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Trauma Written on Flesh: A Psychoanalytic Study of Trauma in Selected Vietnam Veterans Poems

(Extracted from MA Thesis)

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Abstract:

This paper presents a part of the M.A. thesis entitled *Fragmented Memory: A Psychoanalytical Study of Trauma in Selected Vietnam War Poems.* The paper adapts Michelle Balaev's pluralistic approach to trauma in studying selected poems by Vietnam War veterans who witnessed the calamitous war, producing a different literary representation compared to earlier periods of war poetry. The study aims at a deeper investigation of the psychological trauma experienced by veteran poets, and highlights the documentary quality of the poetry that was a mirror to the very events where veterans and Vietnamese equally turned into a raw material for sacrifice. It is an attempt at proving that Vietnam veterans poetry is trauma poetry. It focuses on physical violence against both sides as the basis of the trauma verse, which captures the emotional and psychological impacts of the Vietnam War. The study challenges the notion of the unspeakability of trauma, and through the application of the pluralistic model, it emphasises the representability of trauma and the ability of poetry to articulate traumatic experiences. It highlights how veterans' poetry provides a deeper and more personal insight into the war complexities, offering a more authentic representation of its emotional and psychological toll.

1. Introduction

Literature, as one of the most powerful means of documenting human suffering, has long been an effective channel for portraying war experiences and exploring the psychological and emotional responses to them. War is perhaps the hardest subject to write about because of its devastating impact and influence on upcoming generations. The Twentieth century witnessed many brutal and violent conflicts, apart from the two World Wars, that resulted in horrendous bloodshed worldwide. One of the most notorious was undoubtedly the Indochina War, which spanned over three decades. This conflict began with Ho Chi Minh's declaration of Vietnamese independence in September 1945, shortly after the end of World War II, and ended thirty years later with the fall of Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam. (Lawrence 2008, p. 27). The war resulted in a shocking number of casualties on both sides, but the vast majority were Vietnamese civilians. The physical violence, which is either suffered by the victims, inflicted by the combatants, or witnessed by the survivors, traumatised them and left deep psychological impacts that kept haunting them long after the war had ended.

2. Theoretical Framework

The word trauma originally comes from Greek, which means a 'wound', or a physical injury caused by an external force. However, today it is rather used to mean a psychological injury, or the emotional and mental effects of a physical injury (Kurtz 2021, p. 2). Ever since the emergence of the study of trauma in the late 19th century, the interpretation of psychological trauma has seen remarkable alteration across various disciplines, such as psychiatry, psychoanalysis, sociology, and literature. **To study trauma is to deal with the linguistic representation of violence or an extreme experience, and its impact on individual memory and cultural identity (Balaev 2018, p. 360). Understanding trauma has seen a remarkable evolution reflecting the growing interest in approaching the complexity of trauma and its manifestation and consequences in diverse cultural and historical frameworks. Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), though not the first one to deal with trauma, is perhaps the most important figure of the field, who thought "t**rauma is defined in terms of stimulation that exceeds the individual's ability to cope" (Gold 2017, p. 15).

Briere and Scott believe that "an event is traumatic if it is extremely upsetting, at least temporarily overwhelms the individual's internal resources, and produces lasting psychological symptoms" (2015, p. 10). Generally, trauma is viewed as a pathological, mental and emotional state, resulting from extreme events or threats posed by such events, which cause harm to the psyche and exceed the response mechanism of a normal person. According to Balaev, trauma is the result of an external agent disturbing the psyche, and an internal action of defence against it (2018, p.362). One of the prominent theorists who contributed to the theory of trauma is Cathy Caruth (born 1955). She advanced the idea of unrepresentability of trauma, which became the central point of discussion in trauma studies in the decades that followed, and was even taken into consideration by those disagreeing with it (Balaev 2014, p. 13). The only way to know trauma, for Caruth, is by re-enactment of the traumatic event through recurring flashbacks since the mind cannot represent it in any other way (Balaev 2012, p. 7). She argued that trauma disrupts consciousness unexpectedly (Caruth 1996, p. 104), shattering the normal flow of time and preventing the mind from processing it. She suggested that the severity of traumatic experiences, which causes irrevocable damages to the psyche, results in the trauma remaining unknown and thus resisting direct linguistic articulation (Balaev 2018, p. 363). Therefore, according to Caruth, memory suffers the inability to determine the meaning and the value of the traumatic event (Balaev 2018, pp. 363, 365). This model of trauma study focuses on trauma's unrepresentability, highlighting complexities inherent in narrating trauma, and inadequacy in representing traumatic events both individually and collectively, such as war or genocide (Balaev 2018, pp. 363, 365).

