

# **WOUNDED REPRESSIONS: AN ANALYSIS OF TARRYING TRAUMA IN SELECT WAR NOVELS OF PAT BARKER**

**Lt. Lovji K N**

Asst. Prof. and Research Scholar

PG Dept. of English, Vimala College (Autonomous), Thrissur, Kerala

**Abstract:** The commonwealth has manifested a distinctive literary development marked by its cultural and historical diversity. The present paper discusses the experience and the aftermath of the First World War and the way it problematized ostensibly secure masculinities and femininities, and family relationships, as depicted by Pat Barker, Booker Prize winner from Britain, in her three war novels *Another World* (1998), *Life Class* (2007), and *Toby's Room* (2012). With a particular focus on the character of the psychologically wounded returned soldier the author depicts the home-front aftermath of the First World War challenge the dominant constructions of gender which existed at the time of the war, and that such subversions have a specific relationship to the author's historical and social positionality.

The paper studies the pervasive condition that was named shellshock, its manifestations and its domestic effects, as symptomatic of patriarchal, capitalist, and imperialist systems in crisis. The shell-shocked soldiers are characters that represent their authors' contemporary knowledge of, and perspectives on, the interplay between expectations about gender roles and war-induced psychological trauma. The study intends to highlight how the novels imagine and articulate the haunting significance of the returned First World War soldier characters' trauma in the lives of other characters.

**Introduction:** The literature of world war is a vast body of writing whose relationship to conflict ranges from the immediate to the intangible. Within this body, women have written about the war, against the war and in support of the war. They wrote in the war and they took themselves and their readers out of the war. They demonstrated, in the diversity of their production and the timescale over which it was produced, that war is a concept beyond combat, its impact far exceeding the customary parameters. The war did give particular poets and artists a voice and a vision and those who survived found their best work associated with experiences that most people were trying to forget! But this was a passing phase. Today the words of Wilfred Owen and the landscapes of Paul Nash are frequently used to express the pity of war and its devastation of the natural world - and not merely the war they fought in. The language they found seems to have become universal and is equally applicable to the conflicts of the present day.

The themes of trauma, survival and community permeate all her novels, including those with contemporary settings and surviving trauma is a frequent situation for my characters. At least they do survive and often with a sense of humour and a zest for life intact. Barker's narrative is throbbing with social change, sexual tension and class confusion. It is at war, though, that she finds herself on her surest footing: her descriptions of the injured and dying - a man whose eyeball swings from its socket on a bumpy ambulance ride, a suicidal deserter being nursed back to life only that he might be shot in punishment - are evidently closely researched, deliberately stark and, naturally shocking.

War has a detrimental effect on the individual as the idea of killing another could be horrific to anyone; though from a war perspective it is expected that they were to kill another to defend and honour their country. War can affect the individual mentally, physically and emotionally, causing major distress and discomfort with, not only how they see themselves, but how they see war. For many soldiers and volunteers, life on the fronts during the war means danger, and there are few if any distractions from its horrors. Each comradeship serves as a divergence from the daily atrocities and makes life tolerable. Yet, the same bonds that most World War literature romantically portrays can be equally negative.

*Life Class* Trilogy is a compelling Portrait of Destruction and the soldiers that she had already introduced in her *Regeneration* Trilogy is found to be in a furious dialogue with the war they found themselves fighting. A deliberate effort is being made by the soldiers to entangle the duty, morality and personal motivation that lead to their participation in a bloodbath. For the characters of *Life Class*, a group of art students at the Slade, the

unfolding events of 1914 are, at least initially, the subject of other people's conversations. For the characters of *Life Class*, a group of art students at the Slade, the unfolding events of 1914 are, at least initially, the subject of other people's conversations.

Paul, a working-class student whose vocation was born of desperation to escape the northern industrial landscape of his youth for the beauty of art, starts to paint what he witnesses as a Red Cross volunteer. Even his teacher, Professor Henry Tonks (who pioneered developments in plastic surgery by drawing patients pre- and post-operation, but who refused to allow this work to be exhibited), shades his eyes when confronted with one of Paul's paintings, of a man whose jaw has been obliterated by a shell: 'I don't see how you could ever show that anywhere.'

