



People's Democratic Republic of Algeria
Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research
Dr. Moulay Tahar University, Saida
Faculty of Letters, Languages and Arts
Department of English Language and Literature

War Trauma and Healing in “The Yellow Birds” by Kevin Powers

Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of *Master* in
Literature and Civilization

Presented by:

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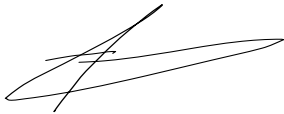
Declaration of originality

I hereby declare that this master thesis titled "War Trauma and Healing in The Yellow Birds by Kevin Powers" is entirely my own work, except where otherwise acknowledged. This work has not been submitted in whole or in part for any other degree or qualification at this or any other university. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work.

Date 31/05/24

Name Ikram Boumediene

Signature



Dedication

To myself

To my late father, may he rest in peace.

To my beloved mother

To my supportive husband Zakaria

To my dear sisters Nouda and Hanan

To the most affectionate brothers Abdellatif and Azzedine

To everyone who will read this work.

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Abstract

This research aims to shed light on the traumatic experiences of veterans and the steps they pass to reach healing and recovery in Kiven Powers's novel "The Yellow Birds". It emphasizes the internal struggles of the protagonist "Private John Bartle", his suffering from PTSD symptoms even after the war period, his behaviour that reflects his shattered emotions and his ability to recover himself. By applying Freudian psychoanalytic theory and analyzing the non-linear narrative technique that is used by the writer to reflect the semi-autobiographical elements, the study examines two significant ideas: trauma and its relationship with fragmented memories; hope that mirrors the healing process. This research paper contributes to highlighting the concept of contemporary war in literature and stresses its psychological impact on soldiers and veterans during and after the war.

Key words: Freudian Psychoanalytic approach, Healing, Semi-autobiographical novel, The Yellow Birds, Trauma,

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General Introduction

General Introduction:

The Yellow Birds by Kevin Powers published in 2012, discusses the chilling struggles of soldiers during the Iraq War. Many important themes were addressed such as trauma, guilt, violence, fear, hope and healing. Depending on Powers' background as a veteran, he conveys a profound depiction of trauma by applying his creative writing and non-linear structure, thus he succeeded in describing the characters' emotional and psychological troubles. This makes it a highly celebrated novel. This research focuses not only on how characters especially the protagonist "John Bartle" experienced war trauma, but also on the steps he passed towards healing.

While there are numerous of research about the psychological impacts of war on soldiers, there is a prominent gap in understanding how these traumatic experiences influence the soldiers's lives even in the post-war period. Also, most of the studies that discussed this novel centred on the dark side of the novel which is the theme of trauma and neglect the second side which is healing and recovery.

This research contributes to making the reader aware of the evolution of the veteran's psychological state from a soldier in the heart of the battle to an ordinary person in civilian life, therefore helping them to face their trauma and fear, and achieve healing and recovery.

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How does psychoanalysis deal with the concept of War trauma? How does Powers embody this concept based on his service as a veteran?
2. How does creative writing serve as a tool for healing and recovery?
3. How does the theme of war trauma appear in the novel? What were the stages passed by the protagonist from the state of shock to recovery? How does psychoanalysis explain this internal process?

From the above-mentioned research questions, the next research hypothesis:

1. The concept of trauma is widely discussed in psychoanalysis by many writers such as Sigmund Freud. This novel is written by Kevin Powers drawing on his military service and it captures his traumatic experiences so it is a semi-autobiographical novel.

2. Creative writing is considered a mechanism of defence. It is an important way of understanding oneself and confronting past traumatic events releasing negative emotions thus achieving self-recovery.
3. The concept of war trauma is depicted through the protagonist “John Bartle” psychological journey, who experienced the atrocities of war, saw horrific views, and witnessed his friend’s death. On his way to recovery, he needs to pass through the mourning process. To explain the relation between the type of writing, the narrative techniques and trauma, Freudian analysis of the protagonist's unconscious mind is applied.

This research aims to:

1. Shedlights on the concept of war trauma in the context of psychoanalysis. Then discussing briefly Powers' biography and “The Yellow Birds” as a semi-autobiographical novel.
2. Focuses on semi-autobiography and its significance in the healing process.
3. Emphasizes Bartle’s psychological state and the traumatic events he experienced. Drawing attention also to the mechanism of writing and the path towards healing.