Critiques of the traditional model resulted in the development of a theoretical pluralism, which is called the pluralistic model. This model challenges the idea of trauma as essentially unspeakable and unrepresentable, and advocates the need to cope with the suffering and overcome it under cultural influences (Salama 2023, p. 193). It "views trauma and the process of remembering within a framework that emphasizes the multiplicity of responses to an extreme experience and the importance of contextual factors in determining the significance of the event" (Balaev 2012, p. xi). The American scholar Michelle Balaev is the major figure of this pluralistic model. Her monograph, *The Nature of Trauma in American Novels* (2012) and her edited volume *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory* (2014) became the central works in the development of this model. The pluralistic model explores various ways to articulate and represent trauma by seeking to determine both its structural impacts on the psyche and its cultural scope. It shifts attention from understanding pathological fragmentation as essential to the ways trauma can bridge gaps between traumatic experience, language, and knowledge. This model embraces the variability and richness of responses to traumatic experiences, and the ways they are perceived and represented across diverse contexts (Balaev 2018, p. 366). Balaev also discusses the influences of societal and ethical norms in the articulation and the representation of trauma. She refuses the difficulty in articulating a traumatic experience to be an inherited quality of trauma, but the result of multiple causes varying between individual, social, and cultural factors that influence the process of remembrance and articulation (Balaev 2012, p. 10).

3. Literary Background of Modern War Poetry

The genre of modern war poetry began with World War I. Poetry held a highly estimated position in society, and appeared regularly in journals and newspapers ever since the beginning of the war. It provided one of the influential ways by which people responded to the war, whether they were supporting it, against it, or just recorded the sudden change the war brought about to everything around them (Ruzich 2022, p. 2). Despite the anti-war atmosphere of the better-known poems in the literary canon, the themes of the more accessible poems produced during the first years of the war were mostly about patriotism and religious faith, and they were more emotional (Ruzich 2022, p. 7). Newspapers and journals were filled with poems encouraging patriotism and praising soldiers, mostly written in a highly decorative diction that would make men feel united despite belonging to different backgrounds. Hence, a generation of young men searching to prove their worth was made more enthusiastic to enrol in the army and go to the front (Fioravanti 2022, 24). However, the glorification of nationalism, liberty, and martyrdom, and urging the romantic enthusiasm of war began to disappear as the war went on and bloodshed became horrendous; poets then began to view the war more realistically, focusing on its futility and brutality (Venugopala 2014, p. 11).

Poets like Wilfred Owen (1893-1918), Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967), and Isaac Rosenberg (1890-1918), who served as soldiers, wrote about horrific and unexpected experiences in the trenches to become the defining figures of war poetry. They vividly expressed the horrors of modern warfare, which had become increasingly lethal and impersonal, destroying everything in its path like a relentless machine. They often criticized the indifferent leadership that sent so many young men to their deaths, hence portraying soldiers not as heroes, but as victims of war. Their poetry overturned the heroic vision of war that was supported at home, and gave voice to the harshness and horrors of the trenches. As Linda M. Shires points out, "The older definition of hero-as-warrior had been fully exploded in the trenches of the First World War" (1985, p. 6).

The change in the ideological landscape during the period of the two wars, resulting from the consequences of World War I and the crises that followed, influenced the poetic response to World War II. During this war, a substantial corpus of poetry was produced; nevertheless, it did not receive the same

recognition as World War I poetry. Considering the impacts of war poetry from major figures of World War I, people understood the significance of poetry in times of war, and expected the poets to express their response to such times. Soldier-poets like Keith Douglas (1920-1944), Sidney Keyes (1922-1943), and Alun Lewis (1915-1944) emerged as powerful voices, reflecting the complex emotions and experiences of those who suffered in this global conflict. According to Shires, "The best poetry of the period did not succumb to ornamental falsity, but is characterized by intellectual honesty in the face of disaster and depression" (1985, p. XV). Among the few poets who felt the injustices of war, from either side of the warring nations, were the soldier-poets like Douglas and Lewis, who both perished in the war. However, it is often the case in the Second World War poetry that the reader is invited to witness the inevitability of the events, being convinced that nothing can change the course of the action. What is being written represents the poet's psychological state of mind (Kendall 2007, p. 374). Their beliefs in individualism made them prefer experience over moralising, believing that everyone needed to search and find their own answers (Kendall 2007, p. 306). But they also "viewed themselves as victims of circumstances that they could only struggle to understand" (Shires 1985, p. 86), in a world marked with uncertainty and moral ambiguity.

