

‘Shock in War-Gothic’: Exploring War Shock and Trauma in Pat Barker’s *Another World*

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Abstract

This article is written to explore the manifestation of after-war shock and trauma in the lives of individuals in the gothic setting. The novel *Another World* by Pat Barker is dealt with through textual analysis in order to see the gothic novel in a new light and bring forth new perspective. The paper deals with the life of the grandfather, Geordie, the impact of the horrors of war, the life of trenches, the massacre, bloodshed, butchery and the inhumanity practised and suffered by every soldier there, on him and the people surrounding him. It reintegrates the past into present, forming a complex of psychological and visceral into the contemporary resonance. Two poems by Wilfred Owen and *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf are used as secondary texts, and the methodology of textual analysis along with analytical framework of psychoanalysis has been used. This paper aims at opening new vistas for the students of literature by inter-relating Gothic and War literature and intends to fill the research gap. It also plans to educate the mass psyche for a peaceful existence by showing them the long lasting ‘horrors of war’.

Keywords: War Gothic, *Another World*, Horrors of war, Owen, *Mrs. Dalloway*

1. Introduction:

War Literature came to forefront mainly after human beings eye-witnessed the huge massacre of the First World War (1914- 1918) and then later, the Second World War (1939- 1945). The anti-war stance was strengthened while defying the age old romantic notions about valour and war in literature that were started from the times of Homer. Instead of the fake and traditional idealism, the reality of war was focussed on along with its impact on an individual, consequently on family and society; as is artistically portrayed in *Another World* by Pat Barker.

Generally speaking, shock is a negative state caused by an extremely unpleasant situation. Trauma or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is the outcome of that repressed shock years later. Traumatic event is the one that causes great stress and distress either physically or emotionally, or both. Here a person gets unable to cope with the experience he/she had. S/he gets psychologically unstable and socially misfit; as is justly portrayed in “*Another World*” by Pat Barker. In this novel, the story moves in two planes with the bridge of ‘Nick’. On one side is his own disturbed family life with his pregnant wife Fran, their son Jasper, a step son Gareth, and a daughter Miranda from the previous wife; and on another side is his 101 years old dying granddad coping with the trauma of the First World War in which he served as veteran and killed his dying brother Harry during bombardment to save him from the agonizing pain. Shell Shock and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is basically the reaction of the soldiers to the fervid bombardment and battle. That consequently leads to the feeling of helplessness, panic, alienation, loss of sleep, and decline in coherent mental and physical activities; such is the case with Geordie.

E. J. Graff writes in his review of *Another World* that it is a gothic horror story with the portrait in the unhappy ménage, along with the shell-shocked flashbacks of World War One veteran. By highlighting each soul’s private miseries he establishes Geordie as the “book’s most interesting and vibrant character”. He regards the novel not as an attempt to make the characters work out through action rather a flash back to the traumas that shaped their psychologies i.e. it depicts philosophical and psychological implications of history and memory by exposing private haunting without any deliverance.

1.1 Literature Review:

Pinkerton has researched upon trauma and its cure in Rebecca West’s *The Return of the Soldier* by relating psychoanalysis with the war shock and trauma in the piece of literature while defending the case of Chris’ magical recovery. He explores the protagonist’s trauma in dislocations, temporal break, postponements and doublings in order to have a look at the trauma on both the structural and thematic levels. The loss of the time frame with the repetition of the same incidents and mind-set with its belatedness and possession makes it lose the boundaries of particular time and place, with one indeterminacy giving birth to further indeterminacies. Talking about his psychologically logical cure he highlights the significance of giving voice to the hushed up in order to bring back the traumatized entity into the right time-frame.

Ben Shephard, while historicizing the psychic traumas and drama given birth by the World Wars, has worked upon how war wounds men’s minds and its possible cures. *A War of Nerves* is basically a history of psychiatry based on a wide range of memoirs, medical papers, interviews as well as the available official records achieved from doctors and soldiers. It focuses on the disturbing relationship between war and psychology which

took its birth on the Western Front and then developed through eras of shock and post traumatic stress disorder.

Post-traumatic Culture: Injury and Interpretation in the Nineties is another book about traumatic culture by Kirkby Farrell in which he discusses cultural crisis as a source of energy for the past century's stories. According to him "the mood's special poignancy comes not from life's usual struggles and sorrows, but also from a sense that the ground of experience has been compromised." The same trauma is there is *Another World*.

The concern is not only to find this war trauma in *Another World* by Pat Barker in the character of Geordie but also to put forth a new genre by inter-relating war and gothic literature i.e. War Gothic by highlighting war trauma in the gothic novel. It proves the direct relation of 'gothic' with everyday life instead of being regarded as a genre belonging to some fairy-land; and also by bringing forth the hidden and hideous side of human nature. It motivates humanity to take measures to solve it in the best possible way instead of repressing and suppressing it.

