychological trauma. Instead, trauma persists, frequently preventing integration into conscious life, and then resurfaces in disruptive and involuntary ways, compelling the survivor to again face it through fragmented memories, compulsions, and dreams.

Over the course of more than a century, the idea of trauma theory gradually came into being. As an interdisciplinary framework, trauma theory is a means of researching and comprehending how individuals who have gone through extremely traumatic and upsetting events, such as war, abuse, or significant natural catastrophes. This framework investigates what happens when someone has an extremely harrowing or overwhelming event and their mind is unable to cope with the suffering. The trauma model aims to explain why survivors are unable to comprehend or recall the event completely, as well as how distressing memories and emotions can resurface later in life as anxiety, dreams or other physical or mental symptoms. Freud defines such anxiety, dreams or other emotional responses as psychic trauma which generally originates in early childhood and later involves experiences that engulf the individual's capacity to integrate the experience consciously, leading to repression with symptoms and this has to be studied. According to him, the symptoms of hysteria are determined by certain experiences on the patient which have operated in a traumatic way. Freud defined trauma with the connection of upsetting childhood events but later refined views suggesting that trauma is not just about past events but about the mind's failed attempts to master them. He writes:

It may happen that someone gets away, apparently unharmed, from the spot where he has suffered a shocking accident, for instance a train collision. In the course of the following weeks, however, he develops a series of grave psychical and motor symptoms, which can be ascribed only to his shock or whatever else happened at the time of the accident. He has developed a “traumatic neurosis.” (84)

Therefore, Freud’s revised definition of trauma refers to the experience’s invisible repercussions as well as the progression from an incident to its repression to its recurrence. Cathy Caruth, a notable person in this discipline, developed a more allusions. She argues, “What returns to haunt the victim, these stories tell us, is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known” (6). According to her, when someone has a very upsetting experience, they might not completely understand it at the moment, but later on, the memory of it may resurface in unexpected ways, such as dreams, silence, or difficult-to-narrate experiences. Therefore, the study of trauma can be the study of traumatic experiences as they are portrayed in literature, culture, and society, particularly when the traumatic event is not completely understood at the time but resurfaces later through flashbacks, repetition, or narrative gaps. She further contends, “Trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures: not as a simple understanding of the past, but as an experience that is paradoxically speaking through the wound of survival” (11). It has thus been utilized in the fields of psychology, psychoanalysis, literature, cultural studies, history, and philosophy to recognize the ways in which traumatic experiences impact people, communities, and cultures, especially through memory, language, and representation. This theory continues to be an essential framework for examining memory, narrative, identity, and healing in the face of overwhelming

experience since it provides strong tools for comprehending how people and communities process and portray suffering. She argues, “The impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent return” (8). As a core part of her trauma theory, it resists clear understanding and keeps returning in indirect ways. Machel Balaev has additionally described it as literary and cultural interpretive approach that highlights the incomprehensibility of catastrophic events and how they shatter identity, memory, and narrative. “Trauma causes a disruption and reorientation of consciousness, but the values attached to this experience are influenced by a variety of individual and cultural factors that change over time” (Balave 4). Trauma, being beyond physical harm, also refers to the condition of loss of control, powerlessness and terror, Judith Herman, another influential figure in trauma studies, claims, “Psychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless. At the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force” (33). As elaborated by her, trauma occurs when an individual is overwhelmed by fear and helplessness and cannot escape or protect themselves and to banish them from consciousness, such events are ignored, denied or silenced, both by individuals and society. Her main contention regarding trauma is that psychological trauma is a social and political problem that is closely related to power and silence rather than just being a personal, individual ailment. She stresses that traumatic events can destroy a person’s sense of self, trust, and capacity for connection building, particularly those involving interpersonal violence or conflict. Dominick LaCapra, another influential contributor in trauma theory, views trauma as an incident or experience that surpasses the victim’s ability to comprehend and assimilate it. He sees it in the context of history, memory and representation and he places more emphasis on an dealing with it sympathetically than on intellectually comprehending the

distinctions between ‘acting out’ and ‘working through’. LaCapra writes, “Acting out is a compulsive repetition of traumatic experience without critical reflection, whereas working through involves a critical engagement that allows for a transformation of trauma and a movement beyond it” (31). According to him, reliving the trauma in an uncontrollable and compulsive manner imprisons the individual in the terrible event, preventing them from thinking back on it or developing new perspectives. However, with time, a traumatized person engages in storytelling, meaning -making, and mourning to face up to terrible experiences instead of ignoring or passively reliving

Extending the concept of trauma from personal to cultural, Jeffrey Alexander, another prominent figure in trauma studies, approaches it as a part of collective memory and public culture. He claims, “The cultural construction of collective trauma is fuelled by individual experiences of pain and suffering, but it is the threat to collective rather than individual identity that defines the suffering at stake” (2). Since trauma always starts with actual people going through pain such as war troops, genocide victims, or disaster survivors, individual suffering can serve as the starting point. These individual experiences then serve as the emotional raw materials for the communal story. Thus, cultural trauma encompasses not only the experiences of individuals but also the way in which these events are perceived as posing a threat to the identity or integrity of a whole group.

At its core level, trauma theory aims to study the psychological impact of trauma, note the difficulties of representing trauma in language or narrative, assess how trauma disrupts time, memory and identity and analyses and understands how collective trauma impacts societies and culture.

2.2 Critical Echoes of War: Scholarly Reflections

Erich Maria Remarque *All Quiet on the Western Front* offers a raw depiction of trench warfare, emphasizing the futility and brutality of war. It criticizes the nationalist ideologies that exalt fighting and its romanticism. Some critics argue that it is a postwar perspective because it was written nearly a decade after World War I. “...All Quiet is more a comment on the postwar mind, on the postwar view of the war, than an attempt to reconstruct the reality of the trench experience” (Ekstein 351). The story examines how young soldiers lose their humanity and innocence through the voice of Paul Baumer, the protagonist. The narrative explores the horrors of war, the alienation soldiers experience from civilian life and the psychological wounds that endure even after they return home. The novel was a commercial success, and an immediate bestseller when it was published in 1929. Originally written in German (German: *Im Westen nichts Neues*), it was translated into English after around 3 months of its publication and the following year was adapted into a movie which also became an Oscar winning Hollywood film. *All Quiet on the Western Front* has been recognized as one of the most authentic and powerful anti-war novels ever written and lauded for raw realism, emotional honesty and detached tone. However, the Nazi regime banned and destroyed the book in 1933, labelling it “degenerate literature,” as it was criticized for weakening patriotism and depicting German soldiers as disheartened. Referring to the same historical record, Richard Nelsson in his article published in the newspaper *The Guardian* writes:

All Quiet’s sense of empathy for a putative enemy did not find favour with the German Nazi party and in December 1930 filmgoers were attacked at several early showings of the movie in Germany. When the Nazis came to power in 1933, the book was banned, along with the rest of Remarque’s works, and it

became one of the most common books destroyed in the infamous Nazi book burnings.

Though the author clearly states in the preface that it is not intended to accuse anyone or confess his own experience, the novel was highly criticized by the Nazis and destroyed too. Talking about its controversy Eksteins writes:

It provoked a feverish controversy between those who claimed that it was an accurate representation of the war experience of 1914-18, portraying the utter futility of war, and those who denounced it as propaganda and an irreverent commercial exploitation of the Great War. Ironically, despite the intended focus of this heated debate, both the novel and the response which it elicited were more an emotional expression of postwar disillusionment and distress than a contribution to the understanding of the actual war experience. (60)

The novel sparked intense debate from the realistic portrayal of World War I emphasizing the absurdity of war to criticism of it as a way of making money but the book was more about expressing the emotional pain and disappointment soldier went through than anything else.

Later in mid-20th century, the novel was applauded for its narrative technique and psychological realism. The fragmented, nonlinear, and static nature of trench warfare appears to be exhibited through the narrative technique, which is very deep and emotional. Paul Baumer presented intimacy and immediacy as a first-person narrator, which was seen as the primary angle to comprehend the alienation and loss of self-caused war. The novel's use of the narration conveys to readers the sense of ruthlessness and futility of war. Remarque attempts to give the reader a sense of what soldiers go through and the psychological fever they must endure, even though trauma as an experience may not be entirely explained in words. "It is not possible to portray

emotional reality in words, Remarque describes how people who have not experienced war cannot understand war; he does this through his treatment of civilians in the novel, particularly when Paul is at home on leave” (Hunt 490).

The novel is also admired for the portrayal of shell shock which later identified as PTSD and Paul is regarded not as a German soldier but as a universal soldier figure. It is believed that contemporary scholars use trauma theory to comprehend a story of unimaginable terror in which the boundaries of representation in trauma literature are mirrored by the many failures or collapses of language. Additionally, the complete absence of women in the war site has been criticized as a deliberate choice to emphasize the masculinized environment of war with the little reference to women.

Kevin Power’s 2012 debut novel *The Yellow Birds* also has garnered significant critical attention of its poignant depiction of that war and its aftermath. “It is a beautiful and horrifying trance of a book, as Powers takes us again and again to a dream-like battlefield where unimaginable cruelties are inflicted upon combatants and civilians alike” (Tobar). The narrative centers on John Bartle and his commitment to protect fellow soldiers Daniel Murphy covering issues of guilt, pain, and the consequences of war. The novel delves into destructive nature of war and its brutality, mental and emotional struggles soldiers face, both during combat and upon returning home. “This is a perennial problem in trying to describe those experiences that relatively few shares: war, madness, extreme violence or suffering, spiritual visions- all of these are only like themselves. The story’s non-linear structure mirrors the disorientation and fragmented memories associated with PTSD” (Burnside). Powers attempts to project the deadly scenario of war with the focus on the exact nature of war i.e. war does not spare anyone and takes away life from everyone whenever and

however it wants. Fahmi AI Khazraji writes, “Powers explores the repercussions of war on civilians, particularly in regions like the Iraqi civilian. The loss of innocent lives and the destruction caused by conflict highlight the human cost of political decisions made in distant capitals” (1090). Although some critics contend that Powers’ use of poetic language occasionally overshadows the story, Powers uses it to portray the agony of war. It is thought to be difficult to extrapolate the effects of such brutality and insanity. Beyond its obvious plot, the novel can be studied to reveal its underlying meanings, literary devices, cultural settings, and philosophical issues. The narrator’s narrative in nonlinear form reflects how trauma messes with memory and perception. His terrible flashbacks display the symptoms of PTSD and the inability to articulate traumatic experiences has been a central tenet in trauma theory. Written in an autobiographical tone, the novel presents the contemporary discourse on war offering to explore the human cost of conflict both on an individual and societal level. “Moreover, ...the choice of first-person narration in *The Yellow Birds* adds a distinctive layer to the study. Understanding how the protagonist’s subjective perspective shapes the narrative contributes to the broader discourse on the role of individual voices in portraying the collective experiences of war (Khazraji 1087). The moral collapse of troops under stress is also explored in the book, particularly in relation to Bartle’s concealing of the truth and his culpability in Murph’s death. When war occurs, it demands everything from a soldier, even the humanity and when it happens, every sense of humanity is dismantled. “The book had given him (Powers) a way of illustrating some of the questions raised by his time in Iraq-not least how to retain your humanity when sacrificing it might be the only way that you could survive” (Flood). When someone is in war, he may have to be indifferent as much as possible, otherwise he may lose everything before he loses his life. Pointing to the

same indifference and callousness of the death and destruction, the act may be described as an emotional distance necessary for their psychological survival. The novel can also be seen as deconstruction of patriotic narrative. Avoiding glorification of war, it focuses on survival, fear and psychological decay but such destruction has not been the matter of concern for political leaders. Targeting the political force, Khazraji argues:

Kevin Powers' novel encompasses several political dimensions, reflecting the broader context of the conflicts in which the characters are embroiled. The novel implicitly critiques the decision-making processes that lead to war and the policies guiding military engagements. Through the experiences of the characters, it portrays the disconnect between political leaders who make decisions about war and the soldiers who bear the brunt of its consequences.