In contrast, the Vietnam War produced a different literary representation compared to earlier conflicts. Lorrie Goldensohn argues that "the Vietnam War for the soldier poets who fought it: their war caught them wrong-footed, ethically, militarily, historically and geo-politically" (2018, p. 2). With the poets' awareness of their position on the wrong side, the whole notion of idealising the war is denied; as Goldensohn assumes, even from the beginning, the poems were written "against its glorification, and in profound rejection of claims to ennobling, mythic, or heroic properties" (2018, p. 2). Furthermore, the nature of the war in Vietnam allowed for more individual encounters**,** making it more intimate and psychologically damaging. Thus, as Irwin argues, Vietnam War poetry "conveys the unmistakable sense that the Vietnam War became deeply and intensely personal for those who fought it" (2014, p. 144).

One of the most significant differences in Vietnam War poetry is the portrayal of the enemy. Unlike the clearly defined enemies of previous wars, this one lacked a clear, recognisable enemy. The guerrilla revolutionaries, or the Viet Cong, blended into civilian populations, leaving American soldiers in a constant state of paranoia and uncertainty. The psychological effects of fighting an invisible enemy fuelled intense anxiety, alienation, and trauma (Buntz 2003, p. 229), which are the recurring themes in Vietnam War poetry. Furthermore, the disillusionment experienced by soldiers led them to question the righteousness of their cause. Hence, unlike the poets of World War I, who portrayed soldiers as victims, Vietnam War poets often depicted American soldiers as wrongdoers, their poetry, as Irwin states, explores "profoundly vulnerable places of stark suffering, shame, anger, and incrimination" (2014, p. 144), condemning their government's war policies and depicting their army's brutality. He adds that they wrote about the people, places, and events of the Vietnam War, capturing the sociocultural, emotional, and psychological impacts of the conflict (2014, p. 145). Their poetry is distinguished by its raw emotional intensity, unvarnished realism, and direct criticism—not only of the war but also of the political figures and decision-makers behind it. Megan Moore emphasises that, because the majority of these poets participated directly in the war and were deeply affected by its consequences, they often write in a stark, unadorned style, forgoing elaborate literary devices in favour of presenting the raw emotions and complex traumas that soldiers experienced during the war (1998, p. 6). This straightforward approach serves to convey the brutal realities of war without romanticisation or glorification. The realism of Vietnam War poetry extends beyond mere personal reflection. As Irwin argues, poetry in this context functions partly as documentation, blending elements of historical truth with personal narrative (Irwin, 2014 p. 146). This documentary quality distinguishes it from other forms of war literature, as many of the poets were eyewitnesses to the very events they describe. W. D. Ehrhart (born 1948), one of the most prominent veteran poets, is quoted by

Irwin for suggesting that to truly grasp the essence of the Vietnam War—its impact, its devastation, and how it worked—a reader must turn to poetry rather than history (Irwin, 2014 p. 146). Poetry, in this view, provides a deeper and more personal insight into the war's complexities, offering a more authentic representation of its emotional and psychological toll.

The need for the portrayal of lingering scars of war went on to include addressing the trauma experienced both during and after the war. Soular notes that, for the veterans, the official ending of the war was no more than a symbolic ending; the battlefield transformed from the fields of Vietnam to the landscapes of their minds. Hence, the war with its traumatic details keeps appearing in their poetry (1994, p. 2). Rendering the psychological trauma, confusion, moral ambiguity, and emotional struggles faced by soldiers makes Vietnam War poetry a distinctive voice in the broader tradition of war literature. Articulating trauma gives the poetry its fragmented nature, and thus Moore believes, it is "difficult to construct a cohesive text that accurately depicts their experience" due to the matchless brutality of the events and scenes they have witnessed (1998, p. 2), and that is, she supposes, due to the matchless brutality of events and scenes they have witnessed. Reflecting their experiences of the war, the veterans depict fragments of it in their poetry to complete the picture, creating a complexity that refuses to give in to rational interpretation and order (Buntz 2003, p. 229). Irwin gives some examples of such scenes as "a decomposing, sun-bloated, bullet-perforated corpse at that gruesome moment," things that one cannot find in government reports because it is not statistics to be recorded in a rationally linguistic form (2014, p. 147).