Since the majority of the previous studies concentrated on the psychological part of the characters in the novel, and disregarded the biographical elements. The researcher tries to use both; a psychoanalytical approach to analyze the protagonist's internal struggles, and an autobiographical approach to highlight Powers's life as a soldier and then as a civilian.

This research finally attempts to answer the antecedent questions by dividing this study into three chapters. The first theoretical chapter entitled "Contextualizing Trauma" will deal with the concept of trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder within the scope of war. It will also explain the experience of trauma according to the Freudian perspective. By the end, it will be a brief biography of the writer and the cause of merging this novel as semi-autobiographical. The second chapter entitled "Writing in Midst of the Fog" will be divided into two subsections. The first one will be about the use of writing as a coping mechanism and how trauma can be addressed through creative writing, while the second part will discuss the notion of healing and recovery taking into consideration the mourning process. The third chapter is entitled “Analyzing “The Yellow Birds” by Kevin Power. This analytical chapter will portray the protagonist's traumatic experiences, the narrative technique that is used to shape his fragmented memories and his unconscious behaviour. In addition to that the

researcher will explain the idea that writing can be used as a coping mechanism in the context of this novel and he will also list the steps toward healing.

During the organization of this research paper, the researcher faced some problems like difficulty applying the psychoanalytic theory, and the necessity of making a balance between objective academic research and subjective interpretation i.e. the personal biases influenced the research paper.

Chapter I:
Contextualizing Trauma

Chapter I: Contextualizing Trauma

1.1. Introduction

Probably one of the hardest messages and images to convey to the reader is that of war. It takes special talent, the ability to portray vivid images to the imagination of the reader, as well as mastery of the languages for the true image to be received safely and soundly.

Writing about the war and the battlefield is no easy task. It takes true courage to revisit painful memories especially ones which are traumatic. It is a truth universally acknowledged that probably the most traumatic thing one can go through is war. Hence, for a writer to write about his experiences, whether it is non-fiction like autobiographies or the journals of war, or fiction like novels which are heavily based and inspired by real events. In this theoretical chapter we try to shed light on war fiction with special focus on the Iraq War. We will explain the psychoanalytical concepts to be used in the analysis of the novel as well as trauma theory and PTSD. This chapter also discusses the biography of the author to show how his novel is actually semi-autobiographical as the dissertation argues that Powers uses creative writing as a tool for healing his own war trauma.

1.2. Historical Background: The Iraq War

The Iraq War is one of the most controversial wars since 9\11. Unquestionably the Iraq War has had a massive impact on how military interventions are perceived. The terror attacks on the 11th of September 2001 shook the world. As the former US president said, “Our very freedom came under attack in a series of deliberate and deadly terrorist acts” (“President Bush”). The media coverage loaded the minds of the people that Al-Qaeda terrorists hijacked U.S. passenger planes and flew them into both World Trade Centres in New York and the Pentagon in Washington D.C. Almost 3000 people were killed. “The idea that the greatest military and economic power in the world could be attacked to that degree on its shores is unheard of, and it makes the government reassess the threat of international terrorism” (“President Bush”). It was not the attack or the losses that shocked the nation, it was the fact that terrorist actions can be easily done which is horrifying as more attacks can happen.

However, the 9\11 terror attacks were presumably committed by Al-Qaeda who mainly operated out of Afghanistan, while Iraq had nothing to do with it. What has it to do with Iraq? The point is that, for terrorist groups to attain that level of impact in their future attacks they need to employ the use of chemical attacks, biological attacks, and nuclear weapons. That is the threat they perceived. Then, George Bush in his State of the Union

address in January 2002 declared an “Axis of evil arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred [...] the price of indifference would be catastrophic” (George W. Bush White House Archives, 2001). In short, it was not that Iraq had a hand in the 9\11 attacks, it was the supposedly fear that Iraq could have a hand in the next 9\11-like attack, which could be worse if the use of weapons of mass destruction is to be used even though there was no evidence for the existence of these weapons. That is what the U.S. was feeding the minds of its people. The main source of those fears was Iraq’s leader Saddam Hussein and how he refused to cooperate with them when it came to oil reserves.