(1090)

Powers, through the character of Bartle and his experiences in combat, exposes the decision-making processes in the political arena since the war does not make sense and Bartle grapples with the futility of war in which he is involved. The confusion shown by Bartle actually raises questions regarding the imposition of war by political leaders. The novel also opposes the portrayal of a conventional masculinity. It defies stereotypical depictions of masculinity and imposes emotional restraint with internal damage while showcasing the emotional link between John Bartle and Daniel Murph. "Powers has given us a highly sensitive and perceptive portrayal of men at war: the mysterious, vulnerable Murph and the brutal but enormously damaged Sterling are wonderfully delineated..." (Burnside). The sense of insensitive nature of male figures who are emotionally robust and unaffected by feelings and pressures have been exposed as so-called characters possessed by soldiers. They are portrayed as sensitive,

empathetic, and fragile individuals who occasionally lose control of their weakest traits and weep like infants. The novel was adopted in a screening version too in 2017, five years later of its publication. Though the novel received widespread acclaim and several prestigious awards such as Guardian First Book Award 2012 and PEN/Hemingway Award for Debut Novel 2013, the film adaptation of it could get only a limited box office impact.

In both texts, through the lens of trauma, it can be noticed psychological fragmentation, narrative structure and the trauma aesthetic, silence and inability to communicate, memory, guilt or survivor's burden as shared themes along with anti-war projection. Analysis on both texts reveals how war literature across different historical periods explores the psychological scars of combat. Though separated by nearly a century and set in different conflicts —World War I and Iraq War, respectively —both novels portray the psychological breakdown and disintegration of the soldier's psyche and the alienation brought by wartime experiences.

2.3 Futility and Dehumanization of Warfare

All Quiet on the Western Front presents the psychological destruction of the soldier's identity through mechanized warfare as one of the central issues. Remarque portrays World War I as a brutal force that robs young men of their humanity and emotional integrity rather than a place of valor. Through the character of Paul Baumer, and his horrifying experiences in the battle field, the author attempts to show the intensity of trauma on soldiers as they witness the real nature of war and realize how war snatches everything from them. Paul as the narrator voices the fear, confusion, pain, nervousness and then numbness of soldiers viewing the destructive scenario of war all around. The novel presents war not as a roadmap to glory, heroism and national honor, but as a senseless machine that demands and devour human life

and spirit without any purpose. The continuous death becomes so pointless that Paul starts to contemplate why war is happening. He says:

For us lads of eighteen they out to have been mediators and guides to the world of maturity, the world of work, of duty, of culture, of progress-to the future. We often made fun of them and played jokes on them, in our hearts we trusted them. The idea of authority, which they represented, as associated in our mind with greater insight and a more humane wisdom. But the first death we saw shattered this belief. We had to recognize that our generation was more to be trusted than theirs. They surpassed us only in phrases and in cleverness. The first bombardment showed us our mistakes, and under it the world as they had taught it to us broke in pieces (11).

The passage captures a crucial moment of their disillusionment since the young soldiers' experiences in the trenches had shown them how horrific a war can be despite its pointlessness. Their faith in the wisdom of the elder generation is destroyed by the deadly realities of the battlefield, which include bombings and fatalities. The ideals and values taught to them in school fall apart in the face of violence. The war causes the loss of innocence of those soldiers who once had big dreams and purpose for progress. Paul further reflects, "We loved our country as much as they: we went courageously into every action; but also, we distinguished the false from true, we had suddenly learned to see. And we saw that there was nothing of their world left. We were all at once terribly alone; and alone we must it through" (12). His contemplation signals the cynicism and sets the tone for the novel's anti-war attitude. This stance is exhibited in the novel not just through Paul's thought but also through conversations, observations and symbolic moments. They share dialogues regarding it, "It's queer, when one thinks about it", says Kropp, 'we are here to protect our fatherland. And the

French are over there to protect their fatherland. Now who's in the right?' 'Perhaps both', say I without believing it." (150). This part of the novel presents how the soldiers participating in war are not convinced with what they are doing since they cannot relate such activities with any meaning. When Albert shows his belief that war occurs when one country badly offends another, Tjaden quotes, "A country? I don't follow. A mountain in Germany cannot offend a mountain in France. Or a river, or a wood, or a field of wheat" (151). The view Tjaden puts forward appears naive but it symbolically questions the logic of war by revealing its capricious and manufactured nature and grasping a profound truth i.e. nature is unaffected by conflict, and the concept of war is based on ideologies created by those in positions of power and politics rather than on necessity or natural enmity.

Along with the futility of war, the novel depicts the dehumanizing and destructive nature of war throughout. The horror the comrades observe, the noise they hear and terror they feel are overwhelming. Paul describes, "The air becomes acrid with the smoke of the guns and the fog. The fumes of powder taste bitter on the tongue. The roar of the guns makes our lorry stagger, the reverberation rolls raging away to the rear, everything quakes. Our faces change imperceptibly" (41). The situation of the trenches makes him realize that how uncertain the life is which is enveloped with the bombardment everywhere. One of the most graphic and harrowing scenes of the warfare can be noticed when Paul narrates the front-line condition describing the corpse-rats with whom the soldiers have to fight to save a small piece of bread and cheese they have got to eat inside the trenches, fight against the constant shellfire coming from outside and bear the heavy stench of death spreading everywhere around. In the words of the narrator:

During the day we loaf about and make war on the rats. Ammunition and hand grenades become more plentiful. We overhaul the bayonets- that is to say, the ones that have a saw on the blunt edge. In the next sector some of our men were found whose noses were cut off and their eyes poked out with their own sawbayonets. Their mouths and noses were stuffed with sawdust so that they suffocated. (78)

The battle Paul and his friends are fighting does not seem to be only with the soldiers from another side but also with the rats, with the hunger and boredom they are living with. The novel displays the disturbing contrast between the dull routines of trench life and the horrific violence of war. The gruesome description of mutilated comrades with their gouged eyes, disfigured faces and sawdust stuffed mouths illustrates the extreme dehumanization and senseless cruelty that define the battlefield.

The Yellow Birds aligns with the same attitude of absurdity and destructive nature of war as expressed by *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Powers' *The Yellow Birds* also portrays war as senseless, disjointed and stripped of coherent purpose or justification. The picture of war *The Yellow Bird* presents is through the portrayal of John Bartle along with Daniel Murph. It narrates the story of how war, in general, destroys everything without any meaningful reasons. Both Bartle and Murphy are thrown into a conflict they do not comprehend. Killing and fighting simply become a part of military service in uncharted territory for ambiguous objectives. The very first line where John quotes, "The war tried to kill us in the spring" (3) removes human agency entirely, making 'war' itself a futile force imposing upon the characters. It reflects how death in war does not follow any logic and how war itself disregards life all around. He further says. "It's impossible to identify the cause of anything, and I began to see the war as a big joke, for how cruel it was..." (155). Calling war, a

“joke” is not the outcome of humor but dark irony Bartle is trying to reveal. He does not laugh with the reference of “joke” but recognizes the grotesque and absurd nature of war and whatever he is enduring due to war with no specific and justifiable objective. In addition to this viewpoint, the violence Powers reveals about war chills us to our core. He convinces us of the severity of war by narrating every detail of the devastation it causes through Bartle’s voice. Bartle narrates, “The war had killed thousands by September. Their bodies lined the poked avenues at irregular intervals. They were hidden in alleys, were found in bloating piles in the troughs of the hills outside the cities, the faces puffed and green, allergic now to life. The war had tried its best to kill us all: man, woman and child” (4). The imagery of decaying bodies scattered across cities and hills underscores the scale of death and suffering caused by war. The expression “allergic now to life” conveys the furious rejection of life irrespective of its identity. The unending misery of war is clearly visible when Bartle finds Murph’s body following a rigorous search. He harrowingly narrates:

We found Murph, finally, covered in a patch of lifeless hyacinth, resting motionless in the shade of the grass and low branches. ...He was broken and bruised and cut and still pale except for his face and hands, and now his eyes had gouged out, the two hollow sockets looking like red angry passages to his mind. His throat had been cut nearly through...His ears were cut off. His nose cut off, too. He had been imprecisely castrated. (206)

Murph’s mutilated body reflects the immeasurable degree of cruelty inflicted during war. His body is not just dead but desecrated crossing every amount of extremity war can offer. The novel provides a very unsettling depiction of the material and symbolic devastation brought about by war, highlighting the harsh reality that conflicts turn people into objects of hatred and brutality.

2.4 Manipulation and Failure of Governmental Agencies

All Quiet on the Western Front can be discussed from perspectives of absurdity and institutional apathy. Governmental organizations and military leaders come out as needlessly bureaucratic and unconcerned with the suffering of soldiers. When Paul returns to his home on a short leave, complete lack of concern by military authorities regarding the condition of soldiers like Paul is depicted. He expresses, “On the way back from the barracks a loud voice calls out to me. Still lost in thought I turn round and find myself confronted by a Major. ‘Can’t you salute?’ he blusters” (121). There is a soldier who has returned home being completely worn out due to the war and he is scolded for missing a proper and timely salute to the authority which hints clearly how the system fails to integrate the situation. He further informs the Major, “I explain to him that I arrived on leave only an hour or two since, thinking that he would then trot along. But he gets even more furious...” (121). The indifference of the Major disregarding the possible situation of war veterans connects the bureaucratic absurdity and how the people in power ignore the pain and complexities of common soldiers. Similarly, Kantorek, the teacher of those young boys, represents the older generation that romanticized war and pressurized young men into enlisting with the song of heroism and bravery but the younger generation ultimately discover the horrifying reality of combat that demands nothing but destruction. The school, as depicted by Kantorek, serves as a symbol of ideological manipulation and its failure as it prepares young men not for life, but for death in service of the state. In a comparative study between *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *Flags of Our Fathers*, Smith-Casanueva mentions the same issue:

The dissonance between the official war narrative and the soldiers’ experience first becomes evident as Baumer recalls Kantorek, the schoolmaster,

persuading the boys to join the army. Here, the myth of a unified national interest is challenged as Baumer remarks on the divide between the older generation of authority figures, as embodied by Kantorek, who joyously supported the war effort and the young soldiers who fought and died in it. (4)

The representative voice of Paul Baumer subverts the prevalent war narratives of soldiers doing a valiant and noble duty to the nation by portraying war as a complete procession of suffering and death. Such brutal realities of war he and his fellow soldiers encounter destroy every sense of patriotism.

