



Trauma of Iraq War in Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the traumatic impact of the Iraq war on the US -soldiers who are the central force in American war -fiction written after 2003. I intend to discuss *Kevin Powers' The Yellow Birds'* (2013) where the distracted and traumatized US soldiers suffer from a wound of the mind, which turns them into individuals who are not whole or normal. This psychological wound is responsible for their detachment and paralysis. Powers view the soldiers as victims suffering from flashbacks, and retreating into isolation, whose actions later are translated into a stigma of mental illness.

The *Yellow Birds* novel is written by the American writer *Kevin Powers*, who is an Iraq War veteran. He served in the US Army in 2004 and 2005 in Iraq, where he was deployed as a machine gunner in Mosul and Tal Afar. In this novel, he presented his memories and terrible experiment during his service. The novel has been acclaimed together of the simplest contemporary novels on war, not just for its literary value but also for its boldness to reveal America's role in spreading destruction within the world since its inception. One of the novel's striking features is that the American soldier isn't depicted as a hero who came to save lots of Iraqi people from a tyrant and to bring democracy on a dish of gold, but as a person's being divided between death and survival .

This research aims to study the role of trauma in the representation of war. And explain the US soldiers' humanity and sympathy as the "psychological pressure that will lead them to return to their country.

Keywords: Trauma, violence, Iraq War, disillusionment.



Introduction :

The American soldiers appear in American cinema and movies to have the courage and legendary heroism. They have the greatest power that can sometimes turn an error into courage. These American films portrayed Iraqis as aggressors, potential terrorists, or collaborators. With the occupying forces, films always pay sympathy for American soldiers as they travel the maximum ground in order to defend the freedoms of others. But in these novel, American soldiers are portrayed as winning the war but not the situation. In the war of Iraq," the overwhelming majority of the victims were soldiers." (Vieira 2013,p. 5) The war experiences also devastate the character within it. This brutal and traumatizing war resulted in a "moral, psychological and existential paralysis of thought" (Stonebridge 2009,p.194) Kate McLoughlin stresses that war -fiction exposes the feeling of meagerness that unavoidably surrounds the author of these war narratives.

According to McLoughlin, the war -experience demands narration, but at the same, it is a tempting force that often silences and paralyzes the traumatic individual. T McLoughlin, this silence is "a well-documented response to trauma and particularly associated with grief" (2009,p. 17). The traumatized individual often turns to narrate his experiences as a way to obtain peace. McLoughlin states that "more realistic is the thought that writing about war somehow controls it: imposing at least verbal order on the chaos; makes it seem more comprehensible and therefore feel safer." (McLoughlin 2009,p. 19) This narration is often done to "keep the record for others - those who were there and can no longer speak for themselves, and those who were not there and need to be told" (McLoughlin 2009,p. 19).

Kevin Powers **The Yellow Birds** is "a must-read book not only because it bears witness to the particular war, but also because "it ekes out some scant but vital vision of humanity from its shame and incomprehensible violence" (Burnside 2019,p.22) . It is an account of a true narrative of a former soldier in the Iraq war. Powers comes from a military family. Like his grandfather, father and uncle, he also registered himself at the age of 17 voluntarily in military service, 'until he became a man,' he thought. But this desire to prove his manhood only after his return from the war resulted in a shattered and disappointed figure. He detests slogans like: "War is the great unifier" ; "war guarantees eternal life"; "soldiers are generally pleased with the death of their colleagues" and "the soldiers' death brings them a little closer to survival."(Powers TYB 2013,p. 12) He soon realizes that he was fighting for a great illusion.

Kevin Powers is not the first to describe his experience in the Iraq war but was preceded by other authors who narrated their war experiences, but no one lived up to Powers poetic anger in his description. **The Yellow Birds** has already been praised as a hurricane, praised by American writers such as Dave Eggers, David Mitchell and Hillary Mantell who praised the narrative style ranging from poetics to ruthless cruelty. Young writer Kevin Powers, 32, won the Hemingway Foundation Prize and



his novel was classified by the New York Times in late 2012 as the Top 10 Books of the Year.

The novel begins in the fall of 2004 with a battle around the city of Tal Afar where the rest of the Iraqi army were flooded with bullets and fragments of handmade shells described by the writer as "rain." Tal Afar is a microscopic specimen of the whole of Iraq during the occupation where panicked Iraqis did not dare to raise their eyes and look around during the hours of conflict. Powers only aspires to understand the psychological, emotional and moral dimensions of war as he describes his novel as a story of spiritual barbarism, which separates the connotations of human bonds and the values of human unity, in which American soldiers mourn only the people they know, but all the other dead they see, are regarded as part of a landscape. Like flowers saggy after frost.