In short, the Iraq war was initiated by the U.S.-led coalition in 2003 and aimed to disarm Iraq of alleged weapons of mass distraction. The war lasted for nine years, during which thousands of lives were lost and billions of dollars were spent. In 2016 in the Republican nomination battle, Donald Trump bravely stated:

The war in Iraq! We spent two trillion dollars and thousands of lives, we don’t even have it, Iran is taking over Iraq with the second largest oil reserves in the world was a mistake, George Bush made a mistake [...] they lied, they said their weapons of mass destruction, there were none and they knew there were none/ there were no weapons of mass destruction! (“The War in Iraq”)

Trump directly critiques Bush’s administration saying they lied while knowing the truth and that the last thing the U.S. needs is another leader like Bush. The conflict led to the removal of Saddam Hussein but resulted in shattered infrastructure, ongoing political instability, sectarian violence, and insurgency. The war officially ended in 2011, leaving a lasting impact on the policies and social landscape of the Middle East. The war was deeply unpopular in the U.S with many questioning its legitimacy and cause as Trump said in an interview on Fox Business in 2003 after the capture of Saddam Hussein “Look, you have a lot of questions and a lot of people questioning the whole concept of going in [Iraq] in the first place” (Eugene Kiely). It was a major factor in the decline of W. Bush’s presidency. Eventually, the U.S. and its allies withdrew their troops from Iraq. The legacy of the war continues to be felt today, with many arguing that it was a mistake, a big lie from the government and a failure of leadership. Overall, the Iraq war is a complex and controversial conflict that has far-reaching consequences for both Iraq and the world at large.

1.2.1. War Fiction

When we try to define war fiction, there is no better definition for it like the one given by McLoughlin. According to her, the war novel is “a novel in which the primary action takes place on the battlefield, or in a civilian setting (or home front), where the characters are either preoccupied with the preparation for, suffering from the effects of, or recovering from war (06). In general, war fiction is historical literature that is produced to illustrate the consequences of wars and also to reflect upon the period it was written about like the two World Wars, the Cold War, Golf Wars etc. This type of literature provides the reader with an in-depth description of the war in an engaging way and s/he can feel like s/he was a part of it all because of the writing style of authors and the language used.

As far as the Iraq War novels go, there was a survey conducted and published by scholar Roger Luckhurst which reveals the lack of literary coverage of the Iraq war of 2003. Luckhurst argues that “no major literary text provides a clear picture of the invasion, post-operation period, or the following civil war in a way comparable to those written in 9\11 or the Vietnam War” (05).

American novelists who wrote about the Iraq War wanted to portray the war for what it was and how it happened and not how the media presented it. Most of these writers—if not all of them—are war veterans; hence, they know exactly what they are talking about. For many of them, writing novels about the War they took part in was an attempt to respond to the often-asked question: what does it feel like to be on the battlefield? In addition to that, they wanted to portray to civilians the actual adversities of being in the war. However, literature produced about the Iraq war does not only come for the above-mentioned causes. Some writers chose to focus on the Iraqi citizens and their reactions to this horrific war. We focused on the Iraqi war and war fiction because this research aims to scrutinize the concepts of trauma and healing within the context of war. The events of the novel *Understudy* take place during the Iraq war hence the need for a better understanding of that period to comprehend the link we are drawing between literature, healing, and war PTSD. It is therefore logical to dive into all these elements one by one before the analysis of the novel.

1.2.2. Trauma and PTSD

Many of us will experience some kind of trauma during our lifetime. Sometimes we escape with no long-term effects. However, for millions of people, those experiences linger, causing symptoms like flashbacks, nightmares, and negative thoughts that interfere with everyday life. This phenomenon, called post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, is not a personal failing; rather, it is a treatable malfunction of certain biological mechanisms that allow us to cope with dangerous experiences.

The history of PTSD is closely linked to the history of wars and the development of psychological treatments for war trauma. The initial psychological approach to PTSD during World War I was Freudian psychoanalysis, with early research on war trauma conducted primarily by psychoanalysts. Over the past century, the terminology and understanding of combat trauma have evolved. During World War I and the interwar years, it was known as "shell shock" or "war neurosis," which was later termed "battle fatigue" in World War II. The scientific study of PTSD began in World War I when analysts encountered "shell shock" while treating soldiers. Key figures in this work included Matthew Eder, who ran a hospital for affected soldiers in Malta, Sandor Ferenczi in Budapest, and Max Eitingon and Karl Abraham in Berlin. The experiences of World War II further influenced many pioneers of psychodynamic psychology, and their interactions with war victims, including children, helped establish theoretical foundations and effective treatments for PTSD (CHMC-Dubai).

Cathy Caruth defines trauma as "the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena" ("unclaimed" 91). So, even after a crisis is over; escalated levels of stress hormones may last for days, contributing to jittery feelings, nightmares and other previously mentioned symptoms. For most people, these experiences disappear within a few days to a couple of weeks when their stress hormone levels stabilize.

