***Short communication***

**Scars in the Silence: War and Witness in Contemporary English Literature**

**Abstract**

This article investigates how contemporary English literature reconfigures the representation of war by transcending conventional narratives of heroism and nationalism to foreground trauma, moral ambiguity, and fragmented memory. Employing a multidisciplinary methodology that combines close textual analysis with theoretical frameworks drawn from trauma theory, ethical witness theory, and postcolonial war studies, the study critically engages with key texts including Pat Barker’s *Regeneration*, Sebastian Faulks’s *Birdsong*, Ian McEwan’s *Saturday*, Chigozie Obioma’s *The Road to the Country*, and Yumna Kassab’s *Politica*. The central research questions explore how these narratives articulate the psychological scars of conflict, challenge dominant war discourses, and address the silences imposed by cultural and political erasures. By analysing literary form, character psychology, and intertextual dialogues, the article elucidates the ways in which contemporary authors negotiate the ethical complexities of bearing witness to violence. It also integrates recent scholarly debates to position these works within broader conversations on war and memory. The study concludes by suggesting avenues for further research, including comparative studies of war literature across cultures and the impact of digital media on the evolving discourse of war witness in literature. Ultimately, the article argues that contemporary war literature functions not only as testimony to trauma but as a vital act of moral remembrance and resistance.

**Keywords**: war narratives, trauma, memory, moral ambiguity, postcolonial conflict, fragmented narrative, repression of violence

**Introduction**

Contemporary English literature represents war as a complex phenomenon and moves beyond traditional narratives of heroism and nationalism to depict the psychological trauma, moral ambiguity, and fragmented identities experienced by individuals. Post-9/11 conflicts and global civil wars have invited writers to interrogate violence not only as a social rupture but also as an internal crisis. Through novels such as Pat Barker’s *Regeneration*, Sebastian Faulks’s *Birdsong*, Ian McEwan’s *Saturday*, Chigozie Obioma’s *The Road to the Country*, and Oleksandr Mykhed’s *The Language of War*, contemporary authors reconstruct warfare—whether historical or modern—as deeply personal and culturally nuanced.

This article has employed qualitative, interpretive literary analysis as its primary method. Through close reading of select contemporary novels and integration of critical commentary from scholarly journals, book reviews, and literary theory, the study examines how war is represented in form, character, voice, and narrative structure. The method consists of:

1. Thematic analysis of identifying recurring themes such as trauma, moral ambiguity, memory, silence, and postcolonial perspectives across texts.
2. Intertextual comparison of linking the novels to one another and to earlier war literature while situating them within a tradition of war representation.
3. Historical-contextual analysis of positioning each novel within its socio-political moment like post-9/11, Biafran War, Syrian crisis, and Russian-Ukrainian war.
4. Critical synthesis of drawing on secondary scholarly sources, including recent journal articles and literary criticism, to support interpretations and align the analysis with current debates in war literature studies.
5. Narratological focus to examine narrative fragmentation, nonlinear structure, and point of view to understand how literary form reflects war’s disorienting and traumatic nature.

This blended literary-critical method allows the article to both interpret individual novels deeply and identify broader representational trends in contemporary English war literature.

The study of war in contemporary English literature has evolved significantly since the dominance of First and Second World War narratives. Scholars have increasingly turned to questions of trauma, memory, morality, and representation and sought to understand how literature responds to both global conflicts and internal crises. This review surveys critical literature across five major areas relevant to the current study: trauma and the body, post-9/11 ethical dilemmas, postcolonial and global war writing, literary form, and the politics of memory.

Building on the foundational trauma theories of Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra, contemporary scholars examine how modern war literature stages the rupture of individual and cultural memory. Patricia E. Johnson (2004) argues that Pat Barker’s *Regeneration* disrupts sanitized war discourse by reintegrating the materiality of injured bodies into the narrative, thus restoring the “corporeal significance” of wartime suffering. Sebastian Faulks’s *Birdsong* is likewise seen as a counter-narrative to collective forgetting. Jerome de Groot (2010) describes *Birdsong* as “historiographic metafiction,” where war trauma is transmitted across generations and demands recognition beyond commemorative rituals. These studies foreground the necessity of re-embodying war’s cost to challenge abstraction and national myth-making.

