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Voicing the Wounds: A Study of War Trauma in the Short Narrative of Andrew Slater's "New Me"

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Abstract

Trauma, as a concept, indicates the return of the repressed. The phantom of the past is repressed in the crypt of the unconscious when it is intentionally silenced by the traumatized individual. Literature; however, functions as a declarative memory that is responsible for bearing witness to traumatic experiences and voicing them instead of being exposed to neglect, distortion, fabrication, and misrepresentation. In this sense, the individual traumatized "I" indicates a collective "we" that stands for a whole group or community who share a collective traumatized consciousness. Literature that is written by American veterans, who participated in Iraq War of 2003, functions as a prism through which the collective traumatic experience of war is examined and highlighted.

Examining Andrew Slater's "New Me", the study argues that the author follows modern and postmodern modes of representing the collective traumatized consciousness of American veterans and thus transfers individual experiences from its individual sphere into a lager scope of collectivity.

The study relies on the psychological and literary approaches of trauma. As such the study significantly draws on Cathy Caruth's Unclaimed Experiences, Michelle Balaev's The Nature of Trauma in American Novels, Dominick LaCapra's Writing History, Writing Trauma and other theorists in the field of trauma theory.

Key Words: *Andrew Slater, Collective Consciousness, Trauma, Traumatized identity.*

Introduction

Trauma, as a concept, is usually linked with moral and physical wounds caused by external powerful forces that affect the explicit and implicit memories, namely the conscious and the unconscious. Within this perspective, war becomes a traumatic experience when memories of the past haunt the present via flashbacks, nightmares, hallucinations, disorder, and the like.It is through such forms, the repressed phantom of the past recalls mental images of places, people, and objects that are related to that atrocious event. While some people are possessed and captivated by their traumatized memories, others assimilate and put them to rest through the

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process of 'verbalization', which Geoffrey Hartman clarifies as "a basis for making the wound perceivable and the silence audible" (Hartman, 1995, 259). Recovering through "verbalizing the wounds" leads towards transforming individual experiences of civilians and soldiers beyond the limited dimension of privacy into a lager scope of declarative memory; thereby collectivity. Furthermore, it leadstowards the literary theory of trauma in which the interplay between the content and form as well as the meaning and being parallels the close connection between trauma and literature.

Psychological perspectives view the essence of trauma as the experience of helplessness in the face of a violated force the ego cannot master at the moment of its occurrence. In this regard, post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is the development of stress and disorder after a severe exposure to an overwhelming event that implies a direct confrontation with death and violence. In relation to military combat Ruth Leys in *Trauma: A Genealogy* explains that Freud's response to war identifies the traumatized consciousness as "the conflict between different parts of the ego itself, that is between the soldier's old peace-loving ego…and his new war-loving ego, or instinct for aggression" (Leys, 2000, 22). On the other hand, Cathy Caruth believes that trauma is much more than a psychological illness; it is rather a story of a wound that cannot be fully comprehended and assimilated unless the traumatized is engaged in the process of narrating. In other words, quoting Caruth, "the experience of trauma is the repeated confrontation with the necessity and impossibility of grasping the threat to one's own life. (Caruth, 1997, 69).

Acting-out and working-through in response to war trauma are two mechanics of remembrance that determine the influence of that overwhelming event upon the individual and collective psychological security. Repetitive engagement in these two processes shapes the survivor's personality within a space that normalizes death and instigates violence. Acting-out process, according to Dominick LaCapra, is the tendency of people who are severely traumatized to relive the traumatic scene in a destructive and self-destructive way. Andrew Slater's short story "New Me" fosters this process through a traumatized American veteran whose disturbed memory "shatters the victim's cognitive and perceptual capacities so that the experience never becomes part of memory's ordinary system"(Leys, 2000, 298). In fact Slater's traumatic narrative is a projection of the shattered assumptions which claims that a traumatic experience can alter one's views about the meaningfulness of the world and the worthiness of the self.Slater's "New Me" represents the negative response to trauma and thus the acting out process through a traumatized narrator who imprisons his trauma within the borders of his inner-self to be materialized belatedly in the form of traumatic dreams whose context is full of war and violence.

Andrew Slater: A Short Biography

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Deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq,Andrew Slater was an officer in the U.S Army, namely infantry and Special Forces officer from 2000 - 2010. He holds an MFA from Columbia University, and currently he teaches English language at the American University in Sulaimani, Iraq. Verbalizing the unspeakable wounds of individual and collective war trauma, Slater's "New Me" is included in an anthology entitled *Fire and Forget*: *Short Stories from the Long War*. The anthology does not follow up historical or political information about war in Iraq; it rather presentsa fictionalized experience in which war is the main source of a psychological conflict against whichtraumatized soldiers seek reconciliation, survival, and the potential to confront a kind of trauma that affects the very core of their being. "New Me" tells the story of Aaron, a soldier who recently returns from war with a psychological wound, namely brain injury. Though surrounded by people who sustain and prop him up to reengage in a normal life, Aaron responds passively to civic life.