The narrator is a twenty-one-year-old American soldier, John Bartle, with his eighteen-year-old friend Daniel Murphy. They experience a "dirty war" that makes no sense. Powers begins his account by describing the situation in wartime Iraq. He says that while the vast sky is crowded with nearby clouds and fear besieging everyone, everyone watched in panic under the influence of stimulant drugs, fear and anticipation of resistance. The rooftops are covered with copper sheets and blood-coloured doors. In the beginning, Bartle is a meek soldier who has human feelings and a (silent) sympathy for the victims of American violence. But the war turns a peaceful, meek soldier into a deadly monster when Sergeant Sterling orders Bartle and his friends to fight those he calls the rebels whom they must not sympathize. He describes the US soldiers' humanity and sympathy as the "psychological pressure that will lead them to return to their country ... But in the boxes of the dead."

(Powers TYB 2013.p. 78)

In the midst of this terrible mass destruction, Bartle begins to speak, the smile is absent from his face (then) he pulls a sheet of paper and reads from it looking from moment to moment for cameraman that comes with him. He asks him to record what he is saying. When Bartle hears the voices of mourning Iraqi women being killed, he says the lament of these women is amazing, like the wind, which comes over the fruit orchard, and carries it until it reaches them. Bartle best describes the scene in Tal Afar saying that fear and amphetamines kept them awake. When the luminous ammunition was flying around the ears, on a flat surface and firing into the city's fruit orchards, the battle was a 'slow bloody procession' and not a good place for emotion. Bartle realizes that they continually watch out for, or "the bullet with your name on it, the IED buried just for you" (Powers TYB 2013,p. 12) .They could not choose their fate in the battle. When he looks at the list of the Dead American soldiers, he says:" I know it isn't like that now. There was no bullet with my name on them or with Murphy's, for that matter where no bombs were made just as well as they'd they killed the owners of these names. We didn't have time I'm laid out for us, or a place".



(Powers TYB 2013,pp. 13-14)

Bartle claims that he," had been kind to think that war was the Great unifier that it brought people closer together than any other activity on Earth. bulshit. War is the great maker of solpsisits."(Powers TYB 2013,p. 12) When Bartle knows of Murphy's death by an Iraqi man who shows him and his friends the way to Marty's corpse, Sergeant Sterling kills the Iraqi man without a reason. Bartle comments:" No time ...to be surprised by it." (Powers TYB 2013,p. 211)They are not sorry for killing the Iraqi civilian whose murder goes unmentioned because he means nothing to them. This is an indication of the dehumanization of these soldiers who are trained to be violent and brutal in war-time. Bartle's obligation to remember Murphy might stem from what McLoughlin calls the "ethical-aesthetic burden", in which there is a demand that those who are capable of writing must write in order to give meaning to death. McLoughlin writes that another reason for writing about war is its cathartic quality: "The traumatized soldier is able to achieve psychological recovery through what Shay calls the "construction of a personal narrative of events that receives sympathetic hearing". (qtd. In McLoughlin Authoring War 20).

Bartle witnesses the horrors of war and his involvement in the crimes in the name of duty. War takes everything that it can take leaving the young soldier John Bartle nothing but dreams. He best describes war as :"[it] is the great maker of solipsists: how are you going to save my life today? Dying would be one way. If you die, it becomes more likely that I will not. You're nothing, that's the secret: a uniform in a sea of numbers, a number in a sea of dust." (Powers TYB 2013,p.12) Bartle's innocence is spoiled, which resulted in moral and psychological destruction. What exacerbates him and causes him spiritual torment is that he does not have political, ideological or religious goals for which he might sacrifice his life. He is not a Catholic believer, a racist, an extremist nationalist, a committed politician, a partisan, and nothing else but a human being. There is a fire in his head, for which he has no definite and definitive answers. The deceived Bartle understands that this world which follows the news of the American war on Iraq, its politicians and institutions and the media view the war in terms of stock exchanges and the perspective of strategic geopolitical gains and losses, not in terms of human suffering and the tragedies that caused by the war to the simple soldiers involved.

Bartle compares Murphy to Sergeant Sterling. He describes Sterling as a symbol of the perfect soldier - strong, manly, confident, a person who "excelled in death and brutality and domination." (Powers TYB 2013,p.19) But he describes Murphy as an ordinary soldier. Murphy's condition as 'ordinary' is really related to the narrative. This description shows that Murphy could not cope with the stress and brutality of war. He is ordinary because he cannot view death as ordinary. His sensitive nature did not allow him to process stress and pain in the same detached manner as Sterling. To Bartle, there is no destiny, no glory, and no order. There was only chance: "We



thought that if we remained ordinary, we would not die. We confused correlation with cause and saw a special significance in the portraits of the dead, arranged neatly next to the number corresponding to their place on the growing list of casualties we read in the newspapers, as indications of an ordered war."He adds:" We had a sense... the names were there as soon as those portraits had been taken, a number given, a place assigned. And that they'd been dead from that moment forward. Of course, we were wrong....