One of the most animating problems faced by Barker's characters is how to carry on. "I find I alternate" says Elinor, one of three main characters: "You know I'll have days when I think about nothing except the war and how terrible it is [...] and then suddenly, for no reason — nothing's changed — it all disappears. And I think. Well, we're still here. We're still the same people we've always been." As it turns out, this description well encapsulates how Barker structures *Noonday's* plot, which alternates between compelling accounts of bombed-out London and updates on the personal lives of Elinor, her husband Paul Tarrant, and their friend and sometimes enemy Kit Neville.

Barker begins by flinging numerous taboo subjects at the reader up front, diluting any sense of nostalgia for the past. We get a manifestation of incest, adultery, miscarriage, insanity, and alcoholism at the outset. Next, Barker introduces a tricky character, a medium by the portentous name of Bertha Mason, who acts as a quasi-mystical force for steering people's lives onto changed paths.

The novel's central themes are the workings of memory and the pervasiveness of the past in the present. Elinor, now working as an ambulance driver and war artist, is still torn up about her brother Toby's death in the Great War, and she bears Kit ill will for his part in the loss. Kit, now a powerful art critic and a lonely man, is possibly still in love with Elinor and wracked by memories of youthful lust. Paul has more and more flashbacks to the battlefield and becomes increasingly untethered as a result, drifting away from Elinor and drifting through the streets as a blackout warden-cum-flâneur. "And always for Paul there were memories of other tunnels" we are told at one point, as he makes his way through underground shelters: "Increasingly the two worlds — France, then; London, now — met and merged."

Many equivalent passages tend to tilt, as this one does, from showing into telling, but ultimately the novel's territory is one of eruptions and echoes. Its charting of the way in which a new conflict can blow the scars off of old wounds, "pic[k] the scab off previous losses," opens the way for a psychological study. Where memory, nostalgic longing, and eerie physical echoes — of one underground tunnel and another will not do enough to open a "porous" channel between the past and the present. Barker trots Bertha Mason into the scene. Mason is named after the madwoman in Jane Eyre's attic for no clear or obvious reason, unless it is perhaps, for the too obvious reason that she hears voices and lives in an attic. She appears first to Paul, for whom she becomes a medium *ex machina*, driving him out of established grooves by making him feel he is operating "out of time." She is a weird and larger-than-life figure — Barker spends quite a bit of time cataloging her many rolls of flesh — and one can't help but compare her to Hilary Mantel's more successful, and physically very similar, portrait of medium Alison Hart in *Beyond Black* (2005).

However, once Bertha is on the scene and has sent Paul reeling off, Barker does not seem to know entirely what to do with her. Parts of her story intersect with *Noonday's* theme of bad or misbegotten mothers, and a sham show of which she is part occasions some thoughts on the manipulation of grief. Yet although Paul will now think of her as "the Witch of Endor" because of her ability to see the dead, she never completes her mythic arc, and she is shuffled off again before the last third of the book, a bold but perhaps not entirely successful experiment in weirding up realism as war makes strange daily life.

The Second World War raises the question of how war can be held in the mind when the mind itself is under siege; of what it means to experience a trauma so unrelentingly forceful, that it cannot be grasped consciously. Freud writes in *Moses and Monotheism*, "We give the name of Traumas to those impressions, experienced early and later forgotten, to which we attach some importance in the aetiology of the neurosis." Trauma lies not in the impression itself but, and this holds true for all theories of trauma, in the way in which it gets into our

head. Central to trauma theory is the idea that an impression can be both experienced and forgotten, sometimes in the same instant. Trauma thus divides the mind not only from itself, but also splits it in time. In scenes where Elinor and Paul are on the job, picking up bodies or pulling people out of cramped, bombed-out quarters, Barker creates suspense and claustrophobia, and skillfully evokes the full range of ways the body can break and go wrong. The descriptions in these scenes are so strong that they can sometimes make the quieter moments feel too quiet. Elinor reflects early on that she has been thinking all day in “vague, trite little phrases, trying to nudge herself into feeling the appropriate emotions and never quite succeeding,” and she’s not necessarily being purely self-deprecating; sections later in the novel where her perspective is rendered in diary form, rather than in third-person narration, evoke one of the key sources historians (and novelists) can turn to for their insight into the past, but they do not evoke as much feeling as they might.