1.1.1 Detailed Discussion

This novel has visible gothic streak with an old castle, hidden and hideous portrait of miserable Victorian family with striking resemblance to a family after 100 years, murders in the history, ghost of a girl, disturbing sexuality, unhappy family (with Gareth playing murderous games in his locked room, Miranda dealing with her mother's depression; parents trying to cope with the hideous shards of broken lives) and shell- shocked flash-backs of Geordie where wounds of past creep into present with the only purpose of creating unease. As is written in the novel:

...he [Nick] hears Geordie say: 'I am in hell.' Present tense, the tense in which his memories of war went on happening. A recognized symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder, a term probably never knew. Though he knew the symptoms well enough, he knew what it did to the perception of time. The present- remote, unreal; the past, in memory, nightmare, hallucination, re-enactment, becoming the present. *I am in hell* (270).

This gothic unease has found its existence in the face of war trauma, where gothic shock has appeared as the shock of the war-ridden soldiers of the First World War represented by the portrayal of the character of Geordie. This gives birth to a new genre i.e. War Gothic which explores the hidden 'imp of the perverse', where butchery, bloodshed, death, bodily deteriorations, murders and their hallucination is a part of real human life. It defamiliarizes the traditional notion of war-- the de-familiarization which is the trait of Gothic and the de-familiarization though which the soldiers went during the obnoxious experience of war:

At first, the Great War seemed the ideal opportunity for American men to re-establish their masculinity. Here, perhaps, was the chance to reclaim manliness on the battlefield. However, instead of becoming heroes, soldiers often found themselves reduced to anonymous bodies in trenches, where life and death seemed the result of dumb luck rather than bravery, skill, or cunning (Joseph, 65).

The non-linear narrative, taking us back in the past through the traumatic state of Geordie, with changing perspectives about his experience in the war also relates war trauma with the gothic obscurity and hovering past. Geordie's past is not past, it is present; it is re-living of that past through the biochemical change in his brain which makes the traumatic experience of the war so painfully persistent for him. This persistent war makes the present incomprehensible; hence consequently horrible for him where he takes his daughter and his grand-son as German soldiers, his room as a trench and his lounge as a battle-field. When it is written about Geordie: "He says, and the words cling to his dry mouth, 'I am in hell'" (246), then it is his psychological state which devours his physical reality.

The physical and emotional deterioration is linked with those survived soldiers who passed through the butchery of war by leading lives in trenches and getting shell shocked. Another reason of their psychical devastation is the sense of guilt for living while the best of their generation are killed right in front of their eyes. In the case of Geordie it is his brother Harry whom his mother wished to be alive even at the cost of Geordie's life. What makes the situation worse for Geordie is his act of committing supposed murder of dying Harry: "I [Geordie] know I've got to stop him [Harry] making that noise. I'm crawling up his side, all I can see is the open mouth, and my fingers are digging into his chest, finding the right place and then I ram the knife in and the screaming stops" (263-264). Geordie's survival is linked with trauma not only because of being the murderer of his brother but also with his inability of being a hero or being 'one of the best' of the generation. His trauma is not simply the outcome of war but it is simultaneously constituted unconsciously by the shock of his villainous act of murdering his brother and of his inability to attain the idealism of war hero. It is his repressed truth which emerges later on in the more dangerous way and constitutes something more shocking than it was expected to be at the moment. This is what Freud Talks about in his article "The Uncanny" that this state is caused by nothing new or unfamiliar, rather is the outcome of the encounter with something very familiar from the past which is alienated and repressed because of being socially or morally unacceptable (525). This repression forms vaults in human psyche and finds expression in unacceptable traumatic states, which is linguistically portrayed by Barker through the use of similes e.g. calling 'moving cars' a blanket of flies and the 'lying granddad' a moribund

animal, hence forming a striking combination which appears weird and unexpected but on deep introspection makes clear sense.

This trauma is constituted by threat to the sexuality of the soldier as well; as constant reference to Geordie's deformed genitals shows: "As Geordie's struggles to stand up, the front of his pyjama trousers gapes open, revealing a shrivelled cock, a dangling and wrinkled scrotum" (126). His manliness was hurt in his failure to get his mother's love and sympathies and to prove him as hero. This is further manifested in his weakness after war which made him tremble with shock, urinate in bed and take sympathies and caresses from his wife like a meek feminine urge. It is trauma of the failure to match the socially set standard of gender roles. As Tiffany Joseph writes in the article:

Physical symptoms arise from the cultural and social conditions of gender, and the trauma of the mind is the trauma of the body --- simultaneously. Trauma, then, is also social, born of external expectations and demands that cannot be fully realized and also, paradoxically, cannot be fully refused (74-75).