The Yellow Birds, also carries the same issue but not as directly as in *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Powers shows the treatment given to soldiers like Bartle and Murph as disposable units within a faceless, hierarchical institution. They count the deaths in such a way that it seems they have been sent only to die, solely to die and they will not be remembered after certain time of death. Bartle narrates, “It seems absurd now that we saw each death as an affirmation of our lives. That each one of those deaths belonged to a time and that therefore that time was not ours. We didn’t know the list was limitless” (13). Moreover, when Murph goes missing and his mutilated body is discovered, the institutional response is only procedural but not emotional. His death is treated as just another operational failure. Bartle does not see his fellow soldier’s death as meaningful or heroic but as senseless, and ignored, just a casualty of institutional indifference rather than patriotic glory. Bartle, at the brutal death of Murph, reflects what would happen after his fellow soldier’s death. He says:

It (the body of Murph) would land in Dover, and someone would receive it, with a flag, and the thanks of a grateful nation, and in a moment of weakness his mother would turn up the lid of the casket and see her son, Daniel Murphy, see what had been done to him, and he would be buried and forgotten by all

but her, as she sat alone in her rocking chair...forgetting herself, no longer bathing, no longer sleeping... (207-08).

Bartle's reflection on his friend's death questions not only the futile aspect of such war and death but also the conduct a nation, a state presents after it making the death of someone as pointless as possible. When Malik, one of the infantrymen stationed in AI Tifar, dies in the combat as a part of the faceless machinery war, Bartle receives it casually because death has become a routine. At that point, he says, "...I'd been trained to think war was the great unifier, that it brought people closer together than any other activity on earth. Bullshit. War is the great maker of solipsists: How are you going to save my life today?" (12). It shows how the state feeds the mind of soldiers with the manipulated justification about war and what they see in reality.

Apart from all these majorly shared issues, there are some other concerns raised by both of these novels separately. Class exploitation as one of the underlying issues can be observed in *All Quiet in the Western Front*. Remarque critiques how working-class soldiers are manipulated, sacrificed and dehumanized by those in power. Most of the soldiers including Paul, Kat, Tjaden, Muller belong to working class or lower-middle class backgrounds. They are persuaded to join the army by authoritative figures like Kantorek who represents educated bourgeoisie promoting nationalism and convincing working-class youth but from a safe distance. Paul says, "During drill-time Kantorek gave us long lectures until the whole of our class went, under his shepherding, to the District Commandant and volunteered. I can see him now, as he used to glare at us through his spectacles and say in a moving voice: "Won't you join up, Comrades?" (10). Kantorek has been that complete figure who imposes forces on the ordinary people to justify his own ego of nationalism. Paul further says, "There were thousands of Kantoreks, all of whom were convinced that

they were acting for the best-in a way that cost them nothing” (11). It shows how a ruling class exploits a working class for their own satisfaction and ideologies. This perspective of Marxism can be noticed very subtly in *The Yellow Birds* as both Bartle and Murph come from middle-class communities. This novel actually reflects the post- 9/11 issues. The Iraq war was a direct consequence of post-9/11 foreign policy. Powers highlights the confusion, futility and chaos faced by soldiers during this war keeping political slogans or justification on a side. Bartle never really understands why he along with other soldiers are there or what victory would look like with massive killings of combatants and civilians.

Besides all these issues, the main focus by both texts appears to be embedded in trauma and its experiences. Both texts largely share the experiences of soldiers on war which link massively in spite of being written and set in a century apart. Paul Baumer and John Bartle both witness destructive war which demands death continuously without any discrimination and consideration. Losing the fellow soldiers, both travel psychological traumatic ride filled with fear, confusion, guilt, helplessness and hopelessness. Trauma, as an individual experience, can differ from individual to individual. When two different war occurs, scenario, causes and consequences cannot be similar. The response, reaction and reflection on wars and perspectives can differ among soldiers but these novels though written and wars they depict occur centuries apart, the soldiers exhibit the similar psychological fragmentation and dissociation. Both of them carry the survivor’s guilt and moral injury and detach themselves from civilian life as they realize the impossibility of reconnecting to a previous life. Their inability to articulate the horrors of war they’ve lived through shows the failure of language and testimony. Along with these, their avoidance to talk about future with the sense of pessimism and their hypervigilance

all are linked with PTSD and the analysis and observation over the experiences of Baumer and Bartle assert the universal psychological cost of trauma regardless of any time, context, and space. The soldiers in both novels are not only fighting a visible enemy but also enduring an internal war which continues even after the physical battles end. The forces of trauma undergone by the soldiers seem to be very similar though the manifestation of trauma differ, shaped by different historical context, narrative style and character development. So, this study has explored commonalities of trauma experienced by two completely different soldiers from a century apart war and tried to dig out the reasons behind such universal elements of trauma through psychoanalytic and literary trauma theories.

Chapter III: Navigating the Intensity of Trauma

3.1 Mapping out Trauma in *All Quiet on the Western Front*

Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* unarguably remains as one of the most influential anti-war novels depicting an unflinching portrayal of the brutal realities faced by soldiers during war. Though some specific writings were developed with anti-war notion before this novel, notably *The Red Badge of Courage* by Stephen Crane (1895), *The Chaterhouse of Parma* by Stendhal (1839), *War and Peace* by Leo Tolstoy (1869), Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* is heavily applauded for its raw depiction of war occupying a foundational and definitive place among similar creations. Its significance lies not only in its undaunted realism, but also in how radically it challenges contemporary narratives about war, heroism, nationalism or patriotism by projecting psychological depth that authentically captures trauma, numbness and alienation of soldiers. Written nearly after a decade of the World War I and being a part of it himself, many believed that Remarque narrated his own experience from the battle field but he mentions in the epigraph, "This book is to be neither an accusation nor a confession and least of all an adventure, for death is not an adventure to those who stand face to face with it. It will try simply to tell of a generation of men who, even though they may have escaped shells, were destroyed by the war" (iii). Through his powerful expression, Remarque seems to clarify that his intention is not political or personal but honestly rejects the romanticized and glorified portrayals of war especially those that present it as heroic and thrilling with an indication to the literary and cultural traditions which have misinterpreted war mainly to the young. His truthful portrayal of the devastating human cost of war both physically and psychologically has served as a strong medium for the society to

comprehend the depth of war and what it demands. In reference to this, Wang reflects on the history in his paper “War Narratives of *All Quiet on the Western Front*”:

For a long period after the end of World War I, the shadow of the war lingered, and the impact of the war on people’s lives gradually made writers and artists realized that the war not the “great war” portrayed in political propaganda. The soldiers deeply scarred by the traumas of war, unable to reintegrate into society, also prompted those who hadn’t experienced war to recognize its brutality and to begin contemplating its meaning. (95)

The consequences of war do not appear only on the battle field once the final shots are fired but the horror continues for a long-time, affecting soldiers who have been able to return and even those individuals who have not gone through it. The physical war may have ceased but the psychological battle persists without revealing till when and up to where which highlights post-traumatic stress disorder.

Paul Baumer serves as the principal lens through which trauma loaded by war unfolds. He gets recruited in the army together with his friends carrying the romanticized concept of war decorated with heroism and patriotism but when all of these young soldiers live through the moments of warfare and visualize the bloodshed and horror with continuous bombardment, they realize that the battle is very less about the country and much more about individual survival erasing every ounce of patriotism from their mind. Becoming a part of unexpectedly destructive and dehumanizing war, Paul narrates what war has been for them and how it has snatched everything even their own dreams, ambitions and existence from them. Paul is a sensitive, poetic young man. While visiting his home on a short leave, he finds all the books, postcards and cut out pieces of the newspaper in the same way but he feels strange having a sight of them. When he attempts to think himself back into the time,

he realizes the vanity of that act. He speaks, “I used to live in this room before I was a soldier...I want to think myself back into that time. It is still in the room, I feel it at once, ...here nothing is changed” (126-27). His feelings of alienation align with the features of traumatized people as discussed in trauma studies. Even when he stays inside his own room and see everything like before he cannot find himself connected to them. There, he feels, stands a huge gap between who he is now and where he is now. According to Caruth, this signals a disjunction between past and present, where the traumatic experience of war has fractured his ability to experience time and place continuous and coherent manner. The fear shown by Paul aligns with Herman’s view that survivors may fear reintegration because it requires confronting the overwhelming loss and betrayal of meaning experienced during trauma. He even feels afraid to think about being back after the war and reliving his life like before. He voices, “I feel excited; but I do not want to be, for that is not right. I want that quiet rapture again. I want to feel the same powerful, nameless urge that I used to feel when I turned to my books...it shall bring back again the lost eagerness of my youth. I sit and wait” (127-28). Paul’s deep emotional conflict and disconnection during his home visit stands himself not simply as a person who has returned home, but as a fragmented self partially stuck in the unresolved temporality of trauma. Though he cursorily expresses a desire to feel joy and youthful passion through books and ambience of his room, there lies a profound sense of estrangement, emptiness and psychological paralysis deep down, which is trademark of war-induced trauma. His inability to feel connected and his dread of returning to normalcy suggests that he is still “acting out” the trauma as discussed by LaCapra. Paul’s longing for “that quiet rapture again” (127) may not be just a nostalgia. Rather it may be a cry from a wounded psyche which is trying to reconnect with a self that has been shattered by experiences too overwhelming. His

inability to locate what he has lost reflects what Caruth explains as the inaccessibility of trauma which can be sensed as Paul does but cannot be grasped fully. He has returned home but he feels numb, displaced and his excitement also becomes unnatural to him, which outlines how survivors of trauma experience disconnection from their previous identities as Judith Herman has argued in *Trauma and Recovery*. Rather than tagging him as a homesick or melancholic, he stays as a trauma survivor who is haunted by what he cannot fully articulate and traps between a past he cannot have and a future he may not have.