War in contemporary fiction is no longer limited to the battlefield but is embedded within domestic and ethical terrains. Ian McEwan’s *Saturday* is emblematic of this shift. Scholars such as Kellner (2022) argue that McEwan’s portrayal of a liberal intellectual justifying the Iraq War problematizes the notion of “good violence.” McEwan’s nuanced moral mapping aligns with what Žižek identifies as “liberal complicity” where war becomes an extension of rational, humanitarian discourse. Such criticism highlights a central tension in post-9/11 literature: how fiction negotiates the language of intervention and terror in everyday life.

Recent scholarship has expanded the focus of war literature to include conflicts beyond Euro-American borders. Nasser Mufti’s *Civilizing War* (2018) critiques the Western monopoly on war narratives and advocates for the inclusion of postcolonial wars in the literary canon. Chigozie Obioma’s *The Road to the Country* (2024), centred on the Biafran War, and Oleksandr Mykhed’s *The Language of War* (2023), which documents the Russian invasion of Ukraine, exemplify this global turn. These works, as reviewed in *The Guardian* and *Financial Times*, blur the lines between testimony, history, and fiction, allowing for a literary ethics rooted in plural perspectives.

Formal innovation is a recurring theme in the literature on war representation. Yumna Kassab’s *Politica* (2023) has received critical praise for its vignette-driven, nonlinear structure that mirrors the disorientation of war. As noted by *The Guardian* (2024), the novel’s form reflects the psychological splintering experienced by survivors and resists totalizing narratives. This trend is supported by narratologists like Brian Richardson, who argue that fragmented temporality in war fiction “enacts the trauma it represents.” Such formal strategies challenge linear heroic arcs and reorient readers toward ambiguity, silence, and rupture.

The literature also interrogates the ethics of representing suffering and violence. Scholars caution against aestheticizing trauma or appropriating voices of victims. Roger Luckhurst (2008) emphasizes the “responsibility of witness” in trauma fiction, a principle evident in the works of Barker and Faulks. These authors use fiction to fill in archival gaps and restore silenced narratives. Recent global works such as Mykhed’s memoir and Obioma’s fiction function not only as literary art but also as acts of historical testimony and places narrative in the service of justice and remembrance.

The article “Scars in the Silence: War and Witness in Contemporary English Literature” poses the following two research questions to guide a comprehensive interpretive analysis of the selected texts.

1. How do contemporary English novels reframe the experience of war through trauma and memory rather than through traditional heroism or nationalism?
2. In what ways do postcolonial and global contemporary war narratives challenge Western-centric representations of war in English literature?

The following thesis statement captures the article’s critical focus on literary form, thematic depth, and ethical responsibility, while also inviting reflection on how literature reshapes collective understanding of war: *Contemporary English literature reimagines war not as a theatre of heroism but as a fractured terrain of trauma, memory, and moral ambiguity, where authors use disrupted narratives, postcolonial voices, and psychological realism to confront the silences left by history and reclaim literature’s role as a medium of witness and ethical resistance*.

**Discussion**

Pat Barker’s *Regeneration* (1991) exemplifies contemporary war literature’s focus on psychological trauma. Barker, informed by her research into First World War soldiers, challenges sanitized remembrance by emphasizing visceral injury. Literary critic Patricia E. Johnson observes that Barker’s novel “breaks the boundaries created by modern society's abstraction of war and its casualties” and employs synecdoche to “re‑present mutilation and death” so readers confront the corporeal reality of conflict. Barker speaks of soldiers who “don’t come back alright,” either physically or mentally, and she insists: “the trilogy is trying to tell something about the parts of war that don’t get into the official accounts.” Similarly, Sebastian Faulks’s *Birdsong* (1993) functions as a work of historiographic metafiction, recovering suppressed narratives. Jerome de Groot highlights that Faulks aims to show “the unknowability of the horror of war” by juxtaposing different narrative perspectives. Faulks’s vivid depiction of the Somme acts as a test of human endurance and explores how combat shatters identities and memory. Thus, both novels foreground trauma—physical, psychological, and narrative—as central to war’s literary representation, countering grand historical accounts with intimate, fragmentary truths.