After her brother Toby's death, Elinor paints endless landscapes whose focal point is always somehow his shadowy, barely seen figure, his absence. She thinks speaking, painting or writing about the trauma of war is therapeutic. It can be, given time. A lot of our attempts to deal with traumatic experience revolve around the discovery of a language - in Elinor's case a visual language - in which to describe it. Anything is better than the wordless unease of dreams and nightmares.

Trauma does not simply describe the psychological effects of being invaded by history-as if the mind were some kind of island onto which history drops its load. But initially this attempt to voice trauma is likely to make it worse - sometimes very much worse. And there is no guarantee that the attempt to communicate the experience to other people who have not themselves suffered it will work. So if the attempt makes you feel worse and doesn't necessarily help other people to understand, it's not surprising that many men retreated into silence.

Homosexuality and sexual taboos are parallel traumas to the war in her book and they intersect with the war. The war produced a weakening of sexual taboos in some areas. Knowledge of contraceptive techniques probably became more widespread. But there was also a great increase in paranoid thinking, as often happens when a society is under external threat. Homosexuals were one of the groups who were believed to be a sort of fifth column. Perhaps too the adulation of wartime comradeship, of love between men, raised the spectre of the other sort of love between men. They weren't the only group that fell under suspicion. Shopkeepers with foreign names often had their windows broken. Even dachshunds were attacked!

Henry Tonks, who was both a surgeon and head of the Slade School of Art, has then macabre job of drawing the various physical injuries of the soldiers who came to Queen Mary's hospital in Sidcup for treatment. People were aware of facial injuries just as they were of amputated limbs. But integrating the disfigured into society again seems to have been more of a problem. The road between Queen's hospital, and the village of Sidcup had blue painted benches for patients to sit on, and the colour warned passersby that they were likely to see something shocking if they looked that way. One convalescent home in the neighbourhood was asked by the local residents to keep the patients indoors because the sight of them was too upsetting, But many local people behaved with great kindness and the majority of men eventually adjusted to their changed appearance.

Kit Neville, who sustained terrible facial injuries in the war, returns to an old haunt, the Cafe Royal, wearing a face mask that acts as both a literal and metaphorical 'cordon sanitaire' around him. This is the experience of many of the returning soldiers, even those without such horrific injuries. Very many men felt alienated from normal life while they were at home on leave - which included sick leave. They resented healthy men in reserved occupations many of whom they considered to be idlers and they hated the fact that some people were making money out of the war, in effect profiting from the suffering of others. For some men it was a relief to go back.

Barker, with her insightful and direct writing style, succeeds in presenting a microcosm of madness that prevails during war. It recounts many vivid war scenes, and without drawing conclusions, effectively instills a feeling of vexation against the war into the reader. The consequences of war eternally changed people's attitudes from the ones they held before the war broke out. People realised that external problems were really the minor ones. It was what was inside them that mattered. Manipulative methods such as of the usage of children and women motivated men to go to war, this was wrong and it was only till it was too late the nation had realised they had created evil itself. Thus so many anti-war literature forms can be found today, because what happened is unforgettable.

Contemporary war writing thus reimagines war in an often self-conscious postmodern translation for an audience whose interests and agendas might differ significantly from those of the wartime generation but their “Prosthetic Memories” shape individual politics and identities. The proliferation of images of wounded bodies, minds, cities, and states shows that the connection between war and trauma was forged only relatively recently. This is not to say that the Trojans didn’t have their minds shattered by years of siege. But the sense that war traumatizes, that it forces a crisis in what it means either to have a mind or to be able to remember what has happened in any straightforward way at all, is modern.

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