

Forging Resilience in the Crucible of War: A Psychological Analysis of Trauma, Moral Injury and Reintegration in Elizabeth Ann Scarborough's *The Healer's War*

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Abstract.

The Healer War by Elizabeth Ann Scarborough is a critical psychological reading discussed in the paper using Glenn E. Richardson metatheory of resilience and resiliency (1988). It suggests that the main character, a nurse Kathleen "Kitty" McCulley, passes through the three phases of the Richardson model - Homeostasis, Disruption, and Reintegration, and shows how trauma disrupts and recreates the self. This paper investigates how Scarborough combines realism and fantasy in her narrative to depict psychological survival during the devastation of war using qualitative textual analysis. The fact that Kitty is taken on a journey of stability by experiencing moral, emotional and existential breakdowns before leading to reintegration shows the deep-seated involvement of trauma and healing in the novel. The magic amulet is not seen as a form of escapism and it is used as a metaphor to reach inner strength. By presenting the complex trauma of Vietnam through moral injury, systematic failures and gendered violence, Scarborough describes a vision of recovery as transformation. Finally, *The Healer War* is a sympathetic image of the patched-up healer who only comes to terms with the scars as a way of wisdom to be healed. The paper will conclude that the novel by Scarborough is aligned with such theorists of trauma as Judith Herman and Bessel van der Kolk in describing the process of healing as a process of integration and makes the novel a monumental work in the literature of the Vietnam War and trauma studies.

Keywords: Trauma Studies, Resilience, Vietnam War Literature, Literary Psychology, Elizabeth Ann Scarborough.

1. Introduction

The stories about the struggle of the male soldiers with combat trauma dominated Vietnam War literature (Herr, 1977; O'Brien, 1990). This kind of attention tends to marginalise women who worked as nurses, healers and observed the destruction of war (Elshtain, 1987; Norman, 1990). *The Healer War* by Scarborough bridges this gap by focusing on a psychological adventure of a woman who is a nurse in the moral and emotional remnant of Vietnam. Inspired by her personal experience as an American Army nurse, Scarborough blends the world of reality with the fantastic, in a hybrid narrative that touches the material and metaphysical aspects of healing.

The magical nature that Scarborough incorporates by way of the healing amulet serves as a psychological metaphor of survival and making sense of trauma. The analysis uses the framework of Glenn E.

Richardson as its main model, which is the Metatheory of Resilience and Resiliency (2002). Richardson describes a sequence of three stages of human reaction to adversity: Homeostasis (equilibrium), Disruption (trauma), and Reintegration (adaptation or transformation). The application of the psychological development of Kitty McCulley to this model shows how *The Healer War* encompasses the breakage and establishment of identity in extreme situations.

In this perspective, the story of Scarborough turns out not just as a story of war but as an in-depth examination of psychological strength - a story of solid reintegration with the traumatised self coming out, transformed but better.

1.1. Research Gap

The main research gap that is being filled is the high level of criticism of female veteran stories that are written using the elements of the hybrid or speculative genres of the Vietnam War literature. The approach to male, realist combat storytelling has led to the under-theorization of such texts as *The Healer War*, in which elements of fantasy can too often be discounted instead of being seen as complex metaphors to psychological events (e.g., resilience activation or identity integration).

2. Theoretical Framework:

In his article, Metatheory of Resilience and Resiliency by Glenn E. Richardson (2002), a paradigm shift to the concept of the human reaction to extreme adversity is elaborated. By contrast to other models, which tended to define resilience as a personality characteristic or only a lack of pathology, Richardson views resilience as an inherent process of restorative lifelong dynamics, an innate human drive to health and meaning. The critical benefit of the theory to the analysis of *The Healer War* is that the theory expressly provides space in the transformation and post-traumatic growth (PTG) as a result, which is exactly what Scarborough needs in her story of great personal transformation.