4. Body as a Site of Trauma

War, as one of the most horrific manmade phenomena, has extreme effects on individuals, but more specifically on those with combat exposure. The danger it poses could be a death threat or severe injuries, the harshness of combat conditions with the possibility of disease and lack of basic requirements to survive, the loss of comrades, and witnessing the death of others -combatants or civilians- or the need to inflict harm upon them. These experiences provoke ethical and emotional dilemmas when combatants feel powerless in situations beyond their limited personal power (Laufer et al. 1984, p. 66). Hence, war begets tremendous traumatic memories leading to the combatants' permanent struggle with handling what they experienced. The exposure of the body to harm and witnessing death and mutilation of others are often experienced in very disturbing ways when modern war technology is put to use, leading to even more harrowing injuries and disfigurement of a defenceless and vulnerable human body. The conflict in Vietnam produced a shocking number of casualties from both sides of the war. The U.S. army dumped nearly 8 million tons of warfare technologies, such as heavy aerial bombardment, napalm, and chemical defoliant (Gilbert 2018, p. 185), cast on largely ill-defined or irrelevant targets. The "friendly fire" of the American forces contributed to the killing of more than one million South Vietnamese, and wounding another one million, almost two-thirds of the number of Vietcong and NVA killed (Olson 2014, p. 146). With such a high rate of casualty, roughly a third of the veterans had at least one first-hand experience of physical violence, varying among "the torture of prisoners, … the use of napalm, white phosphorous, or cluster bombs on villages; death or maiming by booby trap; and the mutilation of bodies" (Laufer et al. 1984, p. 71).

However, the authenticity and emotional depth of Vietnam War poetry came largely from those who had direct combat experience. Poems by the Vietnam veterans explore the horrendous atrocities they experienced during the war, portraying body as the site of trauma. In John Balaban's (born 1943) "After Our War", the speaker recalls mutilated body parts, calling them "snags and tatters", which keep harassing him, and reappearing in his mind even after the war:

> After our war, the dismembered bits
> -- all those pierced eyes, ear slivers, jaw splinters,

gouged lips, odd tibias, skin flaps, and toes --
came squinting, wobbling, jabbering back.
The genitals, of course, were the most bizarre… (Ehrhart 1989, p. 15)

Reducing the combatants to disfigured body parts highlights the fragmentation of identity, which changes the way of the perception of oneself and others. Soldiers are no longer recognised as formal military figures, but as grotesque deformed creatures, "inching along roads like glow worms and slugs" (Ehrhart 1989, p. 16). This suggests dehumanisation and animalisation, and not simply transforming and assuming another identity. This line also calls to mind not only the image of limbless bodies, but also the annoying return of traumatic memories, which disturb peace and oblivion. The combatants appear as intruders, strangers to the land they had fought for, reflecting the traumatic memory as intrusive and undesirable, "these snags and tatters arrived, with immigrant uncertainty / in the United States. It was almost home" (Ehrhart 1989, p. 16). So, despite changing the survivor's identity, trauma alters the character of the place as well; what was once home is a foreign land now, and is denying you. This issue is echoed in W. D. Ehrhart's "A Relative Thing", where he angrily criticises his country's officials for trying to silence the veterans' voice and prohibit their experiences from being publicised. Ehrhart, one of the most prolific veteran poets, writes,

We are the ones you sent to fight a war
you did not know a thing about—
those of us that lived
have tried to tell you what went wrong.
Now you think you do not have to listen (Ehrhart 1989, p. 96).

Here, the poet's voice represents a traumatic memory that keeps turning up despite being repressed. It reflects shared experiences of the soldiers "we", signifying a collective cry of suffering against the negligence of the authorities and the ignorance of the society addressed as "you". This condition of the veterans completes their sense of alienation, which is at the core of trauma. Their alienation started from Vietnam, where they knew no sense of belonging to the place, as the second stanza of the poems suggests, "the only land that we controlled / was covered by the bottoms of our boots," (Ehrhart 1989, p. 95), and haunted them back to where they were supposed to be at home.