Unfortunately, a small percentage of those who experience trauma have persistent problems—sometimes vanishing temporarily, only to resurface months later. When a person is triggered by something that reminds them directly or even indirectly of the trauma they have, the brain makes him experience a range of negative symptoms including intrusive thoughts like dreams and flashbacks, which are heavily seen in war veterans where they consistently remember the horrific scenes from war, avoiding reminders of trauma, feelings of guilt fear, and anger. We cannot forget the reactive systems which are not only psychological but are also experienced by the psychical body like irritability which is referred to by people

as anger issues, and difficulty sleeping. Not everyone has all the symptoms, nor experience them in the same intensity.

For the sake of this dissertation, we will mainly focus on trauma and PTSD seen in war veterans specifically in those who fought in Iraq. It can be said that the impact of the Iraq War particularly on soldiers is the most dangerous as it left huge psychological damage. Statistically speaking, the numbers are horrifying to think about. According to the National Centre for PTSD, the percentage of veterans who came and were diagnosed with PTSD along with other mental health problems like high functioning anxiety, severe depression and panic attacks was more than 48 per cent (“Mental Health Effects”). What is scarier is that the number does not include all those soldiers who died in the war, the veterans who refused to acknowledge they needed help, and those who committed suicide after returning home. Hence the number would have actually been even higher. As high as this number is, it is just logical that it all came down to this when we consider all the gut-ranching events they witnessed and went through the whole time of their deployment. Seeing dead bodies regularly, dismembered body parts, being shot at, having their war companions killed and being on all the time on alert because of the war can only result in catastrophic outcomes for the human being.

1.2.3. Trauma in Literary Studies and Theory

Trauma studies first developed in the 1990s and it is a field of cultural investigation. As trauma is a psychological phenomenon, trauma theory came from psychoanalysis. We cannot mention psychoanalysis without talking about Freud and his contribution to the field of study. He was not only the father of psychoanalysis but he also contributed to putting into light the concept of trauma. In the words of Anne Whitehead, author and historian, simplifies and summarizes Freud’s view on trauma saying:

For Freud, the concept refers to how certain experiences, impressions and memory traces are revised at a later date to correspond with fresh experiences or with the attainment of a new stage of development. Freud’s conception involves a radical thinking of the causality and temporality of memory. The traumatic incident is not fully acknowledged at the time that it occurs and only becomes an event at some later point of intense emotional crisis. (06)

This passage does not only show us what Freud thought of trauma but also how traumatic experiences can turn into PTSD.

Trauma study critic Kali Tal wrote a book entitled *Worlds of Hurt* where she extensively spoke about trauma in fiction and the important relationship between the trauma

and how it is perceived in society and culture. She states: “Literature of trauma is defined by the identity of its author. Literature of trauma holds at its centre the reconstruction and recuperation of the traumatic experience, but it also actively engaged in an ongoing dialogue with the writings and representations of non-traumatized authors” (14). Hence, it was then essential to adopt and put in use the theory of trauma in the literary field as it would prove to be useful in the analysis of many texts.

Numerous other prominent figures and scholars in this field of study spoke about trauma theory namely Geoffrey H. Hartman who wrote a book entitled *On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies*; and historian LaCapra who provided critical inquiry into the problem of trauma in his book *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Also, trauma as a subject in itself was used by writers through different historical periods.

Finally, this dissertation focuses solely on the period of the 2000s, specifically the trauma and PTSD of soldiers and veterans of the Iraq War as depicted in *The Yellow Birds*. Alongside trauma theory, we adopted a psychoanalytical approach as it is best suited for the reading and analysis of such psychological topics and to well understand the psychological problems stemming from the war and because psychoanalysis addresses how crucial the unconscious mind is.

1.3. Psychoanalysis as a literary theory, War Trauma and PTSD

Psychoanalysis is a psychological theory developed by the Australian Neurologist Sigmund Freud and others in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Psychoanalysis has had a tremendous influence on modern literary criticism. Interestingly, the way in which critics tackled literature regarding psychoanalysis and how each had his distinctive perspective made each case study a unique one. There is no single way of approaching literature using psychoanalysis. If we look closely, we can see that literary texts mirror the unconscious mind of their writer. Scholars made hundreds of studies on famous authors like Shakespeare, Kafka, T.S Eliot and Poe, taking their works and analysing them from a psychoanalytic point of view.