Ian McEwan’s *Saturday* (2005) situates domestic life within the shadow of the impending Iraq War. Drawing from realist fiction and critical discourse, McEwan’s protagonist, neurosurgeon Henry Perowne, negotiates both personal and global anxieties. A recent study describes McEwan’s structuring of violence into “legitimate,” “soft,” “justifiable,” and “inevitable” forms—with Perowne’s assertion, “Like I said, I’m not for any war. But this one could be the lesser evil.” The novel highlights how the language of war enables moral confusion: once “good” violence is framed, justifications proliferate. McEwan thus illustrates the ethical entanglement of liberal Western subjects caught in the rhetoric of humanitarian war. These moral ambiguities reflect a critical shift: contemporary war narratives interrogate political rationales and expose how individual agency becomes compromised within discourses of necessity and good intentions.

Contemporary English literature also extends to global war narratives and challenges Eurocentric war memory. Chigozie Obioma’s *The Road to the Country* (2024) turns to the Biafran War (1967–70) and combines Igbo cosmology and brutal trench warfare. As the *Financial Times* notes, Obioma’s writing “vividly encapsulates the brutal reality of the Biafran War” and parallels Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* in its depiction of “harrowing trench warfare and deep comradeship.” Obioma writes: “If it shocks you, then it can haunt you; if it haunts you, it can damage you,” a line that echoes psychological insights elsewhere in contemporary war fiction. Likewise, Ukrainian soldier‑writer Oleksandr Mykhed’s nonfiction *The Language of War* (2023) offers an unflinching account of the Russian‑Ukrainian conflict. *The Guardian* praises its “intense expression of anger, patriotism, and profound grief” and documents civilian suffering and war-induced cultural trauma. These narratives diversify representations of war, embed them in varied cultural and geopolitical contexts, and illustrates that the wounds of conflict stretch far beyond Western theatres.

A further trait of contemporary war literature is its formal experimentation. Yumna Kassab’s novel *Politica* (2023), set in an unnamed Middle Eastern war zone, uses fragmented, nonlinear vignettes. The Guardian notes that Kassab’s “structure mirrors the chaos and disjunctions of war” and renders psychological scars and moral complexity. Through vignettes of a resistance leader, a wife, a daughter-turned-successor, and survivors, Kassab pluralizes the war narrative, resisting coherent or heroic framing. Such fragmentation contrasts sharply with previous chronological war narratives and emphasizes breakdown, both of society and narrative coherence itself, as intrinsic manifestations of conflict.

Writers of contemporary war literature critically interrogate memory and forgetting. Both *Regeneration* and *Birdsong* engage in strategies of “recovering history” and “breaking silence.” Faulks’s work, for example, employs archival recovery to “add meaning to contemporary life” by reconnecting trauma to the present. Similarly, Barker’s use of frank depictions of bodily harm and loss addresses what Johnson describes as society’s tendency to abstract casualties; Barker deliberately reunites “language and material substance” in depicting trauma. This thematic drive reflects late‑twentieth and early‑twenty‑first century preoccupations with testifying against war’s erasure and reaffirming memory as moral action.

**War Theories that Support “Scars in the Silence”**

This section deals with theoretical foundations on how war theories support and deepen the central arguments of the study titled “Scars in the Silence: War and Witness in Contemporary English Literature.” The discussion draws on a range of relevant theoretical frameworks—including trauma theory, cultural memory, just war theory, postcolonial war theory, and narratology—to show how they inform both the interpretation of texts and the methodological stance of the study.