Paul also displays symptoms of trauma through emotional numbing when he kills a soldier from French side. He stabs the soldier to save his life but he notices the dying soldier's pain, he realizes that the so-called enemy is not different from him. He experiences overwhelming guilt, grief and identification with the enemy and tries to feel the pain and suffering of the dead's soldier. He vents out, "This dead man is bound up with my life, therefore I must do everything, promise everything in order to save myself; I swear blindly that I mean to live only for his sake and his family, with wet lips I try to placate him..." (166). Though as a soldier, it is his duty to attack and even kill his enemy, he is filled with remorse and suffers. He cannot figure out what he is supposed to do and how to respond the brutal death he has given to the other soldier. This sense of belatedness of his overwhelming feelings and his emotional numbness is what Caruth highlights. Trauma lies not only in the violence, but in the belated realization that the enemy is not an abstraction, but a reflection of self who is filled with pain, fear, and a life of his own. This recognition is unassimilable in the moment, causing psychic shock and identity destabilization. Paul did what war demands i.e. kill the enemy but instead of feeling justified, he is consumed by guilt

and grief, resulting in an internal moral rupture which Herman sees as central to trauma.

The novel manifests trauma not only with the experiences of Paul but also with all his friends participating in war. When Paul introduces his school mates one after another, we can clearly notice how all of them are full of life and hopes. These young souls are innocent and know nothing about the war. Paul describes, “Muller, who still carries his school textbooks with him, dreams of examinations, and during a bombardment mutters propositions in physics” (4). This act of Muller profoundly reveals that he has not been matured enough to face the tragic war. The deeper observation on his tendency to carry his school textbooks and mutter physics propositions during bombardments serves as a striking illustration of psychological trauma and dislocation. This behavior of Muller exhibits signs of being psychologically overwhelmed and so the mind returns to an earlier and safer state as an attempt to avoid the horrible present. This act aligns with trauma theory especially in Cathy Caruth’s work where traumatic experiences cause a disjunction in temporal and psychological continuity. The next character Kemmerich whose leg has been amputated does not react much to the news. It seems that he has accepted the powerlessness of his situation. Paul narrates:

An hour passes. I sit tensely and watch his every movement in case he may perhaps say something. What if he were to open his mouth and cry out! But he only weeps, his head turned aside. He does not speak of his mother or his brothers and sisters. He says nothing; all that lies behind; he is entirely alone now with his little life of nineteen years, and cries because it leaves him. (26-27)

This scene of the novel echoes the core trauma of the war experience. Both the dying Kemmerich and Paul are entrapped in a traumatic silence—one imposed by war’s unspeakable violence and the other by the helpless witnessing of it. The silence of dying Kemmerich becomes a site of trauma for the observer Paul, who is desperate for verbalization, for something that might make sense of the suffering but his fellow soldier does not speak which embodies Caruth’s notion of trauma as fundamentally inexpressible. What overwhelms the narrator is not just guilt or grief but the absence of language to mediate the death he witnesses. Paul’s intense emotional focus on Kemmerich reveals a state of “acting out”. His frozen, watching tensely and haunted by the possibility that his friend might speak. This scene demonstrates the need for “working through” but the conditions for that process are language, distance, and ethical engagement which are absent.

Albert Kropp, one of Paul’s closest friends and probably the most intellectually inclined of the group, also does not remain untouched by the powerful waves of trauma. After being badly wounded and facing the prospect of amputation, he gets depressed and contemplates committing suicide. When his whole leg is taken off from the thigh, he hardly speaks with others and though his physical wound heals well, he cannot come out of the psychological wound. The threat of permanent disability strips him of a key part of his identity as a functioning soldier and human being. The state of Albert connects with the concept that trauma lies not just in the event itself, but in the loss of future possibility, the collapse of selfhood, and the inability to imagine recovery as put forward by Herman. Paul narrates this scenario, “Albert’s stump heals well. The wound is almost closed. In a few weeks he should go off to an institute for artificial limbs, He continues not to talk much, and is much more solemn than formerly. He often breaks off in his speech and stares in front of him. If

he were not here with us he would have shot himself long ago” (197). The contrast between physical healing and emotional deterioration shown by Albert hints a key theme in trauma studies i.e. visible wounds may get healed but invisible ones persist. His silence, solemnity and suicidal thoughts exhibit how he has been stuck with the loss internally and unable to move forward as LaCapra’s position on “acting out”. Moreover, when Paul, Albert and other soldiers are talking about what they will do if they go back after the war is over, they all utterly feel at loss and Albert says, “I don’t want to anything... You’ll be dead one day, so what does it matter? I don’t think we’ll ever go back” (66). His response deeply reveals the emotional and psychological trauma of hopelessness and despair as a cost of the brutal war he has witnessed. His will to act, engage, or plan for the future is blocked by the unresolved, unknowable weight of traumatic experiences. He no longer desires anything not because of laziness or apathy, but because the traumatic rupture has severed connection between self and meaning. Similarly, Kaczinsky, a senior to Paul and other soldiers, appears resilient and stoic but his continuous scavenging for food can be taken as a coping mechanism he applies to maintain some control in a chaotic world. When he is severely wounded and Paul is carrying him, Paul too mentions how “they commandeered the goose” (210) to divert his mind from the pain he is going through. His eventual death devastates Paul completely and the quiet and sudden death underscores the futility and randomness of death in war. Along with these soldiers, Tjaden, Haie Westhus, Detering and all go through the ride of psychological trauma either by having unknown fate massively lying in front of them or by deserting themselves from everyone just to get into a unknown fate.

The novel definitely keeps the soldier’s traumatic experience and struggle dealing with such feelings at the center but it also sheds light, though very slightly, on

the trauma of non-combatants. There is a pitiful scene of some inhabitants who seem to go through the psychological battle caused by the war. Paul describes this episode:

A few days later we are sent to evacuate a village. On the way we meet the fleeting inhabitants trundling their goods and chattels along with them... Their figures are bent, their faces full of grief, despair, haste, and resignation. The children hold on to their mother's hands, and often an older girl leads the little ones. A few carry miserable-looking dolls. All are silent as they pass us by.
(176)

This episode of the novel vividly depicts the trauma of displacement and emotional numbing of civilians, most probably the French villagers who are forced to leave their homes. This image can be connected to collective trauma in which entire communities not just individuals are affected. The physical posture of these silently walking civilians reflects their psychological burden and helplessness. It exemplifies to what extent war brings psychological devastation far beyond the front lines, haunting soldiers and civilians alike in such a way that words cannot justify at all.

Another example that connects readers to the trauma of war on civilians can be observed in the case of Paul's mother though her trauma is quiet, private and domestic. Her suffering reveals how war trauma extends beyond the battlefield indicating the profound psychological and emotional scars of a mother whose son may die at any moment in war. Paul's mother inquires falteringly, "Was it very bad out there, Paul? (120) but he lies not only because he does not want to reveal the horror of war in front of her mother but also because he believes that she cannot comprehend its extremity. However, she senses what her son has endured since she has heard about the war from others too. She tries her best to avoid the pain and sadness of his leaving by putting away his pack when the time of departure is

approaching. The evening before his return, her psychological suffering can be observed hugely. Paul narrates, “Late in the night my mother comes into my room...She sits long into the night although she in pain and often writhes” (135). Her trauma includes her helplessness, and powerlessness watching her son go off to war. The same intensity of pain is manifested when Kemmerich’s mother cries out on Paul, “Why are you living then, when he is dead?” (134). Her anguished question indicates a searing expression of grief-fueled trauma though directed at Paul but rooted in her unbearable loss, confusion, and helplessness. These moments reveal the raw emotional toll that war inflicts on families, especially mothers.

3.2 Exploring Trauma in *The Yellow Birds*

Kevin Powers’ *The Yellow Birds* opens not merely as a war novel, but as a haunting meditation on memory, loss and the psychological scars left by modern conflict. Set against the backdrop of the Iraq war, the novel offers harsh realities of the war under the heavy weight of trauma. Powers, a veteran himself, has constructed every minute detail to narrate what happens to soldiers at war and how they suffer through psychological upheavals for being a part of violence and destruction. Talking about the novel, Al-Janabi in his research work writes:

In this Iraq War novel, Kevin Powers draws attention to the involvement in overwhelming warfare and defines the mental state of the individual soldiers, and their physical and mental suffering during the Iraqi war and how the soldiers slowly lose their faith in life. The novel describes how soldiers find themselves oftentimes in powerless position because during combat everything depends on the circumstances or happenings and not on their own actions. (2)

The novel does not present war as something glorious nor soldiers as heroes and their actions as heroic to save others. Personifying the war, the author unflinchingly exposes how they are compelled to suffer during war because of the horror and uncertainty it carries with itself all the time. The author decorates the novel with poetic sensibility to the brutality of war by crafting a lyrical and intimate narrative which might be one of the reasons why it stands out among other novels which are written in the similar backdrop. It actually establishes its central concern which is not just the violence and dehumanizing nature of war but the lingering silence that comes after it which indicates the difficulty of articulating experiences of pain. Recounted in fragmented, non-linear narratives, the novel powerfully examines how trauma dismantles personal identity, distorts memory, and disrupts time. It portrays trauma not simply as a wound to be healed, but as a persistent rupture in the soldier's ability to narrate, relate and relive. Through the voice of Private John Bartle, the novel begins its exploration of the human cost of warfare with an attitude of both elegy and brutal honesty highlighting the elements of post-traumatic stress disorder manifested by soldiers.

John Bartle, both as the narrator and victim of trauma, explains every bit of his experience during and after the war. From the beginning, he is loaded by a promise he makes to Murphy's mother- that he will bring her son home safely. Though the promise seems to be simple at the beginning but becomes the catalytic agent for unbearable guilt and psychological turmoil he goes through. But the psychological scars he accumulates do not only come from the unfulfilled promise he has made but also from the senseless war destruction and violent deaths of combatants and non-combatants that he has witnessed. While stationing in AI Tafari, Bartle along with Murphy, Sterling and other soldiers, they involved into multiple flights. Describing

one of those fights, Bartle expresses his doubt over their possibility of being good when the commander tells them that they will be fine. He describes and doubts:

The LT walked to each of us and put his hand on our arms, speaking softly, trying to soothe us with the sound of his voice, the way one would with frightened horses. Perhaps our eyes were wet and black, perhaps we bared our teeth. “Good job”, and “You’re Ok” and “We’re gonna be OK”, he said. It was hard to believe that we’d be OK and that we’d fought well. But I remember being told that the truth does not depend on being believed. (24)

This scene captures the psychological aftermath of combat. After the deadly fights and killings, the commander comes to soothe the soldiers but his attempt seems to be meaningless since only silence can be felt from the side of soldiers and Bartle’s disbelief proves his disconnection with the assurance given. This particular episode also represents collective trauma because the soldiers, unable to articulate their experience, share a silent understanding of speechless terror as discussed by Herman. While the LT offers reassurance, the soldiers do not believe him and this dissonance between external speech and internal disbelief reflects the core condition of trauma i.e. the inability to reconcile experience with meaning.