The haunting memories provoked in Balaban's "After Our War" reflect experiencing or witnessing violence in the war zone where danger lurks in every shadow. Danger may come in different forms; not only in direct clashes, but also from booby traps, mines, and other guerrilla war techniques. Sometimes injuries from these indirect means are so dreadful and unbearable that the desire to get rid of the body, i.e., ceasing to exist, arises as a necessity. As in Bruce Weigl's (born 1949) "Mines", the speaker describes the condition of a man dismembered by a landmine;

One man's legs were laid
alongside him in the dust-off,
he asked for a chairback, morphine,
he screamed he wanted to give
his eyes away, his kidneys,
his heart… (Ehrhart 1989, p. 260).

The severe pain the man suffers from summarises the shocking violence experienced during the war, not necessarily restricted to combat situations. Thus, war turns the body into a source of pain, reducing all the senses to suffering, and where life is denied a soothing moment, death becomes a relief. A case that Balaban's poem also asserts as the ghosts of the fallen soldiers appear in "tens of thousands" wandering through the "city streets," strange and unknown souls without their dismembered bodies, floating "like

swamp fog," thinking they "had no use for the scraps and bits / because, in their opinion, they looked good without them" (Ehrhart 1989, p. 16). The use of similar vivid imagery reflecting incidents witnessed by veterans explores traumatic memories of the human body, suggesting it as the major site upon which violence is inflicted.

Depicting the details of dehumanising actions by the soldiers, which may not even be part of the war strategy, are preserved in the veterans' minds due to the profound psychological impact of the incidents. These are depicted in their poems without literary embellishments; they are expressed in a raw language reflecting the dilemma of the war that challenges understanding. In "War Story" by Gerald McCarthy (born 1945), the speaker, numb from the horrors of war, recalls a fragment of one of these incidents, insisting that even as a corpse, one cannot evade the violence of war;

> We found him
> his chest torn open,
> shirt sticky brown.
> A corporal with a bayonet
> cut off his ears,
> and kicked the body
> in passing. (Ehrhart 1989, pp. 175-6).

The repetition of similar horrific incidents, in which dead bodies are desecrated, results from the numerosity of war casualties, as mentioned in the introduction. W. D. Ehrhart's "A Relative Thing" depicts the horrific results of ill-targeted shelling of Viet Cong assembly areas, which was broadcast proudly by the U.S. media, denoting achievement, but the reality was a catastrophic crime;

> When the newsmen said that naval ships
> had shelled a VC staging point,
> we saw a breastless woman
> and her stillborn child. (Ehrhart 1989, p. 96).

What they witnessed cannot be simply put into words; the use of similar fragmented graphic images indicates the devastating human cost of military actions and the burdens the soldiers have to bear. This overwhelming testimony to civilian suffering signifies the destruction of a nation's future generation; the "stillborn child", and the nation's fertility; the "breastless woman". It depicts the inhumanity of the war that only a soldier sees and feels. "We are the ones you sent to fight a war / you didn't know a thing about" (Ehrhart 1989, p. 95). Presenting the gruesome imagery of violence from the battleground, carved in the veterans' memories and reappearing in their poems, emphasises the inescapability of traumatic experiences.

In "The Woman He Killed" by Elliot Richman (the birth/death years of this and the next two poets are unavailable), the speaker recalls his experience of coming face to face with a woman warrior, describing her as "young and beautiful" with her "Black hair waving in Laotian wind". The encounter embodies the moral conflict the speaker goes through as he takes action against the woman in the ambiguous circumstances of combat; he is already hesitant about using his powerful "machine-gun" against a woman with a "handgun", which he describes as "the only weapon she had". The graphic depiction of the fragmentation of a female body is a shocking image of physical damage,

> torso sawing in half
> as if caressed by a chain saw
> before sinking
> into sheets of dust. (Mahony 1998, p. 71)

This image of body violation is even more harrowing because the "young and beautiful" female body symbolises innocence, beauty, and life, and "caressed by a chainsaw" is a grotesque metaphor resembling killing to industrial destruction. Yet, it becomes even more shocking when contrasted with the sensual description preceding the killing,

So the dance we did
was under tracer light
with mad machine-gun music,
her black blouse unbuttoning… (Mahony 1998, p. 71)

This reflects the emotional and ethical struggle of the soldier. Hence, shattering the identity of both the woman and the speaker, the woman, "sinking / into sheets of dust", loses her existence, and the soldier becomes traumatised with the memory of the damage he inflicted on the body of his victim, mirroring the incurable psychological wound he is burdened with.