The most direct theoretical underpinning of this study is trauma theory, particularly the work of Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra. Caruth emphasizes that trauma resists narrative closure and instead emerges in fragmented, repetitive, and delayed forms: “To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 4). This resonates deeply with how *Birdsong*, *Regeneration*, and *The Road to the Country* construct war as a psychological and narrative rupture rather than a linear sequence of events. In these novels, characters experience dislocation in memory, identity, and language—a form of “scar” that lingers long after the war ends. Trauma theory helps explain why such literature uses fractured chronology, unreliable narration, or dual timelines: the form itself becomes an index of psychic disruption. LaCapra further argues that literature can be a space of “working through” trauma—a process that allows memory to be reintegrated without being resolved or erased (*Writing History, Writing Trauma*). The texts chosen in the study operate within this ethical framework: they do not seek to simplify war but to witness its irreconcilable contradictions.

Nasser Mufti’s concept of “civilizing war” critiques how imperial discourse frames war as a project of order and moral superiority. In *Civilizing War*, Mufti reveals how postcolonial literatures expose this hypocrisy, narrating war instead as a process of cultural devastation and fragmentation. The study draws on this insight through its inclusion of Obioma’s *The Road to the Country* and Kassab’s *Politica*, which highlight indigenous suffering and complicate binary narratives of good versus evil. These texts reflect what Elleke Boehmer calls “postcolonial re-inscriptions of history,” where war is not a geopolitical abstraction but a lived disruption of community, kinship, and voice. The use of English by non-Western writers also invites a postcolonial lens: war is mediated through the language of former colonial powers, challenging readers to reckon with whose memory and trauma are being centred.

War literature today is often a second-generation project, where writers attempt to reconstruct the silences of previous generations. This is particularly evident in *Birdsong*, where Elizabeth’s investigation into her grandfather’s war experience becomes a form of archival retrieval—an effort to make sense of what has been omitted from official histories. Cultural memory theory, especially that of Aleida Assmann and Marianne Hirsch, for example, postmemory, supports the study’s argument that literature functions as an alternate memory site. These novels become acts of remembrance that bridge temporal gaps and resist collective amnesia. As Hirsch notes, “Postmemory... describes the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right” (*Family Frames*, 22).

While not a literary theory per se, just war theory, rooted in Augustine, Aquinas, and later modern philosophers, provides an ethical background to the critique in contemporary war novels. The core principles—*jus ad bellum* [just cause for war] and *jus in bello* [just conduct in war]—are repeatedly undermined in these texts. In Kassab’s *Politica*, for example, the atomized narratives offer no unified moral high ground and reflect the erosion of traditional war ethics in the face of modern state violence, propaganda, and civilian targeting. This complements critiques by theorists like Michael Walzer and Judith Butler, who question the applicability of just war frameworks in asymmetrical or ideological conflicts. The study engages these critiques by showing how literature highlights not only physical destruction but also the collapse of ethical coherence under wartime conditions.

Finally, narrative theory, particularly that of Brian Richardson and Roger Luckhurst, supports the study’s attention to how literary form encodes the disorientation of war. Richardson’s work on unnatural narration explains why fragmented or multi-perspectival narration emerges in trauma literature—it mimics the fractured consciousness of survivors. Luckhurst, in *The Trauma Question*, emphasizes that literary form is often the only accessible representation of inaccessibility—a way of showing the unshowable. The silence, gaps, and recursive structures in the selected novels are not simply stylistic; they enact the psychic economy of trauma itself.

**Explanatory Response to Research Questions 1**

Contemporary English literature reframes war by shifting the narrative emphasis from valour and patriotism to the interior landscapes of trauma, fragmented memory, and psychological survival. In Pat Barker’s *Regeneration trilogy*, particularly the first novel, war is not glorified but rather psychologized through the lens of shell-shocked soldiers like Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen. Their therapy sessions with Dr. Rivers foreground the deep psychological rupture caused by combat and reveal war as an enduring affliction rather than a heroic endeavour. Barker’s work thus decentres the battlefield and centres the mind as the site of struggle and aligns with trauma theorists like Cathy Caruth, who argue that “trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way its very unassimilated nature returns to haunt the survivor” (*Unclaimed Experience* 4).