The Traumatized Veteran: Between Home and War

The traumatized individual lives "in between" two worlds: the world of his inner self which is motivated by a traumatized memory and the outer world within which he used to live in the past and has to reengage in the present. Discussing the sense of being in between, Stacy Peebles in *Welcome to the Suck* argues that "many veterans return to discover the unexpected pain of being "in between" war and home, not able to fully exist in either state"(Peebles, 3, 2011). This is echoed by Andrew Slater's short narrative "New Me" which fosters the traumatic memory of a soldier whose experience as veteran in Iraq feeds his unconsciousness, alienates him from the civic world he used to live with, and imprisons him within the limits of a traumatic inner self. He practices, quotingAbram Kardiner's words in his *The Traumatic Neurosis of War*"[A] type of adaptation in which no complete restitution takes place but in which the individual continues with … a contraction of the ego" (Kardiner, 79). Dramatizing the dilemma of being in between home and the battlefield, the conflict of Slater's narrator is embodied inthe sense of strangeness and homelessness soldiers often feel in their own country and their own culture.It dramatizes how war changes the soldier's sense of identity and fuels the loss of trust—in oneself, in others, and sometimes in society as a whole.

Enhanced by the word "New", the title of Slater's "New Me" indicates the collapse of an old order and the replacement of a new one. To elucidate this, Aaron's conscious interaction is crippled by a new psychological system of a traumatized memory. Within such deformed psychic system, namely brain injury, the consciousness is Othered and obliterated. It is such a difficult task, therefore, to get used to a new life burdened with traumatic experiences and traumatic Self. The narrator's brain injury leaves him in a state of "an abject helplessness" with which his conceptions of the outer world have undergone considerable change (Kardiner, 84). Aaron's inability to act and reengage properly with the pathetic civic society violates "the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others" (Herman 51). His traumatic experience in Iraq affects his belief in the positive value of himself and its creative

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ability in relation to the community. Nevertheless, his passivity is encountered by Emily, his fiancé and future wife, who props him up to start a new life with a new job at the Tractor Supply: "This is going to be the start of a new life" [Emily] kept saying, and [he] knew that meant something different to her than it did to [him]"(131). According to Aaron, the new life is marked by a new self—an Othered traumatized self.

The contours of passivity, inefficacy, traumatization, and acting-out process are primarily embodied through the technique of interior monologue, the concept of emotional numbness, and the motif of dream. All these tropes fall in the three main categories that Judith Herman identifies as symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These symptoms are called "hyperarousal," "intrusion," and "constriction". Herman explains that: "Hyperarousal reflects the persistent expectation of danger; intrusion reflects the indelible imprint of the traumatic moment; constriction reflects the numbing response of the surrender"(Herman, 2015, 35). Poor sleeping and nightmares are among the main cardinal symptoms of hyperarousal: "I was hoping there was something that lets you sleep without dreams for a while. Like a dark and quiet place in your head you can go to all night" (130). Powerfully captured by forces of poor sleeping and nightmares, Aaron, Slater's traumatized narrator, is withdrawn from the regular activities of his daily life—a matter that leads to "an abrupt change in adaptation"(Kardiner, 1941, 81). On the one hand he has to cope with people who expect him to be normal; on the other hand, hesuppresses his anxiety and suffering—a matter that makes him unable to play a satisfactory and perfect role in the process of adaptation to civic life: "I pretended that I recognized everything ... I had no idea how many times the old me had been to this town"(131). Constriction in Slater's short narrative is similar to the "phenomena of hypnotic dissociation [by which] the helpless person escapes from [his] situation in the real world not by action but rather by altering his state of consciousness"(Hartman, 42). This is recognized when Aaron's traumatized unconsciousness paralyses his conscious awareness of time. As a case in point, after his meeting with his neurologist, Aaron is unaware that: " [his neurologist] walked off to answer [his phone] after shaking [his] hand, heading in the direction of the hospital. When he did not return, [he] realized about thirty minutes later that [their] meeting is over"(130).