One of the greatest mysteries of life is the human mind. Psychology helped us figure out and answer numerous vital questions about human nature and the self, some of which we did not even think we needed the answer to. It was initially built upon the theories of Sigmund Freud. What would eventually become psychoanalysis began when Freud was treating patients—mainly women—tormented by hysteria and neurosis. This was what motivated him to further investigate and learn the mysteries behind the human mind and the way it works.

His curiosity and motivation to find an explanation regarding how the human mind exactly worked resulted in him dedicating years of his life to research theories and experimentation. He eventually concluded that human behaviour is mainly affected by the unconscious. This means that humans are driven by hidden desires, fears, and needs that are out of their awareness. What is more fascinating is that Freud found that the unconscious mind can be accessed through dream analysis. It is the method he used to know about his patients' repressed desires and fears, and it is still in use to this very day.

The impact that psychoanalysis has on literary criticism is not a limited one. It reached almost all aspects of what is now established as modern literary theory. For instance, scholar S.O Lesser provided a psychoanalytic account of the reading process. Then, came Holland, who linked the notion of the ego with the readers' repressed desires, showing how texts appeal to readers' fantasies. Also, Juliet Mitchel, a feminist critic, used psychoanalysis to explain patriarchy. Adding to that, Herbert Marcuse, among others, adopted Freudian concepts in their Marxist analysis of culture and ideologies (M.A.R Habib 573). While these scholars have interesting approaches to psychoanalysis, the basic Freudian psychoanalysis is the one to be used for this research. In trauma literary studies, the different concepts about the mind, the subconscious mind and the conscious mind are important because the actions of humans are all linked in one way or another to our previous experiences in life. More important than that is the notion of the unconscious mind. As we have mentioned, trauma is a psychological thing, and in this sense, it is highly associated with our unconscious mind which is why we need to first understand it before understanding trauma.

1.4. Freudian Perspective on the Unconscious Mind in Literature

Freud's theory of the unconscious mind appealed to many other scholars and researchers of his domain. Freud popularized the notion of unconsciousness and made it a central component of his psychoanalytic approach. Starting with the conscious mind, in his essay "The Unconscious" (1915), Freud explained that it holds every memory, thought, feeling, or belief that we are aware of at any given moment and can access; whereas the unconscious mind is the place where the hidden desires, feelings, thoughts, urges, traumatic events, repressed memories and experiences reside (*General psychological Theory* 159-170).

They are largely inaccessible and are held out of awareness. so, the unconscious is a stack of feelings, desires, and thoughts that are outside of our conscious awareness. Most of the matters of the unconscious are unacceptable or unpleasant.

According to Freud, our unconsciousness continues to impact our behaviour yet we are not aware of it. Due to “repression” which means the act of keeping memories, thoughts, or desires away from one’s conscious awareness these repressed thoughts and feelings do not just go away. They stay and affect our behaviour. The words we choose and actions we take are unconsciously motivated.

Adding to that, he likened these two twinned terms to an iceberg; the tip of which and the visible part is the conscious mind. The hidden, larger part beneath water represents the unconsciousness. He introduced us to the notion that the mind has three areas: the Id, ego, and superego. While the Id is considered to be the unconscious part of the instinctual part being responsible for hidden drives, the superego can be said to be the moral consciousness of the person, and thus the two are always in a state of war about what is allowed to do and be thought about and what should not, and it is the preconscious level of operation. The ego, however, has the part of the mediator between their impulses, operating as a balance-maker, being the conscious and preconscious level of operation. In addition, psychoanalysis focuses on the impact of early childhood experiences on the rest of a person’s life. Freud’s contribution to psychoanalysis is enormous.

Psychoanalysis is not exclusive to the field of medicine. Other fields including arts relied on its insights. Particularly, literature uses psychoanalysis for creative purposes. It allows for the exploration of the psyche. Psychoanalytical criticism in literature “focuses on a work of literature as an expression in fictional form of the inner workings of the human mind.” (*Literature: Reading, Reacting, Writing* 2054) Because a literary work is analogous to dreams, Freudian analysis can help explore the nature of the mind that produced it. It adopts the methods of reading employed by Freud and other theorists to interpret texts. Murfin states: “The author’s purpose in writing is to gratify secretly some forbidden wish, [...] that has been repressed into the unconscious mind. To discover what the wish is, the psychoanalytic critic employs many of the terms and procedures developed by Freud to analyse dreams.” (*Psychoanalytic Criticism* 507) Psychoanalytic criticism does not focus on what the author reveals but rather on what he hides. This approach to literature regards literary

works as the manifestations of their author's neuroses. What psychoanalytic critics try to do is to expose the latent content of a given work.