The psychological journey is broken into the three sequential stages:

2.1. Homeostasis: Biopsychospiritual Comfort Zone

This is the first step, which is the psychological and emotional baseline of an individual, a balance in which the inner resources (coping mechanisms, stable belief systems, social roles) are adequate to deal with stressors on a daily basis. It is the schemata of self and world. In the case of Kathleen, commonly referred to as Kitty, McCulley, this level is well-infused with her untested idealism as a nurse, which was characterised by the order and neatness of her life before the war and her unproven faith in the ethical purity of her healing profession. In this first level, there is a high-fidelity psychological thermometer; the more the first stability, the more it measures the ensuing disturbance.

2.2. Disruption:

The process of disruption is instigated by adversity, which, in this instance, is the ethically undefined and violent theatre of the Vietnam War, crushing and breaking the homeostatic processes. It is characterised by a sense of disequilibrium, self-identity fragmentation and doubting existence. The experience Kitty undergoes is more than just a stressful event:

Moral Disruption: The fact that she accidentally overdoses on a Vietnamese patient breaks her personal moral code, which causes a severe moral wound that breaks the essence of the helper and a good person, she is (Litz et al., 2009).

Systemic Disruption: The experience of seeing institutional racism, bureaucratic apathy, and a collapse of the military leadership (the systems she was sworn to uphold) causes her to lose her faith in the external authority and meaning, which is in line with Judith Herman (1997) saying that the trauma annihilates the systems of care. It is the profundity of this split that prompts the radical remodelling of self which preconditions the all-important final stage.

2.3. Reintegration: The Adaptive Response and Trajectories

The psychological mechanism of adapting to the ruptured post-trauma condition is called reintegration. Richardson stands out in outlining four potential, non-linear paths, and provides a different spectrum of recovery:

Dysfunctional Reintegration: The dysfunctional reaction (e.g., addiction, long-lasting isolation, avoidance behaviors). It is briefly into this that Kitty plunges when she goes home and feels the sterility of civilian life.

Reintegration with Loss: This is a weaker state in which the person is functioning but has profound unintegrated scars and has lowered psychological level of functioning.

Return to Homeostasis: It is a challenging yet eventually achievable reversion to the previous baseline with no major development or comprehension.

Resilient Reintegration: The ultimate of adaptation. This person comes out not only healed, but essentially changed, and empowered, and with new wisdom learned directly through adversity. This is a direction that Kitty is heading at and that she incorporates her traumatic experiences into a novel and more empathetic and authoritative character, which is PTG in accordance with Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996).

3. Methodology

The methodology framework is based on a solid interdisciplinary approach where *The Healer's War* is a simulated psychological case file whose fictional aspects can be proven as having psychological truth. The rigorous qualitative textual analysis is traversed to the clinical interpretation through the Model by Richardson. The methodological strength is the decision to prioritise Richardson (2002) in correspondence to all other trauma theorists. Although the models of trauma, such as those of Judith Herman (1997), which dwell on the elements of safety, remembrance, and mourning, can be considered the crucial elements of clinical stabilisation, they do not necessarily contribute to the focus on transcendence.

The Metatheory by Richardson has been selected strategically due to its central focus: great dividend of adversity (Resilient Reintegration), which strictly fits the narrative version of Scarborough, who deliberately concludes with growth instead of cynical resignation. The methodology determines that we should seek evidence of the new meaning and broadened self-knowledge rather than the disappearance of symptoms.

3.1. Three Phase Qualitative Coding Process

The three-phase systematic method ensures the validity of the textual interpretation:

Narrative Segmentation and Alignment: The text was divided according to significant structural divisions and ensured that the theoretical stages (Homeostasis, Disruption, Reintegration) were rightly aligned with the chronology of the novel (pre-war, in-country, post-return). This provides a definite spatial and temporal pattern of the psychological analysis.

Thematic Coding and Saturation: It included micro-reading of particular psychological terms. Internal monologues and dialogue as well as symbolic descriptions were coded. The major codes were: Moral Betrayal, Systemic Indifference, Alienation, Locus of Control Shift and Post-traumatic Meaning-Making. This was aimed at attaining thematic saturation, such that all the available evidence to the psychological assertions was removed.