We didn't have a time laid out for us, or place.... Nothing made us special. Nor living, not dying. Not even being ordinary".

(Powers TYB 2013,pp. 12-14).

Murphy loses his mind because he cannot bear the violence and brutality of the war. In one scene a soldier is killed and Murphy is very irritated approaching the dead body and touching it. The other soldiers are surprised because they know that sympathy is uncommon in war. Murphy begins to be led by his feelings, which shocks other soldiers who are taught to be desensitized. Soldiers oversee to live by getting to be desensitized. Bartle says he did not prefer to go to Murphy and calm him down because he had sufficient stress to think about. But later Bartle blames himself for not trying to calm Murphy down at the appropriate moment. He thought if he did it Murphy "might not have broken himself". (Powers TYB 2013,p. 120)

Murphy begins to separate himself from other soldiers. Bartle decides to go to Sterling with his concerns, to which Sterling replies:"Some people just can't fucking hack it, Private. You'd better get used to the fact that Murphy is a dead man" (Powers TYB 2013,p. 155). Bartle is taken aback by this comment, and Sterling continues: "Private, you forget the edge you've got because the edge is normal now... If you get back to the States in your head before your ass is there too, then you are a fucking dead man, I'm telling you. You don't know where Murphy keeps going, but I do... Murphy is home, Bartle. And he's gonna be there with a flag shoved up his ass before you know it.... You've got to stay deviant in this motherfucker".

(Powers TYB 2013,p. 156)

Murphy suffers a complete mental breakdown, leaving camp completely naked and disoriented, seemingly in a daze. He is taken by an old man who leads him into the dark. Bartle and his friends try to rescue him but it is too late. Bartle and Sterling find him at the base of a minaret. Bartle description of Murphy's wounds is extremely graphic, exposing the violence and brutality of Murphy's death. His body was "broken and bruised." His eyes had been taken out, the "two hollow sockets looking like red angry passages to his mind" ; his throat, nose and ears had been cut; he has been "imprecisely castrated" (Powers TYB 2013,p. 206). He looks at the body of Murphy saying:" He will be buried and everyone will forget him. His mother alone will never forget him. She will sit on her chair alone every evening to remember Murphy. She will be sitting on her chair with an absent-minded contribution, smoking



the cigarette after another, and the severity of her presence will forget to extinguish the cigarette butts and the ashes on her feet ". (Powers TYB 2013,p. 208)

The tough sergeant – is disturbed and defeated by the scene, blurting out: "Fuck, little man. You didn't have to go out like this," Sterling said to the body at his feet. He flopped down on his butt into the dry grass and took his helmet off" (Powers TYB 2013,p. 207). The detailed portrayal of the body shocks and disgusts Bartle . The graphic scene of Murphy's body would be the most exceedingly bad memory Bartle and Sterling may ever endure. They choose, in an act of sympathy, to conceal Murphy's body by setting him within the river and letting it wash his body away. In that minute, Bartle and Sterling made a choice that would alter everything. Murphy's family would never know what happened to him.

Their blame would haunt them both after the war. In Bartle's case, he is additionally burdened by his guarantee to Murphy's mother, and the letter he composed to her impersonating Murphy. For both Sterling and Bartle, that evening in Tal afar would have exceptionally awful results. Bartle is detained at some point after he returns home, and Sterling murders himself. Thus, it is not merely the cruelty of war that traumatizes Bartle, but the way in which his entire identity is shaped, in addition to the difficulty in dealing with the traumatic experience. Bartle laments that he is a young man. He is 20 years old, yet he knows only despair, death, horror and sadness. He sees people fighting among themselves, silently, ignorantly, foolishly and blindly, and every one murders each other innocently. Bartle and his friends experience guilt which results in emotional detachment and delusion. They have done brutal violence against the Iraqi civilians under the name of duty.

After the experiences Bartle witnessed in Iraq he isolates himself from his family and society when he comes back home, which Caruth calls: " Oscillation between a crisis of death and the correlative prices of life: between the story of the Unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable of its survival."(1996,p.7) He cannot do anything to change the situation he is in. He has a deep psychological injury which reflects his mind and drives him to total and abnormal isolation. He is a stagnant and paralyzed. He says:" Back home, everything had begun to remind me of something else...I was lost to whatever present I was in" (Powers TYB 2013,p.134)But in one scene he breaks down which makes his healing more difficult. He physically relives the war in his country. He recalls:" 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 faster than I thought reasonable. (Powers TYB 2013,p. 54)

In one episode, Bartle dreams of an injured horse in the water. The horse is badly injured that one could see" it's bruised Old muscles". (Powers TYB



2013,p.147) He is similar to this horse in the sense that he is also injured but his injury is not physical like the horse's but psychological. He enters the river and "just did a little down, a little to sleep." (Powers TYB 2013,p.146) The moment of peace in the water is interrupted when his friends and the policeman saving him from drowning. His psychological trauma forces him to narrate his war experiences.