In her *War Experience and Trauma in American Literature: A Study of American Military Memoirs of Operation Iraqi Freedom,*Lena-Simon Guntherexplains that"the focus on the plight and experience of one soldier direct[s]the focus of the reader towards a seemingly all-American boys exposed to the realities of war"(Gunther, 2014, 28). This finds its echo in Slater's quick way of mentioning Aaron's name. His name is mentioned twice in such a quick way that would hardly attract the reader's attention. It is as if Slater intentionally releases his narrator from the limited scope of his individual traumatic identity so as to transform it into a broader field that represents collectivity. Aaron, in this regard, does not only represent himself; he symbolically represents collective traumatized soldiers whose identities are blended and shattered between the traumatic memories of the military world and the present civic life. In her

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The nature of Trauma in American Novels,Michelle Balaev, within this framework, explains that situating an individual protagonist within a unique individual traumatic experience is one of the main tricks in trauma fiction in a sense that he may function to represent an experience of a group of people; it provides a whole picture of every person (Balaev, 2012, 17). In this regard, Aaron represents "every soldier figure" whose traumatic conflict is related to a historical event, namely Iraq war. He may represent the archetypal figure of the Unknown Soldier. Yet the collective patriotic identity of the Unknown Soldier is replaced by a collective traumatic one.

The consciousness is partly constructed out of responsive interactions. Aaron's consciousness, by contrast, takes on the technique of interior monologueandmonological gestureswhich enhance his sense of strangeness and confines his need for interaction. This technique decreases the space of the exchanged dialogues among characters—a matter that sustains emotional numbness, the inability to share positive experiences and emotions and thereby motivates the acting-out process which is marked by "the collapse of witnessing". This collapse stimulates the return of the repressed incarnated in traumatic nightmares. Nevertheless, this technique places the reader inside the mind of the narrator and details the components of his old and the present world so as to examine the roots of his trauma and the way it develops. Aaron's narrative account, as a case in point, starts with the scene depicting the drowning of his girlfriend, his inability to save her, and how the following days lead up to joining the military: "I joined the army after my girlfriend Renee drowned because I felt that some people in my hometown would be unable to not blame me. Something would have seemed wrong with the world if they didn't. The Army was a way for me to leave Elberton "(127). Though identifying the reason behind his decision of joining the military, Aaron focuses more on the way he is shattered and fractured between the time of being deployed in Iraq—a time full of traumatic incidents and fire fights, and the apparent peaceful time of being home.

According to the Greek definition, trauma is an injury inflicted upon the body. That definition; however, is expanded by Cathy Caruth who proposes, based on her reading of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principles*, that trauma is "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"(Caruth, 1996, 4). Combining the two definitions is echoed by Lisa Woolfork who views the physical wound as "the corporeal dimension of traumatic experience" (Woolfork, 2009, 6). According to this perspective, trauma is not an event that one can easily leave behind. It is a story whose voice cries out through a wound to tell the truth not only about what is known and visible, but also about what remains unknown and invisible(Caruth,4). This is manifested in the physical and psychic scars which Aaron tries to hide and thereby to repress. He hides his scars by wearing "Georgia Tech hat" during the time of work. In addition, he "meant to grow [his] hair out long enough to comb over scars"(133). Hiding these scars inextricably correlates with the concept of combat numbness which indicates a conscious blank of emotional state through which he is enabled, temporarily, to forget his fear and anxiety. This numbness motivates the veteran's

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traumatic memory that is figured out in the form traumatic dreams from which he usually wakes up with a headache.

Slater takes on the avenue of withholding an explicit account of traumatic visceral depicted consciously by Aaron. Through such technique he enhances trauma's unspeakability and motivates the reader to imagine the worst fears of violent war experienced by Slater's traumatized protagonist. Balaev suggests that such technique enables the author to structure and situate his narrative within a form that embodies the psychological response of a traumatic memory (Balaev, 2012, 22). Slater projects the chaotic response of a traumatized unconsciousness through the motif of dream which is filled by many traumatic symbols and details. It is the unconscious nature of symbolism that underlies this deeply negative reaction, the fundamental function of symbolism being 'to overcome the inhibition that is hindering the free expression of a given feeling-idea' (E. Jones, 1916: 144). In other words, symbolism is closely related to repression. Jones is clear on this point: 'Only what is repressed is symbolized;only what is repressed needs to be symbolized' (1916: 116). In his "On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies," Geoffrey H. Hartman tackles the symbolic indication of traumatic dreams:

> [They] relate to the negative moment in [the traumatic experience], to what in experience …cannot be, adequately experienced. That the moment is now expressed, or made known, in its negativity; the artistic representation modifies that part of our desire for knowledge (epistemophilia) which is driven by images (scopohilia). (1995: 540).

Aaron's dreams represent the way he is psychologically possessed by his traumatic experience and thus motivate the return of the battlefield's repressed traumatic moments and crystalize his confusion as well as the sense of being in between. Accordingly, the motif of traumatic dream in Slater's narrative is characterized by certain elements like incongruent components, symbolic denotation, and the use of sensuous images.