Similarly, Sebastian Faulks’s *Birdsong* employs a dual temporal structure by interweaving the trench warfare of Stephen Wraysford’s experience with the 1970s narrative of his granddaughter, Elizabeth, who tries to recover his forgotten history. This intergenerational memory framework emphasizes how war’s trauma transcends time and affects those who were never directly involved. Faulks critiques the nationalistic erasure of individual suffering by showing that “there are parts of war that simply do not end” (Faulks 408). In both novels, trauma becomes a counter-discourse to national mythologies. Instead of celebrating war as a rite of passage, these authors use literary fiction to bear witness to its lingering psychological and cultural damage.

**Explanatory Response to Research Questions 1**

Postcolonial and global war narratives in contemporary English literature expand the spatial and ethical boundaries of war fiction and challenge the traditional Euro-American axis that dominates war storytelling. Chigozie Obioma’s *The Road to the Country* (2024), set during the Biafran War, offers a Nigerian perspective that resists the colonial logic of silence and suppression. The protagonist, Kunle, is drawn into a civil conflict that fractures his identity, and the novel narrates the war as a moral and cultural tragedy rather than a militaristic campaign. Obioma’s depiction of the Biafran War explores indigenous suffering, state failure, and emotional dislocation—elements often ignored in Western war literature. As Nasser Mufti argues, “postcolonial war writing undermines the coherence of liberal, civilizational discourse by exposing its entanglement in violence” (*Civilizing War* 132).

Similarly, Yumna Kassab’s *Politica* (2023) represents war not through linear plot but through a fragmentary, aphoristic structure. Each brief narrative voice suggests the complexity and futility of war in Middle Eastern contexts and emphasizes how everyday civilians bear the burden of conflict. As Gillian Slovo notes in her review, Kassab “denies the reader the luxury of clarity” and mirrors the moral and political opacity of modern wars (*The Guardian*, 2024). The novel’s refusal to anchor itself in a single nation or ideology critiques the Western demand for coherence and resolution in war stories. These global perspectives contest dominant narratives that portray war through Western military or diplomatic lenses. Instead, they offer a polyphonic, pluralistic, and ethically charged portrayal of warfare—shifting the axis of war literature to include colonized, displaced, and silenced voices.

**Suggestions**

Here are six suggestions for further research inspired by the themes, gaps, and innovations identified in the article “Scars in the Silence: War and Witness in Contemporary English Literature.” These suggestions build upon the current focus on trauma, global perspectives, and literary form in war representation and are suitable for thesis topics, journal articles, or advanced seminars.

1. Investigation of how trauma is portrayed in war narratives from different cultural or geopolitical contexts—e.g., British vs. Nigerian vs. Ukrainian literature.
2. Exploration of how contemporary war novels represent gendered experiences of war, including the roles of women as nurses, victims, resistors, and narrators.
3. Critically assessment of the ethical implications of representing real-life conflicts like the Iraq War, Biafra, and Ukraine in fiction.
4. Analysis of the use of experimental narrative structures—fragments, nonlinear chronology, polyphony—in representing disorientation and trauma in war.
5. Examination of how contemporary war fiction addresses the ecological consequences of conflict—deforestation, displacement, and climate impact.
6. The study of how literature explores the silence and inheritance of war memory across generations—especially the psychological effects on descendants.

**Conclusion**

Contemporary English literature’s representation of war is marked by realistic, fragmented, and morally sensitive narratives. From Barker’s and Faulks’s excavations of First World War trauma to McEwan’s post-9/11 moral probing, from Obioma’s postcolonial trench realism to Kassab’s vignettes of modern martyrdom, current writing refuses simplistic heroism. Instead, it foregrounds the body, the psyche, and fractured memory. These works share a common preoccupation: war cannot be represented through grand narratives alone; it must be reclaimed through personal testimonies, cultural specificity, and formal experimentation. They challenge readers to confront brutality, ambiguity, and the scars of collective violence and affirm literature’s role in preserving ethical memory.

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