The way Bartle speaks of the war in a detached tone, often describing horrific events in an understated manner indicates not only a survival mechanism but also a symptom of post-traumatic stress. When Malik, an interpreter for American soldiers, gets killed, Bartle’s reaction is not filled with horror, outrage or sorrow, but remains as a blank, emotional observation. This lack of affect reflects what Caruth identifies the inability to process or feel the event fully at the time it occurs. He narrates, “We did not see Malik get killed, but Murph and I had his blood on both of our uniforms... and there was a lot of blood around him” (11) and confesses, “I didn’t think about Malik

much after that. He was an incidental figure who only seemed to exist in his relation to my counting life” (12). This non-response of Bartle also suggests not acceptance but a complete moral and emotional breakdown, where resistance or grief feels absolutely absurd since witnessing death has just been regular routine for him and other soldiers. His reaction can be identified as emotional numbing and detachment which Herman explains not only as a symptom of shock but as a defense mechanism for survival in traumatic experiences. However, when Murph gets killed and he discovers his mutilated body, he cannot remain unresponsive since his death becomes deeply personal because of his strong bonding with him and the promise he can never fulfill for Murph’s mother. The dead body of Murph imposes him loss, guilt and betrayal of a promise all at once. He says:

I gave up, surrendered, whatever, I was gone. My muscles became marionetted by nerve ending and memory. “Murph!” I heard the sound of my own voice, disembodied, arching into and out of the dust and smoke. “Murph!” No answer. The voice of my drill sergeant entered my mind, dominated each and every synapse as it fired inside my as yet unpunctured brain. (167)

This part of the novel captures Bartle’s psychological breakdown in the immediate aftermath of trauma, reflecting a moment of dissociation and helplessness. It suggests a disembodied consciousness which is a hallmark of trauma in Caruth’s thinking. The repetition of “Murph!” serves as a futile attempt to reclaim connection amid chaos but no response comes that indicates the profound isolation. And by mentioning “my drill sergeant”, Powers attempts to show how military conditioning overrides emotional processing further highlighting how trauma destroys identity and memory. Additionally, the conversation Bartle has with Murphy’s mother, his confession in front of her and complete acceptance of his fellow soldier’s death function as a

“working through” of trauma indicating that he may release the traumatic burden gradually though not fully.

Along with John Bartle, the voice of trauma can be heard from Daniel Murphy. An eighteen- year-old Murphy is depicted as a symbol of innocence crushed under the weight of war. When he joins the army, he is a naïve yet hopeful young man but intense terror and randomness of war transforms him to a hollow and broken figure. Observing the endless death, pain and suffering all around, Murphy slowly isolates himself from everyone. His alienation from everyone connects the features of PTSD. He stops speaking much, is visibly disturbed and increasingly withdrawn. Bartle narrates, “Murph had missed the ceremony. Over the next few weeks I started to get the impression he was avoiding me. There wasn’t any particular thing that made me curious at first. He was aloof on patrol, which happened from time to time” (153). Bartle cannot figure out that his closest buddy has been unable to handle the brutality of war and its futility. What began as an obligation for him remains just as a pointless activity that costs human life mercilessly. Withdrawing from everyone and everything around, he starts to take emotional shelter in the proximity of a medic for he feels tranquil seeing her activity. Trauma survivors often seek proximity to those who embody calmness and control, not for intimacy, but for survival-based emotional regulation as discussed by Herman. Bartle narrates, “I looked at Murph and I thought I knew why he had been coming here. It was not because she was beautiful, though she was. It was something else...and she crossed her legs and began to cry quietly” (164). Tormented by the torturous war, Murph seeks the solace to come out of the trauma he has been going through. This part of Murph reveals the human need for emotional recognition in the midst of trauma which emphasizes the argument of Herman who says trauma isolates individuals but the possibility of healing begins

with the recognition that others are suffering too. Focusing this act of Murphy, Bartle says, “That place, those little tents at the top of the hill the small area where she was; it might have been the last habitat for gentleness and kindness that we’d ever know...So sure, Murph wanted to see something kind, he wanted to look at a beautiful girl...He wanted to replace the dullness growing inside him with anything else” (165). This endeavor of Murphy indicates his wish to come out of the heavily loaded trauma but when the medic is killed, he gets collapsed completely in such a way that there is no way back for him. The freezing situation at the sight of the dead medic vividly show his emotional numbness in the face of overwhelming situation. Then follows his total psychological breakdown when he walks into enemy hands, unclothed and unarmed ultimately leading to his atrocious death. The survival guilt he carries eventually brings surrender of the will to survive, which can be marked as a result of prolonged trauma as discussed by Herman.

Apart from these two major characters, the trauma of war can be studied through the civilian figures; Mother of both Bartle and Murphy. Bartle’s mother, though limited in direct appearances, significantly understands her son’s trauma and emotional dislocation. Her presence helps frame the emotional rupture between the civilian world and the war zone. However, she also goes through fear and nervousness. Narrating the situation of his mother, the story narrates, “I don’t understand what’s happening to you. I’ve been worried half to death.” She stood there, then moved to the counter and started shuffling the letters nervously where they were stacked” (148). Bartle’s mother’s nervous shuffling of letters mirrors her inability to repair the connection with her son. His only source for his comfort and solace, his mother, cannot comprehend what actually happening with her son. This brief yet powerful moment captures the emotional disconnect between a traumatized

veteran and his mother who desperately wants to help. But Bartle believes there is no answer to the unanswerable to make her understand his traumatic experience. He even feels guilty for giving all worries and tensions to his mother. In his words, “She turned to look at me and I saw in her eyes all the pain and horror that I had given her” (148). This portrays his mother as a symbol of the well-meaning but powerless witness who wants to understand and help but who suffers in her own way.

Similarly, Murphy’s mother plays a pivotal and haunting role in Bartle’s life as a living symbol of his guilt, moral injury and inability to process his trauma. She becomes both a reminder of promise broken and a witness to a truth that he cannot bear to reveal. Her direct presence almost at the end serves as a channel for Bartle to step towards “working through”. The confrontation with Murphy’s mother works as a turning point in his postwar deterioration. Her demand for truth and accountability accelerates the downfall of the depression and isolation Bartle has been imposing upon himself for a long time. Bartle explains:

I was glad she came. Not because there was any unexpected reconciliation, but she was tolerant and seemed to want to understand what happened to her son, why I’d made her read a letter that wasn’t real...I guess all the words I used to try to explain it to her were like so much straw compared to what I’d seen. But I appreciated the way she reacted to my explanation, as roughly as I told it to her, the connection failing as they did daily on the walls of my cell. (223)

The face-to-face conversation and sharing occurs between both of them indicates their serious attempt to work through the trauma they have been living since long.

Murphy’s mother has been traumatized due to her son’s death and Bartle for not being able to save his friend, for not being able to keep his words and for witnessing the horrors of war. Additionally, this episode of the novel one more time expresses the

unspeakable nature of the horror of war, horror of trauma. The role of Murphy's mother definitely hints the bitter reality of those ladies who have lost their sons in war when she utters, "I just wish he hadn't left home" (222). That time cannot be flipped back but the expression makes her feel lighter. Similarly, Bartle too expresses, "I do feel ordinary again" (224), after six hours long talk to Murph's mother which points out his initiations towards the process of trauma. LaCapra suggests the role of "working through" to acknowledge the trauma so that the survivors do not remain trapped in repetitive reliving or avoidance of the overwhelming experience which ultimately paves way for making meaning from it towards the path of healing even if the healing does not take fully. The situation can be observed not only in the case of Bartle but also in Murphy's mother.

3.3 Echoes of War Trauma on Soldiers

When *All Quiet on the Western Front* was written, the concept of PTSD had not been emerged but 'the shell-shock' or 'combat stress' was in practice. However, the conditions in which these terms were/are referring remain the same- a psychological condition that develops in response to exposure to traumatic events marked by symptoms such as flashbacks, emotional numbing, anxiousness, disruption of time and narrative. Cathy Caruth defines PTSD, "...there is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucination, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience" (4). She explains it not as a direct experience of the overwhelming event itself but as the way it was experienced after the fact which comes as a belated response in which there lies its inability to be fully known or understood at the time of occurrence. Erich Maria Remarque reflects Caruth's theory both in form and content. Paul experiences the war

not in a cohesive narrative but in moments of shock, numbness, and later reflections that fail to fully process what he has witnessed. As he observes death of his fellow soldiers continuously, he becomes numb and the horror of war never leaves him. He says, “Again beds are empty. Days after day goes by with pain and fear, groans and death gurgles. Even the Death Room is no use any more, it is too small; fellows die during the night in our room. They go even faster than the sisters can cope with them” (192). Death is happening like a routine task and he even does not know how to comprehend or respond. When his friend Kemmerich dies, he does not show immediate emotional breakdown. He is so much overwhelmed by melancholia that the grief surfaces in his internal monologue later as a belated response. When he notices Kemmerich’s body is hauled on to a waterproof sheet, he says, “Outside the door I am aware of the darkness and the wind as a deliverance ... The earth is streaming with forces which pour into me through the soles of my feet” (27). His disturbed mental state gets expressed not exactly when he sees his fellow soldier dies but later as Caruth views trauma, the memory is not integrated but re-lived and it becomes unbearable for him to comprehend the pain he feels over the loss of his friend. The narration of Paul, here, also reflects the phases of psychic dislocation, emotional numbing and the search for stability or grounding after overwhelming loss as discussed by Herman. The direct horror of his fellow soldier’s death and the impersonal disposal of his body is too much to confront emotionally, so Paul redirects his focus towards natural world as a stabilizing or numbing

Paul’s experiences of trauma occur during the war- directly on the battlefield or on the death beds inside the hospital, so the sense of belatedness as expressed by Caruth seems to be contradictory at a surface level but it can be noticed that his full psychological impact due to such experiences doesn’t manifest immediately. He often

revisits the deadly moments of horror, especially when he is alone by re-experiencing the war in fragmented and repetitive ways. His monologue connects to the concept of LaCapra which shows how he is trapped within his traumatic experiences. When he kills Gerard Duval, a soldier from French side, he shivers internally and outwardly and feels guilty for taking his life. He stabs Duval with his knife, then feels hurt to see him groaning with pain. It becomes unbearable for him to hear the groaning of that dying soldier and regrets for not having a revolver to shoot him. He says, “If only I had not lost my revolver crawling about, I would shoot him. Stab him I cannot” (163). His wish to have a revolver is not because he wants to kill him but because he wishes to free him from the pain. When he dies, Paul tries to make Duval’s dead body comfortable though he cannot feel anything anymore. This act shows how trauma occurs not at the time but later. He gets traumatized so much that he starts to think about the wife of the dead enemy and feels sorry for him. “No doubt his wife still thinks of him; she does not know what happened” (164). He communicates with that dead soldier and even promises him to write to his wife. But after sometime he says that it is not possible to write a letter. “My brain is taxed beyond endurance. But I realize this much, that I will never dare to write to these people as I intended. Impossible” (166). Paul’s thoughts and actions are so unstable. In spite of realizing that he cannot write to the enemy’s family, he writes the address on an envelope with the dead man’s pen. This act of Paul expresses confusion or numbness which marks as a kind of temporal freezing as discussed in LaCapra’s framework of “acting out”.