Equally essential, Freud himself was interested in the works of literature that are loaded with symbolism believing that writers mystify ideas in figures that only make sense when interpreted. Using Freud's different theories makes psychoanalysis a useful tool for assessing literature, and attaining by that a richer understanding of the work, its author, and the reader. Understanding the hidden psychological message of a work results in the understanding of the author's psyche.

His exploration of war trauma during World War I significantly transformed his insights into trauma and its effects on individuals. He redefined war trauma as a communal issue rather than an individual shortcoming, highlighting that military psychiatrists, not the soldiers, were primarily responsible for war neurosis. In his role as an expert witness for the state in Vienna, Freud condemned the actions of military psychiatrists, likening them to "machine guns behind the front" and identifying them as the direct cause of war neurosis (Danto 50-56). He observed that war victims often endured repetitive dreams and memories of their traumatic experiences, which would frequently jolt them awake, forcing them to relive their traumatic events. Inspired by his belief in the right to mental health care and his support of social democratic principles, Freud championed the establishment of community-based clinics that provided free treatment for war trauma (Danto 50-56).

His studies on war trauma played a critical role in the development of the concept of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Over the past century, the diagnosis of war neurosis, or shell shock, has evolved, with Freudian psychoanalysis being integral to early treatment practices. Freud's work on war trauma emphasizes the need to perceive trauma as a societal issue rather than an individual problem. His pioneering contributions to understanding PTSD and promoting community-based treatment approaches have left a lasting impact on the field of psychology (CHMC-Dubai).

Moving to trauma and PTSD, Sigmund Freud's contribution to the latest methods used in psychotherapy to treat soldiers with PTSD was by explaining the talking cure used by the therapist himself which proved it to be of fruitful results (Jaffe 01). He was the one to initiate what is known as Direct Support which is used to ease patients' capacity to express their thoughts and feelings. He also gave tips to doctors and therapists and showed them that establishing a relationship with patients puts them more at ease to open up and to facilitate examination too (15).

Moreover, Freud was the one to use Introjection which is a direct way for the therapist to suggest to the patient (veterans and soldiers in our case) that their feelings are valid but their thoughts are irrational (17). Also, he had a significant role in aiding patients to see and reflect truly on their irrational thoughts through what he calls Insight, rather than just dismissing them. We cannot forget one crucial method which is Identification. It is the act of moving power or control from the superego to the therapist (23) which proved to be a huge relief to many struggling soldiers as the superego is a powerful and distractive part of our psyche that can lead to the downfall of a patient if left unmonitored in cases like PTSD. To conclude, there is no better way to approach war fiction than psychoanalysis. Therapeutic methods which were developed by Freud are still relevant to contemporary psychotherapeutic actions, especially the ones treating PTSD. The novel *Understudy* proves to be a perfect example of war fiction and it is the aim of this dissertation to put it under the lens of psychoanalysis to reveal all the hidden messages in the text which the author unconsciously expressed. While the first chapter dealt with the theoretical framework, the second chapter will be an extension to it in which we go into explaining and shedding light on healing from trauma through creative writing.

1.5. The Yellow Birds as semi-autobiographical novel

Born on July 11, 1980, Kevin Powers is an American poet, writer and an Iraqi War veteran. He worked in the army for six years until he was deployed to Iraq at the age of 23 years old. To his unfortunate luck, the time he served was a rough period of intense wars. He was then honourably discharged and chose to major in English at the University of his Hometown, Virginia. He graduated in 2008 with a Bachelor's degree. He had a thing for writing and was talented and hardworking. 2012 marked a good year in his life for he received the M.F.A. in poetry from the Michener Centre for Writers, University of Texas. He then published several novels whose core theme is the Iraq War. This type of fiction is referred to as war novels or military fiction ("*The Yellow Birds*").

The Yellow Birds is Kevin Powers' first novel and his most famous one. It was published in 2012 and by the year 2017, they made a movie adaptation of this book. It is a fictionalized account of a soldier's time in Iraq which has received critical attention from all corners, and deservedly so. Powers is a poet at heart, and when a poet decides to write prose it turns into a true piece of art. This novel is known for its lyrical and brutal prose. It is one emotional story and the non-linear story vividly and often brutally depicts the boundless impacts of war. Lisa Allardice, editor of the Guardian Review and chair of judges, said: "Drawing on Kevin Powers' experience serving as a soldier in Iraq, *The Yellow Birds* is a

powerful meditation on war and mortality. Its subject matter is ugly and harrowing, but its expression is beautiful and poetic. It is a triumphant, unforgettable first novel” (“*The Yellow Birds*”).