Moreover, regarding the fact that the major war technique in the Vietnam War was guerrilla warfare, with barely any distinct frontline, combatants were destined to come across dead bodies of diverse warring factions and civilians as well. In his poem "It Don't Mean Nothin", David Connolly draws upon this point. The speaker tells the adventure of a newly deployed G.I. visiting the city of Bien Hoa in a convoy after being evacuated by the VC guerrillas. The new G.I. is surprised by the scenes from the aftermath of war, "the bloating bodies / of Americans, dead for days" (Mahony 1998, p. 49), which were lying all around the city along with those of different Vietnamese groups. The shocking severity of this experience is even more evident when considering that a soldier's first encounter with the reality of war is marked by such inhumane and gruesome circumstances of death;

And everywhere he went,
there were more,
down all the days and nights,
all kinds of bodies,
ours, theirs, his… (Mahony 1998, p. 49).

However, what surprises him even more are not just such horrors, but the dehumanisation of oneself and others, and the desensitisation to atrocious incidents of war, which are reflected in the actions of their leader. Like the corporal in Gerald McCarhty's poem, the leader shows no respect to the corpses of those fallen during the war, not even to those of his comrades.

… their leader
. . .
who hawked brown phlegm
on each dead American saying,
"That don't mean nothin;
y'hear me, meat?" (Mahony 1998, p. 49).

He insults the bodies of his dead comrades, spitting on them and calling them "meat". These dehumanising gestures mirror the alienating impact of war on the soldiers, turning them into merciless beasts, and so, denying any bonds of comradeship, and defying promises of high values.

The pervasive violence and violation against the body reflect the morally scarring circumstances of war. The nature of the Vietnam War exposed soldiers to brutality and violence on an almost constant basis, forcing them to confront death too often. The violence they inflicted or witnessed was not always combat-related; it also included sadistic torture or corporal punishment against civilians—children, women, and the elderly. In "Blood Trail" by Jon Forrest Glade, the speaker recounts an incident in which he shoots a man,

only to end up witnessing the arrest of a woman whose love letters are found in the man's abandoned pack.

Intelligence reported the letters
were from a woman in the southern provinces.
Which meant she was arrested,
beaten, raped, locked in a tiger cage,
forced to eat her own excrement
and beaten again. (Mahony 1998, p. 67).

The dreadful act of breaking the woman's dignity before executing her indicates that the war took not only those who fought it, but also those who had no role to play in it, except for being victims.

Moreover, the stark and brutal description of the ruthless torturing of the woman highlights the moral decay and psychological numbness of the participants of war, emphasising the erosion of the soldiers' humanity. While expressing the physical violence, the scene also reveals the lasting psychological scars left on perpetrators and witnesses, who suffer from the inability to assimilate such brutality with their identity and humanity. Following the statement of the inevitability of her execution, "If she confessed, she was executed. / If she refused to confess, she was executed" (Mahony 1998, p. 67), the last lines convey the ambiguity of traumatic experiences, where the speaker remains helpless to make sense of the situation, denoting a psyche numbed by numerous atrocities. "It was a funny war. / I shot a man. / I killed a woman" (Mahony 1998, p. 67). It was never a funny war in reality, but the absurdity of the speaker's experiences and the meaninglessness of such actions and their consequences render it both ridiculous and crazy.

Poems by the Vietnam Veterans frequently explore similarly shocking, inhumane violence against women and children both in and outside the combat zone. W. D. Ehrhart's "Beautiful Wreckage" recalls his actions during the war and his inner conflict over killing civilians. "What if I didn't shoot the old lady / … / or the old man in the back of the head,/ or the boy in the marketplace?" (Gilbert 2018, p. 268). Similarly, Bruce Weigl's "The Last Lie" recounts a soldier in a convoy throwing "a can of C rations at a child/ who called into the rumble for food" (Ehrhart 1989, p. 260). He emphasises that the soldier threw it deliberately, "He didn't toss the can, he wound up and hung it / on the child's forehead" (Ehrhart 1989, p. 260). Subsequently, the child was injured as she rose from the dust with "her swollen, bleeding head". These examples add up more about the moral complexities of the war. However, there is still one more poem with a disturbing scene of a soldier experiencing an ethical dilemma, which highlights the complexity of emotions caused by war. "The Labyrinth" by Elliot Richman recounts the story of one of those soldiers, known as tunnel rats, whose duty was to venture into the labyrinthine tunnels used by the Viet Cong. When he reaches their hole, which is "stinking of death / and napalm wounds, gangrene like mustard gas / or hag's breath," (Mahony 1998, p. 78), he finds a dead body, and then kills two men he finds. However, what traumatises him is his encounter with the fourth Viet Cong in the tunnel, a woman.