Trauma, for Caruth, is not simply the experience itself but the way it is experienced belatedly and that is what one can notice in Paul’s behavior. Paul even asks for forgiveness, “Comrade, I didn’t want to kill you...for the first time, I see you are a man like me” (164). This cannot be taken simply as a remorse but actually as a

delayed humanization, a recognition that only arrives after the traumatic event. The way Paul begins to imagine Duval's life, family and existence only after he has already stabbed him to death can be received as a perfect case of belated recognition as Caruth has said. His repeated attempts to apologize to the dead soldier also reflects what Judith Herman identifies as survivor's guilt. He seems to be crushed by guilt and disorientation for killing his so-called enemy whom he finds just a man like him. Moreover, the fragmented, compulsive speech and attention to trivial details such as the enemy's brown eyes, black hair, brownish skin suggest a dissociative state-consistent with a traumatic break between experience and comprehension.

Kevin Powers's *The Yellow Birds* exhibits the same intensity of trauma parallelly. The emotionally charged portrayal of the psychological scars accumulated by John Bartle can be seen when he says, "But looking back from where I am, almost thirty, old enough, I can see myself for what I was. Barely a man. Not a man. Life was in me, but it splashed as if at the bottom of a nearly empty bowl" (39). This can be a profound reflection of Bartle's psychological and emotional desolation as a result of PTSD. He is "almost thirty" and looking back and trying to acknowledge how the experience was which he was unable to grasp at that very moment which Caruth's theory describes as belated. His acknowledgement of his youthful vulnerability only becomes fully visible to him years later, underscoring Caruth's idea that trauma is not experienced fully in the moment and returns in bits and pieces which are often unbidden and harrowing. The same sense of belatedness can be seen when he confesses, "I was supposed to be happy, but I cannot recall feeling much of anything except a dull, throbbing numbness" (54). His emotional numbness-hallmark symptom of PTSD which Herman identifies as a survival mechanism. According to her, trauma victims may become detached from their emotions as a way of shielding themselves

from overwhelming pain. He says, “Back home, everything had begun to remind me of something else. Every thought I had blossomed outward and backward until it attached itself to some other memory, that one leading to another, impermanent, until I was lost to whatever present moment I was in” (134). According to Caruth, the past is not truly past and traumatic memory intrudes upon the present in repetitive, disorienting ways. Bartle’s thoughts move outward and backward rather staying anchored in the present takes his state of mind into past on and on. Trauma disrupts a survivor’s perception of time, memory and presence which one notices in Bartle’s state as discussed by Herman. Bartle’s disconnection of the presented, saturated with past that has given him unbearable suffering marks vividly as PTSD. The war experiences and the loss of his fellow soldier Murph leaves an indelible mark in his mind that Bartle revisits his past again and again with the displacement of present as Caruth and Herman argue that the self is unable to live in the present due to trauma-induced temporal distortion. Bartle further says:

I hadn’t known what I was doing then, but my memories of Murph were a kind of misguided archaeology. Shifting through the remains of what I remembered about him was a denial of the fact that a whole was really all that was left, an absence I had attempted to reverse but found that I could not. There was simply not enough material to account for what had been removed. The closer I got to reconstructing him in my mind, the more the picture I was trying to re-create receded. (138)

This passage exemplifies Caruth’s same notion that trauma disrupts linear temporality, causing the past to impost upon the present involuntarily. Bartle’s passiveness to remain anchored in the current moment manifests the disorienting nature of traumatic theory. Moreover, there is a moment when Bartle unconsciously mimics holding a

rifle despite no weapon being present. He says, “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, and they kept closing around the space where my rifle was supposed to be and I continued to sweat and my heart was beating much more than I thought reasonable” (54). This shows how intensely he has been traumatized. This can be analyzed under a classic somatic memory response where the body remembers trauma even when the conscious mind knows that it is in a safe environment. This conflict between cognitive response and bodily response results in hyperarousal as a PTSD symptom.

Caruth and LaCapra emphasize that trauma is also evident in language breakdown. The inability to narrate trauma coherently can be viewed as the impact of a traumatic situation one goes through. She argues “Trauma ... is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” (4). Trauma survivors often narrate in fragments, or use clichés, silence and disjointed chronology. Language collapses in acting out since a traumatized one cannot narrate coherently and ends up with a fragmentary narrative. Paul repeatedly describes his experiences with fragmented and contradictory imagery, “We march up, moody or good-tempered soldiers- we reach the zone where the front begins and become on the instant human animals” (44). This part suggests that the soldiers, still human retaining emotional variation but by the moment they cross an invisible boundary, they transform into animalistic instinct. The expression does not have a consistent tone, rather it swings from detached observation to sudden horror and such shifts reflect the narrative rupture that trauma imposes on language itself according to Caruth and LaCapra. Another major reference can be seen when Paul narrates, “We are not youth any longer. We don’t want to take the world by storm. We are fleeing. We fly from ourselves” (79). These short, repetitive sentences mirror the

breakdown of internal coherence. His disconnected monologue signals the impossibility of integrating his experience into a stable identity. When Paul sees the Russian prisoners, he wants to communicate but he cannot utter anything. He expresses his inability, “I know nothing of them except that they are prisoners; and that is exactly what troubles me. Their life is obscure and guiltless; - if I could know more of them, what their names are, how they live, what they are waiting for, what their burdens are...” (142). His failure to speak to the prisoners captures this language paralysis in the face of shared humanity and guilt. Felman & Laub describes trauma as a crisis of witnessing where the survivor is forced to speak but fails to narrate.

While analyzing *The Yellow Birds*, one can notice the entire novel alternates between timelines before deployment, during the war and after Bartle’s returning home. The non-linear pattern of narration is very vivid. Bartle says, “I had become a mystery to myself. I had left fragments of my spirit along the way....” (132). This reflects Caruth’s notion of latency since trauma is not experienced linearly but in fact returns in fragments and uncontrolled moments which affects his narration of trauma. The opening paragraph read, “The war tried to kill us in the spring. As the grass greened the plains of Nineveh...And it tried to kill us in the fall” (3). The novel, at the very beginning, presents cyclical but not chronological time which mirrors Caruth’s idea of trauma returning in repetitive and intrusive way. The constant shifting between past and present in the narration shows how traumatic memory functions. The narration oscillates between Bartle during the Iraq War and his post-war life in Virginia which emphasizes that events cannot be recalled in order, but in fragments. When he recalls Murph time and again and blames himself, “His absence from the family plot was my fault. I had left him in the river” (219). Bartle willingly and unwillingly recalls the traumatic moment of Murph’s death and relives that horrible

state but each time with subtle changes showing how trauma disrupts memory and demands repetitive re-narration as LaCapra's "acting out". Similarly, the disorientation in time and place supports the claim that trauma collapses narrative coherence. Bartle speaks, "I couldn't even remember what I'd said, or even what had been asked for. Bring him home? What, in one piece? At all? I couldn't remember?" (155). His explanation is vague and blurs present and past which echoes Felman and Laub's theory of "crisis of witnessing. The language breakdown with non-linear structure embodies the trauma experienced by Bartle due to the horror and cruel death of his fellow soldier rather than a stylistic choice.

Alienation and detachment from normal life can be understood as profound consequences of trauma. Caruth emphasizes that trauma is inaccessible to direct language and resists integration into normal life. The traumatic experience of a person makes himself/herself separate from the rest and he/she avoids talking about the same event and experiences. Paul visits his hometown on a short leave he gets but he finds himself unable to communicate with civilians including his own family. When he reaches home, he repeatedly reminds him about it and tries to be a part of it but in vain. In his word, "I breathe deeply and say over to myself: You are at home, you are at home. But a sense of strangeness will not leave me, I cannot feel at home amongst these things. There is my mother, there is my sister, there my case of butterflies and there the mahogany piano- but I am not myself. There is a distance, a veil between us" (119). This emotion of Paul clearly expresses how he has been disconnected from everyone and everything before turning to a soldier in war and after living through it. His own home, his own people for him becomes distant since he sees a gulf between him and the civilian world that lies ahead. He says, "I find I do not belong here any more, it is a foreign world" (125). Paul's statement shows how he cannot reconcile his

wartime experiences with his pre-war identity or with civilian life. The experiences he has lived through at the front are so extreme that they reside outside of the realm of normal human experience and understanding and he cannot share his pain. This inability to communicate his experience also alienates him from the society. He avoids talking to them as far as he can and just desires for loneliness. In his words, “I prefer to be alone, so that no one troubles me. For they all come back to the same thing, how badly it goes and how well it goes; one thinks it is this way, another that; and Formerly I lived in just the same way myself, but I feel no contact here” (125). This striking articulation of war-induced alienation and emotional detachment captures the profound rupture between Paul’s past self and his current psychological state that reflects LaCapra’s concept of trauma as disruption of the fabric experience. The civilian life, the routines and attachments that others find meaning in, no longer speaks to him. His preferred silence also mirrors what Caruth describes as the “unspeakable” nature of trauma- it is not just hard to express and talk about trauma- it exists outside of language. Paul’s act of alienation and disconnection can be associated with acting out (reliving trauma) where the survivor repeats without resolution. Moreover, as Herman has said that trauma isolates individuals by destroying the fundamental assumptions about the world, Paul cannot reenter the civilian life and activities because the battlefield has replaced his worldview with chaos, death and disillusionment. And he does not think that it is only the society who cannot understand him but it is also he himself who cannot comprehend people. He says “They talk too much for me. They have worries, aims, desires, that I cannot comprehend” (125). He was like one of them earlier but now he is none of them. He is disconnected not only from the society but also from his previous self. Moreover, he finds all the queries and eagerness to know his experiences on the front very absurd

and upsetting. When he notices his father being curious to know the details, he expresses. “He wants to tell him about the front; he is curious in a way that I find stupid and distressing; I no longer have any real contact with him. There is nothing he likes more than just hearing it” (123). His father represents the society who hear their experiences if they share but cannot comprehend and with such people, he has been detached. The novel, through the narration of Paul encapsulates the core dynamics of war trauma: isolation, emotional detachment, identity rupture, and the inability to return to a former life.