As Louisa Barbosa puts it, “The wars circumscribed by the battlefield [...] the overwhelming majority of the victims were soldiers (qtd. In Metafiction 07). This novel explores the human cost of war and the devastating impact it can have on soldiers and their families. The story is set during the Iraq War of 2003 and follows the journey of two soldiers, John Bartel and Daniel Murphy, who formed a deep bond while serving in the same unit in the US Army. The novel explores the physical and psychological toll of war on soldiers and how it can affect their relationships, their sense of self, and their ability to return to civilian life.

The reader clearly sees that the main theme of the novel is the trauma of war and its impact on soldiers. The writer portrays the soldiers’ experiences viscerally and realistically, depicting the violence, fear, death and fate that are in constant presence all around the soldiers in war. They are also shown dealing with the trauma of war through coping mechanisms such as alcohol and drugs. The novel also explores the idea that soldiers are often left to deal with the trauma of war on their own, as there is little support or understanding from those who have not experienced it first-hand.

Another crucial theme of the novel is the impact of war on relationships. As we stated before, this book follows the friendship between Bartle and Murphy, who are united by their shared experiences in the war but are also separated by their different reactions to the trauma they have experienced. The exploration of the impact of war on the soldiers’ relationships with their families is obvious in the novel, particularly the relationship between Bartle and his mother, who struggles to comprehend and come to terms with her son’s experiences in the war. Equally important, we see how this war trauma they went through can cause a rift between soldiers and their loved ones, and that it becomes difficult for them to reconnect and communicate with one another.

Moreover, the author puts a special emphasis on an often not-so-seen theme which is the impact of war on soldiers’ sense of self. A prominent idea in this book is how soldiers are continuously forced to make difficult choices and sacrifices during war, and that these choices can have a profound impact on their sense of self and their understanding of right and wrong. Also, related to this idea is another one that shows us indirectly how these soldiers are frequently torn between their duty to their country and their duty to themselves and that this can lead to harsh feelings of guilt and confusion.

The harshness of war does not end when soldiers finish their tour. On the contrary, the hardest of all they have seen and experienced is yet to come when they go home. Post-traumatic stress disorder veterans often start to present its symptoms after they get home because when they are on the battlefield, there is no time for them to process any emotions and feelings, they are in constant fear for their lives, always alert and have the adrenaline rush that keeps them alive at the moment. However, once they finish their tour, their minds start to ease and allow the feelings to resurface and actually live them. Speaking about his intentions in writing his novel, Powers says, “I wanted to show the whole picture. It's not just: you get off the plane, you're back home, everything's fine. Maybe the physical danger ends, but soldiers are still deeply at risk of being injured differently. I thought it was important to acknowledge that” (Crown). The difficulty veterans face when trying to return to civilian life can go beyond comprehension as war changes people to the point they no longer associate with their old selves. After deployment, they are ill-prepared for civilian life and they struggle immensely to adjust to the everyday world after experiencing severe PTSD caused by the trauma of war. Being misunderstood adds to their already existing struggles. People who never joined the army or went on tour cannot comprehend the harshness and ugliness of war and its effects on soldiers. For that reason, those who served in the army cannot relate to the others, and their feelings are kept invalidated.

Because it is made up, a story ends where it ends. Not in the case of this novel. It is a fictional work yet considered to be a semi-autobiographical novel as it is based on the experiences Kevin Powers himself went through. The purpose of this dissertation is to argue that this story is an attempt by the author to heal himself through writing.

Powers' life looks quite ordinary but we look for the exceptional within the ordinary. As a veteran and a writer, Powers wrote about his experience in the war. His writing feels so personal i.e. his novel is considered to be a semi-autobiographical novel as it is heavily based on the writer's own experience when he was in the military. The story is fictional, and the characters are fictional yet the feelings, the atmosphere, the description of the vibe and mood and everything in between are utterly real. For the sake of this research, we will use the writer's biography as a starting point to analyse his novel and extract similar elements or events from the two.