Syntactic Interpretation through the Lens of Richardson: The coded data were synthesised by translating the events in the literature into the outcomes of Richardson. Indicatively, the fact that Kitty chose to ignore the conventional medical guidelines in the jungle and instead turned to the amulet was viewed as the Disruption of her professional schema which prompted the activation of her Natural Resilience (Masten, 2001), thus marking the beginning of the Resilient Reintegration. Such strict translation eliminates subjective jumping and bases the final argument in the selected theoretical framework.

4. Results

Stage 1: Homeostasis- Pre-War Balance

At the start of the novel, the life of Kitty is one that is stable and innocent. The safety and predictability of her psychological condition can be traced to her pink-painted room and the treasured glass cat figurines (Scarborough, 1988). Her nursing persona is based on order and compassion.

Stage 2: Shock -The Breaking of Equilibrium

Vietnam turns out to be a topography of dislocation. The unintentional overdose of a young Vietnamese girl by Kitty discredits her identity as a healer and brings moral injury in her life (Litz et al., 2009). The ignorance of white physicians towards kitchen Vietnamese patients breaks Kitty's belief in the healing system, which is similar to the views of Judith Herman that trauma destroys the systems of care and meaning that support the existence of humans (Herman, 1997). The magical amulet, which is granted to Kitty by a dying healer, symbolises the catalyst of the psychological resources of resilience, projecting the empathy and intuition, which are latent in Kitty, in line with the concept of ordinary magic proposed by Masten (Masten, 2001).

Stage 3: Reintegration - The Battle to Find Purpose

When Kitty comes back to the United States, the alienation is an expression of post-war dislocation (Lifton, 1973), and, at first, it describes Dysfunctional Reintegration, which is in line with what van der Kolk found; the trauma disconnects the sense of continuity (van der Kolk, 2014). Her slow reconnection with care giving and integration of her trauma is the beginning of Resilient Reintegration, which is the manifestation of post-traumatic growth (Tadeschi and Calhoun, 1996).

5. Literary Analysis and Discussion: Unpacking the Trauma Landscape

It goes beyond the act of mapping and into the deep psychological role of the essential narrative approaches proving the literary nature of discussing the complex trauma in Scarborough.

5.1. Dynamics of Moral Injury and the Wounded Healer

The traumatic event that defines Kitty is the moral injury (Shay, 1994) which is captured as an attack on conscience. The fear of death is not the only trauma, and it is the violation of her holiness of healing that is inside her. This crisis makes her the Wounded Healer, a mythic and psychological archetype which means that a person has to cope with his or her greatest wound in order to empathise deeply and possess true healing ability. The systemic moral injury of the war and the sight of colleagues practising institutional racism and neglect is intensified by this inner struggle which in turn is a deep challenge to the very possibility of a moral universe. Her own suffering is a miniature of the overall moral and spiritual harm done by the war.

5.2. The Amulet: Externalised Metaphor of Intrinsic Strength

A purely literary interpretation would reject the magic amulet; a psychological reading is the one that proves its role as a transition object which is the internal locus of control. The amulet in the jungle is used as a permission structure when stripped of her medical bag, institutional authority and professional certainty. It gives her the psychological power to believe her latent wisdom and intuition to allure failed external protocols. It is the literary expression of the kind of the so-called ordinary magic as Ann Masten (2001) defines it: the amulet is not a supernatural power, but a physical representation of the unseen, natural ability to practise self-regulation and meaning-making, which appears when all the external scaffolding breaks down. Its role is essential: to make it possible to transfer the external reliance (depending on the U.S. Army and its medicine) to the internal one (depending on intuition and personal ethics).

5.3. Rather than Recalling Normality: Making Integration Growing

This is seen through the way Scarborough creatively depicts the alienation and the loss of time among the veterans as they come back to civil life (Lifton, 1973). The banality of American life after the war drives Kitty into the stage of Dysfunctional Reintegration (Richardson, 2002) wherein the chaos within her body collides violently with the stillness of the outside world. It is integration rather than erasure that allows her to recover in the end. She does not want to go back to the innocence of Homeostasis of her pink-painted room, but instead, she attains Resilient Reintegration because she will now live with her scars as a part of her identity. It is the acceptance of suffering as a source of wisdom and renewed purpose, this synthesis, the literary expression of Post-Traumatic Growth (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 1996), which proves that the climax of the narrative is not just survival, but a complicated, long-lasting psychological change.