The Yellow Birds, in a parallel way, exhibits the condition of Bartle’s alienation and detachment from civilian life as one of the central themes that reflects the psychological aftermath of war trauma. Powers presents a deeply introspective narrative through his protagonist, whose return to civilian life is marred by persistent sense of alienation and disconnection from the world he once knew. Once he returns to his home land, he cannot convince himself that he has been back after experiencing all those brutalities and destructions. His mother welcomes him home and her words affirm a return to safety, comfort, and familiarity but Bartle’s response expresses his detachment and alienation upon returning from the war. He says, “Yet when she said, ‘Oh, John, you’re home,’ I did not believe her” (109). This moment reinforces the psychological chasm that separates him from civilian life and from any sense of belonging it. His disbelief signifies this estrangement from civilian reality. Bartle’s inability to believe his mother reflects his broken trust as an effect of post-trauma as Herman points out that trauma undermines a person’s trust in the world and in others. LaCapra’s distinction between “acting out” is also relevant as Bartle is still acting out the trauma, caught in a psychological repetition of the war, and unable to move forward which shows he remains a fragmented self, suspended between two

incompatible worlds for him. He says, “I was going home. But home, too, was hard to get an image of, harder still to think beyond the last curved enclosure of the desert, where it seemed I had left the better portion of myself as one among innumerable grains of sand...” (99). He has been so much traumatized that he talks about the experience in fragmented nature displaying his psychological scars. His articulation here shows that his certain parts in war and bringing himself back to the place called ‘home’ seems to be impossible. He says “I was afraid all the time. I did not know what I was afraid of. I was afraid of I. I was afraid of the way the world seemed to collapse into itself” (111). Bartle exhibits hyper-vigilance and self-alienation and his contempt for civilians reflects the civil-military divide created by trauma, when he says. “I thought the people in the stee were fools. They didn’t know anything. I hated them for it” (133). This moment actually captures Bartle’s profound sense of alienation and detachment from civilian life due to his horrible experiences given war. As Caruth argues that trauma creates a rupture in understanding- both of the self and of others, Bartle’s contempt can be taken as a symptom of such rupture. He knows he cannot share or translate his pain to civilians, so instead he rejects them entirely by calling them ‘fool’. His traumatic experiences blended with guilt for not being able to save Murph completely dismantle his mental stability and alienates him from the people and even from himself.

Survivor’s guilt as discussed by Judith Herman, can be seen to be vividly embodied in the text. Herman in her work *Trauma and Recovery* explicitly addresses ‘survivor guilt’ as a symptom of PTSD. She frames it as a common and deeply human psychological response among survivors, especially those who live through events and tragic incidents in which others have died. She writes, “Survivors of atrocities often feel guilty for having survived when others did not...even when they bear no

responsibility for the outcome” (61). Paul’s psychological deterioration, emotional numbness, and sense of moral injury align closely with ‘survival’s guilt. Paul watches his all friends die slowly and helplessly leaving him all alone which creates a sense of survival guilt. A deep sense of regret in him for being spared when everyone else is dying manifests time and again. At the death of Kat, he says, ““Do I walk? Have I feet still? I raise my eyes, I let them move around, and turn myself with them, one circle, one circle and I stand in the midst. All is usual. Only the Militiaman Stanislaus Katczinsky has died” (212). This expression compounds his guilt and grief- guilt for again surviving and again bearing the loss which has been piled up one after another. He tries to save Kat, his closest friend and the only friend who had been survived with him in the group by carrying him on his back up to the dressing station though he himself was gravely injured but when he dies, he is devastated. LaCapra explains, “One’s bond with the dead, especially with dead intimates, may invest trauma with value and make its reliving a painful but necessary commemoration or memorial to which one remains dedicated or at least bound. This situation may create a more or less unconscious desire to remain within trauma” (21-22). When the orderly informs the death of Kat at first glance, Paul says, “Not possible. Only ten minutes ago I was talking to him. He has fainted...Kat is dead...Slowly I get up” (212). Though he knows he could not have saved Kat, his guilt emerges from helplessness and the inability to prevent death. At the death of Duval, his so-called enemy, he says, “Comrade, I did not want to kill you...But you were only an idea to me before and called forth its appropriate response. It was that abstraction I stabbed. But now, for the first time, I see you are a man like me... Forgive me, comrade. We always see it too late” (164). This deeply traumatic episode of the novel extends his guilts but not just a survivor’s guilt but a moral injury too; the guilt of doing something that violets one’s

own ethical code. “In an effort to make sense out of senseless death, survivors sometimes blame themselves ... [This] can paradoxically serve to protect the survivor from the full terror of helplessness” (Herman 54). When he describes those young innocent soldiers including himself as a lost generation, it can be sensed how he feels being survived at the cost of his identity, youth and hope. He reflects on the deaths all around him, trying to ascribe purpose or reason but ultimately confronting the futility. He describes, “We are forlorn like children, and experienced like old men, we are crude and sorrowful and superficial – I believe we are lost” (92). The juxtaposition of “forlorn” and “experienced” reveals how the death around him has aged and alienated him who is left to carry the intolerable weight of remembrance and realities. This distortion stems not just from witnessing death but from surviving it. The feeling of “being lost” symptomatic of survivor’s guilt: Paul survives, but at the cost of any sense of coherence or identity. He explicitly connects his survival with the death of his former self. He articulates, “I am so alone, and so without hope that I can confront them without fear. The life that has borne me through these years is still in my hands and my eyes. Whether I have subdued it, I know not, But, so long as it is there it will seek its own way out, heedless of the will that is within me” (214). His final expression articulates the moral confusion and fractured identity that Herman connects with survivor’s guilt. He no longer knows or wants to know who he is or if he even deserves life.

The same layer of survival’s guilt can be noticed when Bartle grieves over Murph’s death along with so many others and his own survival remains as a guilt. While flying back to America after the War, he remembers all who could not be survived. He says:

I looked at the battalion scattered throughout the plane. How many didn't make it? Murph. Three specialists from Bravo company who'd been killed by a suicide bomber in the chow hall. A few others scattered over the year. One from HQ company killed by a mortar on the FOB. Another I didn't know but had heard was killed by a sniper. Ten more? Twenty? (101)

The counting of dead ones by Bartle does not only present the horrific scenario of war and pointless death but also captures a powerful moment of survivor's guilt. His thought about all of them expresses collective mourning. His gaze turns from the scattered surviving comrades to the absent ones haunts him. His survival, he does not take as a relief but as an unspoken burden. His act of listing does not happen at the front but while returning home shows trauma intrudes even in safe spaces as Caruth argues. Bartle even remembers the death of those he did not know "Another I didn't know" (104) along with his close buddy Murph which makes him think his own survival underserved. His guilt becomes so intense that he does not like people admiring him and his act. To the pilot's announcement praising their bravery, he responds, "Said how honored he was to be giving an American hero a ride home. Fuck it, I thought" (107). His rejection of the praising words offered by the pilot hints to his guilt of being alive; his survival becomes source of shame, not joy. His guilt of being survived can be seen more vividly when he says:

The ghost of the dead filled the empty seats of every gate I passed: boys destroyed by mortars and rockets and bullets and IEDs to the point that when we tried to get them to a medevac, the skin slid off, or limbs barely held in place detached, and I thought that they were young and had girls at home or some dream that they thought would make their lives important, They had

been wrong of course. You don't dream when you are dead. The living dream, though I won't say thanks for that. (104)

This harrowing passage shows a raw and visceral expression of survivor's guilt of Bartle whose mind seems to be haunted by the dead. The dead soldiers occupy real space in his mind because their absence is so overwhelming that it becomes a presence. This grotesque detailing of the bodies cannot be seen just as a memory but as his inability to forget. Bartle's trauma lives in gruesome sensory recall which reflects Herman's concept of intrusive memories. When he mentions about the dreams of the dead and the absurdity of their hopes, his guilt emerges not just from their death, but also from the futures they were denied with. In contrast to them, he is alive and he may dream too but he rejects gratitude for it. His existence makes him feel undeserved and may be shameful too. He sounds to resent the burden of living in a world that others were torn apart already. His guilt becomes so extreme that he thinks of killing himself. He vents out: "Or should I have said that I wanted to die, not in the sense of wanting to throw myself off to that train bridge over there, but more like wanting to be sleep forever because there isn't any making up for killing women or even watching women get killed, or for that matter killing men and shooting them in the back and shooting them more time than necessary ... (144)". This deeply reflective passage captures the moral and emotional weight of war trauma, where guilt does not seem just about surviving but also about participating in violence and being unable to reconcile that with life afterward. Bartle does not want to take a direction action to end his life but he longs for a state where the guilt, memory, and pain comes to an end and his wish for such death may not be necessarily to escape life but for the feeling of unworthy of survival as Herman discusses.

The critical framework provided by Dominick LaCapra's concepts of acting out and working through proves highly significant while exploring the psychological impact of war trauma with Remarque's novel. These categories allow for deep understanding of how trauma is represented, experienced and processed in literary narratives. Acting out, as explained by LaCapra involves the repetitive reliving of trauma in a compulsive, symptomatic manner, in which the past remains unresolved and continually disrupts the present. In contrast, working through entails a more reflective and dialogic process, one that enables the subject to come to terms with trauma, integrate it into a coherent narrative and ultimately resolves the losses.

Remarque's protagonist, Paul Baumer, manifests exclusively within the structure of acting out. His wartime experience is marked by the relentless recurrence of traumatic events and the psychic disintegration. His narrative voice, often slipping into expressions of emotional numbness, fragmentation and temporal dislocation are symptomatic of trauma and references from the text have already been provided. His alienation from the self and detachment from the society, his survivor's guilt and moral injury, his incommunicability of trauma and reliving those traumatic experiences time and again all show how 'acting out'. In spite of the predominance of acting out, the novel presents fleeting but significant gestures toward working through. One of such moment occurs when French soldier named Gerald, Duval is killed by him. The silence brought after his death becomes intolerable for him and he feels that such silence must be broken. He says, "The silence spreads, I talk and must talk, So I speak to him and to say to him" (164). The urgency he shows here can be connected the necessity of working through so that he can come out of the trauma that is eating him away. His monologue can be observed as a momentary attempt at

working through- an effort to engage ethically and emotionally with the traumatic reality of killing another human being. He speaks:

Forgive me, comrade. We always see it too late. Why do they never tell us that you are poor devils like us. That your mothers are just as anxious as ours, and that we have the same fear of death, and the same dying and the same agony-
 Forgive me, comrade; how could you be my enemy? If we threw away these rifles and this uniform you could be my brother just like Kat and Albert. Take twenty years of my life, comrade, and stand up-take more for I do not know what I can even attempt to do with it now. (164-165)

Overcome with guilt and empathy, he addresses the dead soldier by humanizing him with the sense of forgiveness. This passage, also blended with the anti-war notion and survivor's guilt, marks with a rupture in the repetition of trauma. Paul recognizes the ideological dehumanization that made killing possible and attempts to restore an ethical awareness and reintegrate his shattered sense of self. This moment does not resolve his trauma but reflects a critical self-awareness-a hallmark of 'working through'. As LaCapra suggests that working through does not mean the complete elimination of trauma nor it means a complete healing but involves a shift in one's relation to it. Paul makes a meaningful attempt to face the horror and express trauma through his one-way conversation to the dead but it becomes unbearable for him to endure it within the destructive nature of war. His return to mechanical survival later buries the experience suggesting the impossibility of sustained working through in the trenches. Soon after this act of expressing empathy and introspection, Paul shifts to primal survival instinct. He says, "Now suddenly I begin to tremble; something might happen in the interval. I think no more of the dead man, he is of no consequence to me now. With one bound the lust to live flares up again and everything that has filled my

thoughts goes down before it” (167). His dismissal of the dead man shows the collapse of ethical recognition that contrasts with the earlier scene of deep guilt and identification with French soldier. The reversion demonstrates how unresolved trauma can interrupt or even erase the progress of working through and does not progress later too since the novel ends with the death of Paul. His death, narrated in the third person, is described in unexpectedly serene terms, “He had fallen forward and lay on the earth as though sleeping. Turning him over one saw that he could not have suffered long; his face had an expression of calm, as though almost glad the end had come” (296). Here the “calm” can be read a tragic form of closure but not the product of successful working through. The fact that Paul no longer speaks in the final paragraph signals not healing, but a permanent silencing suggesting that trauma cannot be resolved by death. The tranquility on Paul’s face might reflect not from working through trauma but from no longer having to endure it. The ‘end’ might be indicating not only the end of his pain but also the end of war as a whole.