Starting with the incongruent components of Aaron's dreams, they are recognized in his "Mall dream" where:

> …the Country Mall was attached to the side of the granary building on the Tigress. At the far side of Belk's, the aluminum silos ran up alongside the parking garage…The Arby's front window was spider-webbed with bullet holes. A Shopping cart from Sears sat the entrance, filled with artillery shells and sweaters with a wire running up into the ceiling (134-5)

One can easily recognize how "Tigress", "Country Mall", "Belk", "artillery shells", and "sweaters" overlay on each other and thereby motivate the question of whether the dream is set in Iraq or in the U.S, in the battlefield or in malls. The connotation of the return of the repressed moments and confronting death are incarnated in another dream in the symbolic falling in a hole:

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"My truck hits this bomb—and the back end of my truck falls through a hole in the ice…the hole we fell through …keeps getting smaller and smaller and the air keeps getting tighter and tighter in the truck"(129). Falling in a hole may symbolically suggesta descent into traumatic unconscious and memories.It can also represent an escape route when one loses the potential to control his traumatic life. Applying these interpretation on Aaron's dreams enhances his powerful engagement in the acting-out process in which the dream is no more than a ghost of a traumatic past that is intentionally buried in the crypt of the unconscious. Aaron's dreams, moreover, are filled with olfactory images in which the smell of war and death, sounds of bombs and bangs, and the visual suffocating atmosphere of military trucks are their most distinguished characteristics. No dream is empty of words like see, hear, smell, touch and other words related to these senses: "I ran my fingers over the store locks in the dark, to see if they were tempered with, to see if men were waiting inside. The dark corridors were filled with grain-fattened pigeon, and their fluttering was all we could hear" (137). Aaron's obsessive use of the senses powerfully and symbolically fleshes out the unrepresentable and unspeakable memories of wartime which he effectively silenced.

In the three traumatic dreams of the story, Slater interweaves descriptions of apocalyptic and psychological paranoia to reflect the extreme nature of war experience. Aaron is haunted by dreams that merge his experiences in Iraq with images from the new life he is trying to establish in the US. They project, in addition, Aaron's traumatized Self whose features do not glisten or float on the surface, but rather hide beneath. This can be recognized when he dreams that he and others

> were driving over the ice. The whole Atlantic was frozen over. There was this flat sheet of ice we were driving on, and you could feel it vibrate because of the waves underneath the ice…And then there were these shantytowns… which had palm tree chimneys whose roots reached under the ice, and you can see them stretching down. Our trucks were airtight so they stunk like diesel (129).

The narrator's Self falls into two dimensions: the surface structure and the deep structure. The "ice" and the "frozen" Atlantic may stand for the surface structure which implies Aaron's facial features behind which he hides his trauma. His facial features are as flat as the "flat sheet of ice". His traumatic feelings, reside in the deep structure, "vibrate" like "waves underneath the ice". The shantytowns in correlation with the palm tree may stand for traumatic devastation that encapsulates Iraq. Though Aaron returns home, his traumatic memories are "stretching down" the deep structure of hisSelf/unconscious.

In each dream Aaron has to relive the atrocities and horrors of the bloody and violent atmosphere of war. He has to relive what he has repressed. This, in fact, may bring to the mind Coleridge's lines in his "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner": That agony returns; / And till my ghastly tale is told, / This heart within me burns."The burden of Aaron's traumatic memories is

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indicated by the word "dust" which he uses in two of his dreams. This dust is the veterans' extra baggage they bring with them upon returning from war and coming home.Confirmed by the fact that the story ends with a traumatic dream, the psychological baggage and the way itis deeply seated in the narrator's memories represent what Kardiner calls "fixation on the trauma".In this sense, Veterans are possessed by an inner war that permeates their bodies and minds as well.

Conclusion

The psychological possession of war trauma brings to the forefront the question and the dialect of the victimizer and the victimized. Who is victimizing whom? Stacy Peebles does not give a definite answer to this question; yet she discusses the way soldiers are stimulated and intimidated by their political and military regimes to be engaged in the experience of war. In order to be engaged emotionally in war, the soldier has to have a military self which is constructed, Peebles explains, through military pornography. Watching movies and documentaries about war evokes the instincts of combat and violence in the same way pornographic movies evoke sexual instincts. Watching documentaries and movies about war gives the soldier a powerful sense of pleasure on two levels: the level of the onscreen soldiers with whom he identifies himself and the level of the enemies' wounds and death. Such movies places the soldier's military self in the position of power—a position that stimulates his desire to be in the combat zone to fight and kill. Being in a real combat zone; however, transformsthe soldiers' fantasy of patriotic enthusiasm into a bereavement behind which the mental and physical effects of war trauma are lying down. The soldiers realize that "Battle is a traumatic experience at the best of times…for a soldier directly encountering the violence of war, that violence is suddenly and often traumatically made real by the perception of pain or the presence of the dead and wounded"(Peebles, 2011, 29). The incontestable reality of such traumatic experience has a special place of enmity in the anti-war literature. Traumatized soldiers, in this regard, advocate the verbal representation of trauma through which they condemns, as a case in point, the American political discourse that pressed them into the trenches.

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