6. Conclusion: Synthesis, Transformation and Critical Implication

The Healer's War is a rich piece of psychological realism disguised behind a genre, assassin of a form. The step-by-step overlay on Richardson (2002) Metatheory shows conclusively how Kitty McCulley moved through a perfect Homeostasis to an existential Disruption to a painful, transformative Resilient Reintegration. The most important fact the magical amulet is a metaphor used to activate the elements of natural resilience and

internal locus of control, makes the novel a highly psychological work. Moreover, the fact that the story is consistent with modern trauma theorists is simply indisputable:

1. Recovery is demonstrated as a non-linear process of making sense and identity reformation, which is at the core of the work by van der Kolk (2014) concerning integration.
2. The stress on the systemic level of moral failures recalls the attention to the sociopolitical context of trauma by Herman (1997).

The following are the three critical implications of this analysis:

Genre and Psychological Depth: It confirms the application of interdisciplinary models to discover deeper psychological interest in speculative and hybrid genres, and asks critics to consider fantasy on a deeper level.

Trauma Studies Value: It is a very engaging narrative presentation on the archetype of the wounded healer that is carried out as an act of moral injury and that emphasises the less studied experience of female veterans, where looking and taking care instead of fighting was the focus of trauma.

Vietnam Literature Revision: By providing an alternative, gendered, view of the costs of caring in the midst of moral ruin, the paper establishes the position of *The Healer's War* as a central, revisionary work that extends the focus and ethical dimension of the Vietnam War literary canon.

In its ultimate manifestation, *The Healer War* is perceived as not only a chronicle of a survival, but a positive statement of the human soul as being able to create compassionate wisdom out of the furnace of a war.

7. Findings

It is evident that *The Healer War* can be mapped onto Metatheory (2002), which created three main findings:

1. **Resilient Reintegration Verified:** Resilient Reintegration trajectory is yielded in the experience of the main character, Kitty McCulley, who proves that recovery is a transformational process (Post-Traumatic Growth) in which the trauma is assimilated to a more complex, empathetic self, not a simple recovery.
2. **Amulet as Internal Locus of Control:** The magical amulet is used as a psychological metaphor of the mobilisation of inherent strength and internal locus of control transformation. It externalises the everyday magic (Masten, 2001) that is needed when external systems (military, medical) are broken.
3. **Redefining Moral Injury:** the novel describes the definition of trauma as mainly a moral injury (Litz et al., 2009; Shay, 1994)- the betrayal of the ethical duty. This discovery shifts the experience of the female veterans inside the Vietnam literature, as the emphasis lies on the trauma of observing the failures of the system, and the helplessness to stop the suffering.

8. Limitations

1. **Single-Text Focus:** The results are obtained on the basis of the qualitative analysis of one novel. The amulet has a particular function that the arc of moral injury is, and this amulet needs to be comparatively studied.
2. **Theoretical Specificity:** The heavy emphasis on the developmental-oriented framework by Richardson did not allow applying other clinical frameworks in depth (e.g. neurobiological aspects of PTSD by van der Kolk, 2014) to the story.

3. Genre Bias: It is based on the interpretation based on the elevation of a text that is a hybrid genre; the interpretation is still vulnerable to continuous critical prejudice against speculative texts in literary traditions.

9. Scope for Further Research

1. Comparative Resilience Study: Examine the reliability of the archetype of the moral injury/wounded healer in different genres(memoir vs. fiction) written by women veterans of Vietnam.
2. Speculative Trauma Metaphors: Complete a cross-genre analysis where writers have also explored fantasy, sci-Fi or supernatural aspects as a way to externalize internal trauma conditions such as dissociation or locus of control disruption in modern trauma fiction.
3. Gendered Moral Injury: Study the difference in the effect of moral injury depending on gender roles in the military settings: comparing the impact of trauma related to actions done (usually male) with the impact of trauma related to the actions seen or not done to prevent (usually female caregivers).

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