The Yellow Birds explores the legacy of war as an unresolvable psychic burden saturated with guilt, loss and fragmentation. As with Remarque’s Paul Baumer, John Bartle’s narrative is shaped predominantly by ‘acting out’ as asserted by LaCapra—a repetitive reliving of trauma in which the past invades and disrupts the present and yet the novel stages moments of ‘working through’ particularly through Bartle’s retrospective narration and ethical self-interrogation. The structure of the novel itself embodies trauma’s nonlinear temporality through the oscillation between Bartle’s deployment in Iraq, his pre-deployment and his life after returning home. Through he relives trauma through his memories of war, especially surrounding the death of his comrade Murphy, recur obsessively fragmenting his sense of self and time. The inability to maintain boundaries between wartime experience and postwar reality is a

clear sign of ‘acting out’ about which discussion has been done previously. However, the novel offers more deliberate gestures towards working through. Bartle’s retroactive voice suggests a desire to process his trauma by narrating it. The way he repeatedly questioning of his complicity in Murphy’s death, his acknowledgment of guilt, and his eventual confession of Murphy’s mother signals a move toward ‘working through’. When he is arrested for covering up the death of Murphy and kept inside the cell, he says, “My first few months inside, I spent a lot of time trying to piece the war into a pattern. I developed the habit of making mark on my cell wall when I remembered a particular event, thinking that at some later date I could refer to it and assemble all the marks into a story that made sense” (216). This powerful articulation of Bartle shows the desire to ‘work through’. His act of “trying to piece the war into a pattern” reflects the very essence of working through” as LaCapra believes. The effort to organize traumatic memories into a coherent and comprehensible narrative. Bartle’s belief that he could “assemble all the marks into a story that made sense” implies a yearning for coherence. He is trying to create a future moment in which he can return to the past with some control and clarity which links the emphasis of LaCapra that working though does not mean forgetting or fully mastering the past, but rather repositioning oneself in relation to it. This episode of the novel does not depict the completion of working through but just an initiation. The marks on the wall are not yet a story, just isolated fragments which align with LaCapra’s idea that working though is an ongoing, dialogic process. His confession to Murphy’s mother also highlights his attempt to process the trauma he had been living. He says:

I guess all the words I used to try to explain it to her were like so much straw compared to what I’d seen. But I appreciated the way she reacted to my

explanation, as roughly as I told it to her Even after talking for six hours straight I couldn't swear to any visible relief. She hadn't offered forgiveness and I hadn't asked for it. But after she left, I felt like my resignation was just justified, perhaps hers too. (223)

As LaCapra focuses the process of trauma through engaging in a dialogic process with others- a space where trauma can be confronted, expressed and shared even if imperfectly, Bartle's internal orientation towards his trauma moves from silence, isolation, escape towards dialogue, acknowledgment, and ethical recognition. He finds it difficult to express the extremity of Murph's death which suggests the limits of language in expressing trauma, yet his attempts to narrate the unspeakable and tries to give a shape to it. Rather than seeking to be excused, he takes responsibility by simply telling the truth no matter how fractured it is which can be connected to LaCapra's argument that working through doesn't mean forgetting or justifying the past but acknowledging its weight without seeking easy absolution.

The last few lines of the novel also serve as an instance of working through though in a deeply symbolic and poetic register. He says, "And I saw his body finally break apart near the mouth of the gulf, where the shadows of the date palms fell in long, dark curtains on his bones, now scattered, and swept them out to sea, toward a line of waves that break forever as he enters them" (226). Bartle envisions Murph's body being absorbed into the sea- a gesture that, while not redemptive, evokes release, transformation, and symbolic mourning, all of which resonate with Dominick LaCapra's concept of working through, though in a deeply symbolic and poetic register. Bartle envisions Murph's body being absorbed into sea- a gesture that evokes release after being trapped in the grief of Murphy which indicates that he views his death with acceptance rather than guilt.

Both the books reveal striking parallels in their depiction of trauma despite their temporal and geopolitical differences. Despite being written nearly a century apart, both the books explore a profound psychological and emotional trauma of war through the experiences of young soldiers.

Paul Baumer's pre-war is obliterated by combat. He describes himself as severed from his innocent past and unable to envision a future beyond the war. His internal conflict stems from the irreconcilable divide between his civilian self and the desensitized soldier he has become. Bartle's psyche fractures under the weight of survivor's guilt and repressed memories. His failure to protect his comrade Murph erodes his sense of self-worth, leaving him haunted by recurrence of memory and nightmares. Both protagonists embody a lost generation, stripped of their former identities and trapped in existential limbo.

In *All Quiet on the Western Front*, soldiers are reduced to instruments of survival, numb to suffering and disconnected from civilian life. Paul feels alienated from his family, who cannot comprehend his trauma, and views non-combatants with envy and disdain. In *The Yellow Birds*, Bartle becomes emotionally paralyzed and describes himself as a "museum of fear" and withdrawing from society. His detachment manifests as indifference to violence and an inability to reintegrate into peacetime routines. Both novels critique war's dehumanizing effects, portraying soldiers as expendable objects rather than individuals.

Paul's trauma persists long after the physical war ends. He is haunted by enduring worry, sadness and isolation and is unable to reconcile his wartime experiences with civilian norms. His death in the novel's closing moment symbolizes the inevitability of war's psychological toll. Bartle's PTSD manifests as self-imposed isolation, nightmares, and a pervasive sense of guilt. His lie to Murph's mother and

subsequent imprisonment reflect his inability to escape the war's moral and emotional weight. Both narratives emphasize trauma as permanent scar, transcending the battlefield.

In *All Quiet on the Western Front*, civilians romanticize the war, unaware of its horrors Paul's father's patriotic curiosity feels stupid and distressing, highlighting the chasm between soldiers and those at home. Bartle encounters civilians who glorify war or reduce it to abstract political rhetoric. His mother's inability to grasp his suffering mirrors the broader societal failure to acknowledge soldiers' trauma. Both novels condemn the societal structures that perpetuate war while ignoring its human cost.

Paul clings to his comrades as his only anchor to humanity, yet remains profoundly isolated. Similarly, Bartle's bond with Murph becomes a source of both solace and anguish, as his failure to protect him deepens his guilt. Both protagonists confront ethical decay: Paul rationalizes killing to survive, while Bartle participates in atrocities that erode his moral compass. This trauma is compounded by the recognition of their own dehumanization.

Chapter IV: Conclusion

Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* and Powers' *The Yellow Birds* vividly manifest that trauma is a universal and deeply human response to the extremities of war. Despite holding sharp differences in era, geography and cultural background, both Paul Baumer and John Bartle experience a common psychological breakdown that underscores the timelessness of trauma. Both of these narratives reinforce the idea that war does not simply end on the battlefield, in fact continues to reverberate within the realms of mind and souls of those who witness and survive it.

There can be various factors underlying behind the parallel dimensions demonstrated by both novels. One of the major reasons behind it may be the extreme psychological stress inherent in warfare which is prolonged exposure to violence, unpredictability and moral ambiguity ultimately creating conditions apt for trauma regardless of context. Both Paul and Bartle witness violence to the extreme level that they even cannot map out how it is happening. The violence they experience is beyond their expectation and imagination. Secondly, the youth and vulnerability of the protagonists highlight the susceptibility of the developing psyche to long lasting damage. As young individuals, their identities, values, and perception of the world are at young state and still forming. At this time when they get exposed to the psychological impact of traumatic experiences. Their mental and emotional frameworks are not yet fully matured which make them more likely to absorb the horrors of war in such a way that permanently alters their sense of self and reality. Thirdly, both novels depict institutional failure whether it is a military command, societal expectations or political leadership. They feel that they have been betrayed and abandoned by those who are supposed to take responsibilities. The failures of

such institutions not only compound direct trauma of warfare but also prevent recovery and integration.

Furthermore, the soldiers' connection among their fellow soldiers can response as one of the powerful factors behind the commonality of trauma in both texts. Both novels highlight how intense bonds between comrades create a shared emotional and psychological experience. In fact, their company to each other is only the emotional refuge from the deadly atmosphere of battle fields. They depend on each other for survival even in extreme conditions. Paul's emotional bonding with his fellow soldiers and Bartle's with Murph become the main source of support and understanding because they think civilians cannot comprehend their experience except their fellows who have witnessed the sufferings and shared the vulnerability together. Their camaraderie and the loss of that might be one of reason behind alienating and disconnecting themselves from home and civilians. Additionally, the incommunicability of traumatic experiences, the breakdown of language and the cultural silence surrounding psychological injury amplify the suffering experienced by soldiers across generations.

Both texts illustrate that while wars may differ across centuries in terms of technique, context and motives, the psychological impact caused by them bear striking resemblance. Through these shared patterns, Remarque and Powers make a compelling case for understanding trauma as a universal human consequence of organized violence and demand for analyzing all the factors to address which are responsible for the intense psychological disturbances.

Despite their temporal and contextual differences, World War I trenches versus the urban warfare of Iraq, *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *The Yellow Birds* share striking similarities in their portrayal of war trauma. Both depict the dehumanization,

guilt, psychological fragmentation, desensitization, alienation and futility that define the soldier's experiences, as well as the bittersweet role of camaraderie. These shared elements highlight on the universal and timeless nature of war's traumatic impact, making both novels powerful testimonies to the enduring psychological scars borne by those who survive. Both the novels focus on the war's universal capacity to annihilate identity, fracture relationship and inflict enduring psychological wounds. Both Remarque and Powers reject glorified narratives of heroism, instead highlight on the invisible scars of soldiers that persist long even after war ends. Their works serve as stark reminders of war's cyclical trauma across generations.

In conclusion, this dissertation calls for constructing a collective understanding of the human cost of war which is essential for ethical remembrance and public discourse. It can be also helpful to inform more compassionate and effective psychological care for veterans acknowledging how trauma is shaped by camaraderie, loss and moral injury, not just by exposure to violence. Finally, this research can foster cross-cultural empathy as it reveals that despite different uniforms, languages or ideologies, soldiers often endure strikingly similar forms of suffering and this approach may step towards global solidarity and peacebuilding.

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