In the end, Bartle said: "I am not a hero. I am lucky that I was not killed in the war and still alive. I was ready to do anything to stay alive. That was my cowardice and let me down." (Powers TYB 2013,p. 103) He adds:"Before every battle I fought (in Iraq) I feel that my legs do not carry me and my fingertips have been stiffened."(Powers TYB 2013,p. 93)Bartle narrates: "When I returned from the war, I was almost surrounded by civilians. They all wanted me to tell them how life is in the war there, so the novel is my attempt to convey to these people the things that I hope they should not see themselves". (Powers TYB 2013,p.229)

To Bartle's psyche, the civilians' response is like "a deeper hole is being dug in his heart because everybody is so fucking happy to see you, the killer, the fucking conspirator, "the at-bare-minimum bearer of some fucking responsibility, and everyone wants to slap you on the back and you start to want to burn the whole goddamn country down, you want to burn every goddamn yellow ribbon in sight". (Powers TYB 2013,p.144)

The young soldier returned from the war to his homeland, shocked and obsessed with tragic and ultimately broken memories. He declares his remorse in many moments of his life on the day he joined the army at the age of 17. But he says in a word of thanks, which does not belong to the novel, that he is lucky to have survived all that and found a new life there.

To Bartle , being praised for what he did in Iraq and being called a legend is profoundly infuriating, however, he feels he cannot complain since he volunteered to go to war. He says:" Men go to war as a rite of passage - a long tradition in which a young boy must prove himself in order to become a man- but modern war shatters this idea of manhood, bravery, and patriotism." Bartle adds:"You signed up to go so it's all your fault, really, because you went on purpose, so you are in the end doubly fucked, so why not just find a spot and curl up and die and let's make it as painless as possible because you are a coward and, really, cowardice got you into this mess because you wanted to be a man." He laments:" this is never gonna happen now and you're too much of a coward to be a man and get it over with so why not find a clean, dry place and wait it out with it hurting as little as possible and just wait to go to sleep and not wake up and fuck 'em all." (Powers TYB 2013,pp.144-146)

Bartle experiences symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder when he returns home - ranging from paralysis, depression, and isolation. In the battlefield Bartle viewed death as ordinary:" We only pay attention to rare things and death was not rare." (Powers TYB 2013,p.11)



But when he comes back home he is confronted with its viciousness and violence. He claims: "The ghosts 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 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". He adds sadly:" They had been wrong of course. You don't dream when you are dead. I dream. The living dream, though I won't say thanks for that." (Powers TYB 2013,p.104) Caruth says that the traumatized soldier is:" faced with sudden massive death around him... who suffers this sight in a numbed state, only to relive it later on in repeated nightmares, is a central and recurring image of trauma in our century" (1996,p.11).

He is often possessed by the desire to sleep forever. He explains: "I was tired of my mind running all night through the things I remembered, then through things I did not remember but for which I blamed myself... I wanted to go to sleep and stay there, that's all. A passive wish, one I didn't push." He sadly adds:" Sure , there is a fine line between not wanting to wake up and actually wanting to kill yourself ,and while I discovered you can walk that line for a long time without even noticing, anybody who is around you surely will, and then of course all kinds of unanswerable questions will not be far behind ."(Powers TYB 2013,pp. 136-137) When his mother encourages him to join his friends on a journey, Bartle, who feels detached and isolated from his past acquaintances and his old way of life, explodes: "Goddammit, Mama. All I fucking do is think."(Powers TYB 2013,p.238) Bartle feels like a cripple who does not know how to escape his own mind and the cruel and domineering nature of his memories. Bartle is aware that he cannot manage and organize his flow of memories and that there is, in fact, no underlying meaning to many of the horrors he witnessed. This feeling of helplessness motivates him to think about ending his life sometimes.

Conclusion

Powers' **The Yellow Bird** is a story of a passionately deluded soldier. It does not revolve around a famous figure, but it tells the torment of a soldier, influenced by the horrors of Iraq war. He realizes through the events he lived that what he is fighting for is a great illusion, therefore; he strives hard, especially after the loss of his friend «Murphy» to restore his humanity and the feelings he has lost in the battlefield. Powers raises the issue that those who are fighting and returning from war may be more pathetic than those killed on the battlefield.



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