I sensed her silence
in the darkness and turned my light, catching
her maddened face in the gloom, her legs
spread apart as the child slipped from her
without even a wail, knowing already the ways
of this war. (Mahony 1998, p. 78).

The use of these vivid images mirrors the shock the tunnel rat undergoes. The woman, in the most crucial moment of her life, suppresses her pain and refuses to abandon her role and position at war.

The scene could be one of the most gruesome depictions of traumatic experiences in the poetry of the Vietnam War. A woman with a "maddened face" and "legs spread apart" gives birth to a stillborn child in a

stinky, dark tunnel without making a sound due to the conditions of war. This absurd and harrowing scene is so incomprehensible that the soldier fails to fully perceive. Various dehumanising remarks in the poem highlight the loss of humanity and the transformation of identity, such as the speaker describing himself as “a palsied humpbacked worm,” “no longer human in form,” “a killer of men,” “a dark rabbit in Alice's white hole.” He also refers to the Vietnamese with demeaning and insulting names like “dink”, and “gook,” and describes their tunnel as “shit that smelled like fish”, “the crotch of a two-bit Tu Do whore”, and “stinking of death / and napalm wounds, gangrene like mustard gas / or hag's breath” (Mahony 1998, p. 78). These remarks reflect the common consequence of trauma in war, revealing the war’s impact on the soldier’s psyche and showing the moral wounds that accompany his actions. However, the last episode is more ambiguous. He shoots two other men without hesitation, yet when he confronts the woman with her dead child still “tied to her,” he is compelled to help her to “cut the cord.” However, as she prepares to attack him with a “stick grenade,” he slits “her throat” with his K-Bar knife already “dipped in dink's blood.” The poem thus captures an intricate overlap of human sympathy and survival instinct. The decision between aiding the woman and saving his own life takes only a moment, leaving him psychologically and morally scarred, because eventually he completes the violence of the scene, he has just witnessed, by becoming the perpetrator.

Together, these poems explore the personal nature of trauma resulting from the soldiers’ confrontation with death or physical injuries they witnessed or inflicted upon others, whether during combat or away from the battlefield. The violence inflicted on the bodies of the casualties leaves a profound impact on the soldiers, resulting in moral injury and severe psychological burdens they must endure. Even years after the war, they remain traumatised and haunted by memories of their experiences in Vietnam, which they attempt to express through poetry. By using raw descriptions and graphic imagery of those confrontations, their poems recreate the gruesome scenes of war that keep tormenting them. Consequently, the Vietnam veterans’ poetry provides a testimony to the irredeemable wounds of the psyche, highlighting the chaotic psychological state of the veterans and their struggle to resolve their actions and the horrendous realities they experienced.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that the Vietnam veterans’ poems represent a literary articulation of traumatic experiences of war and its lingering impact. It reveals that the human body is the first site of trauma as it is exposed to violence and brutality when war turns it into a source of pain, reducing all the senses to suffering. Due to its nature, the war in Vietnam allowed for more individual encounters**,** making it more personal and psychologically damaging. Through the application of Michelle Balaev’s pluralistic approach, the study gives a realistic portrayal of the disastrous battlefields through the selected poems of Veteran poets, distinguished by their emotional intensity and unvarnished realism. The stark, unadorned style forgoes elaborate literary devices in favour of presenting the raw emotions and complex traumas that soldiers experienced during the war. The visual representation of trauma in the poems prove that the battlefield transformed from the fields of Vietnam to the landscapes of the veterans’ minds. The inescapability of trauma, which is carved in the veterans’ memory, is emphasised through the gruesome imagery of violence against the body, showing both veterans and Vietnamese as victims. By presenting disfigured body parts to express the violence the veterans inflicted or witnessed, the poems suggest dehumanisation and animalisation, and portray the lasting psychological scars left on them both as perpetrators and witnesses, suffering from the inability to assimilate such brutality with their humanity, and leaving them with no clear identity.

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