This lack of compatibility between social and personal realities forms the state of trauma as is the case with Septimus Warren Smith in *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf. He ends up committing suicide in the society which marginalizes him due his psychological damage-- caused by the war and aggravated by that very society. Here again the traumatized mind deteriorates without the least hope of recovery; as he fails to give meaning to his post-traumatic life where the past ideologies no more support the revealed truths witnessed in the shadow of bombs and butchery, murder and massacre, cruelty and catastrophe. Fragmentation in consciousness occurs when the unconscious strongly finds its way out:

It was a dreadful pity. For that made Septimus cry out about human cruelty—how they tear each other to pieces... But "Lovely!" he used to cry, and the tears would run down his cheeks, which was to her the most dreadful thing of all, to see a man like Septimus, who had fought, who was brave, crying. And he would lie listening until suddenly he would cry that he was falling down, down into the flames! (151)

Septimus cries out "Evans" but no one sees Evans and no one understands the state of Septimus either. Here narrative of the traumatized existence is uprooted from the meta-narrative of the society. The man is in trauma not only because he was unable to cope with the shock but also because the overall society is not capable of dealing with the shock of that one person. His suicide is his last message which is also not decoded.

This uprooted psychology makes him lose the linear time-frame, just like the time frame of the novel itself, this intermingling of past and present in the consciousness of the traumatized existence also supports the repetition of past in present in Gothic literature e.g. *Beloved* by Tony Morrison etc.

The past keeps on haunting the traumatic soldiers and they are unable to forget the froth corrupted lung, dying soldiers, blood gargling from their mouths and ultimately the shock of which they are the sole bearer. Wilfred Owen writes in his poem "Dulce Et Decorum Est": "In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,/ He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning" (Silken, 183). In another poem "Mental Cases", while describing the traumatic soldiers in an asylum, he writes:

--These are men whose minds the Dead have ravished.
Memory fingers in their hair of murders,
Multitudinous murders they once witnessed.
Wading sloughs of flesh these helpless wander,
Treading blood from lungs that had loved laughter.
Always they must see these things and hear them,
Batter of guns and shatter of flying muscles,
Carnage incomparable, and human squander
Rucked too thick for these men's extrication (Silken, 195).

The ghost like existence of these 'mental cases' has a history at its back, ridden with death and guilt like gothic backgrounds; which leads to their alienation and sufferings like that of Geordie in "Another World". World War I stole ten millions of their lives; while devouring a generation of male youth between 16 and 30 it caused sentimental and social void for millions left over tortured and injured--- hence resulting into political and social blisters that were hardly cured. German soldier in Geordie's fantasies is such a blister which is persistently there for him even several years after the war when his grandchild also has thirteen years old daughter. By showing the Victorian ghost of a young girl being suspected as her brother's murderer on one side and by exhibiting the traumatized 'ever present' state of Geordie due to killing his brother Harry at war on the other side, Barker has drawn a parallel between Gothic haunting and war trauma which is unfolded by Nick and the readers simultaneously. In a claustrophobic situation- where Nicks runs after answers and sympathies, Fran yearns for respite, Miranda for her parents, Gareth for isolation and computer games, Geordie for peace and so on-- all this haunting and trauma is interlinked in such a tangled chaos that not even the readers can find their way out, let alone the characters.

This chaos is formed by the poisonous fangs of both past and present. The novel has given birth to a

shattering family, the dark history of Franshaws, the legacy of 1914-1918 in the haunting of Geordie with all the elements merging and distorting distinctions between past and present. That is why ghosts come into present and living beings keep lost in past, and that is why Geordie's 80 years old bayonet wound hurts more than his current stomach wound. The horror is not of the repetition of the past but of its being consistently 'present', which makes 'another world' of the past war and ghosts belong very much to this world, hence giving ironic undertones to the title itself.

This past is very much present in the life of the novelist as well who was born during Second World War with her father killed in the war, making her live with her grandfather along with his war memories and 'bayonet wound'. This non-linear time frame in the life of Pat Barker and in the lives of the characters is reflected in this 'war-gothic'. The 'absent presence' of past makes it more 'present' than the present itself in "Another World"; where ghosts are alive and traumas are persistent; and this pattern is followed throughout in continuous blurring between past and present. As John H. Baker writes:

The absent presence of a ghost signifies undeath, its persistently haunting nature unyieldingly foregrounding unprocessed traumas or obsessions lurking in the unconsciousness of certain persons, historical periods or cultures.... Moreover, as Jacques Derrida has pointed out, 'a spectre is always a revenant', a coming back: the logic of haunting necessarily engenders a collapse of linear time (178).

Similarly, by calling memory the 'presence of the past' Henry Roussou suggests that it is actually representation of the past through reconstruction (4), which is always with us.

So, with every character moving in its own emotional direction and yet claiming for readers' sympathies, 'another world' becomes your own very world. Traumas creep into gothic mansion. Haunting hovers over traumatized soldier and yet none offers any relief, any escape, or any hope. In this traumatized 'War Gothic' real characters fade away saying like ghosts: "I am in hell" (Barker, 246).

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