1.6. Conclusion

Trauma fiction has gained much weight recently. It aims at depicting the horrors of war and telling all the unspoken truths, and untold stories. Even though this type of literature has a disrupting nature to it, it offers solace to other veterans and opens a window to the war where readers especially civilians who had no idea about the war, can bear witness to what happens. Not only that, it also acts as a healing tool for the writers who attempt to go through the journey of recovery and healing by using writing. In the following chapter, we will get to see trauma and the healing journey in *The Yellow Birds* and how Powers used his writing as an escape.

Chapter II:

Writing in the Midst of the Fog

Chapter II: Writing in the Midst of the Fog**2.1. Introduction**

This chapter aims to provide an in-depth explanation of how writing can be used as a healing tool by shedding light on its therapeutic properties and how different scholars highly regard writing as a door to the inner self. It also aims to examine trauma and its representation in war fiction. Special emphasis is to be given to the challenging task of communicating the trauma suffered in deployment. We will also unravel how literature can be therapeutic when it comes to overcoming traumatic events. Psychoanalysis helps us learn a lot about the writer since it is more interested in what was not said and not what was revealed. It is the purpose of this chapter to discuss and clarify in what way writing helps a person to navigate through his feelings and experiences.

The chapter is divided into two sections. The first section details the therapeutic role that writing plays through a writer's healing journey, and how it can be a coping mechanism and a tool to be used towards recovery. The second section explains the process of recovery through writing, the steps one must take to heal from the inside, and how mourning in a healthy way eventually leads to post-traumatic growth.

2.2. Writing as a Coping Mechanism

Traumatic stress involves some coping processes that can differ from one person to another. Some might choose silence as their weapon, trying to ignore their experiences and avoid talking about them. Others might choose substance use i.e., drugs to numb their feelings. Other people might choose to bury themselves in work so that their mind is always occupied and have no time to reflect on the traumatic event. Coping mechanisms can take several forms; sometimes unconscious and other times by conscious strategies. The one shared truth between all mechanisms and strategies is that it is hard to manage the instability of the mind of PTSD.

Notwithstanding, writing is one unique and creative way of handling the overwhelming experiences of trauma. It enables the writer to go through the journey of trauma recovery. In this journey, the writer embraces a process where s/he is able to finally regain control over and move on with his/her life after the traumatic event. Writing is a way to release one's repressed suffering by creating linguistic artwork.

2.2.1. Trauma-ridden Lives after the War

Death, brutality, bravery, and fear; are all intense themes commonly seen in war fiction. In an article entitled “War and Words”, McLoughlin accounts for how literature is a medium through which soldiers and veteran can express their confusion and disturbed state. Literature unravels feelings of despair and melancholia circling the ones who write about their experiences in war. Mcloughlin insists that war has a haunting and hindering quality to it that oftentimes blocks people from expressing themselves. She also stresses her views about how war requires narration. According to McLoughlin, the overwhelming force that enables them to articulate is “a well-documented response to trauma and particularly associated with grief” (17).

War results in a state of paralysis. There is no safe place to acquire peace better than literature as it offers solace, company, and a listening non-judgmental ear. In this sense, literature is not only beneficial for those veterans but also for lost souls, and the reader in the comfort of his home. It is a way “to keep the record for others—those who were there and can no longer speak for themselves, and those who were not there and need to be told” (“War and Words” 19).

The benefits of writing do not end there. It is known to have a cathartic attribute to it. The path towards recovery is long and needs to go through, in the words of Shally, “construction of a personal narrative of events that receives sympathetic hearing” (qtd. In McLoughlin *Authoring War*20). Experiencing PTSD symptoms does not equal an untreatable condition. Recovery is indeed attainable and McLoughlin sees that writing and narration are powerful tools leading to recovery. One has to just first acknowledge the fact that he is traumatized and to grieve properly all his losses relating to war.

There is a decent period separating the trauma of war and their response to it. The return home marks the start of the grieving journey for the majority of veterans. The process of dealing with grief, stress, guilt, silence, and paralysis is long and daunting. Stonebridge argues that “the idea that impression can be both experiences and forgotten” is central to trauma theory as “trauma thus divides the mind not only from itself but also splits it in time” (196). This means that the horrors of trauma are not only about the war itself but also the aftermath: the return home and the great feeling of alienation soldiers feel. Scholar Caruth refers to this state as being the “oscillation between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable of its survival” (7).

The alienation felt upon returning home is not a new thing, it is also experienced in deployment but under a different name: decentralization. This state of decentralization is crucial in the time of war as it helps the soldier's mind to cope and withstand the horrific brutality of the war. Nevertheless, once he is home, this feeling is shattered and an overwhelming gloomy cloud resides in the soldier's mind and heart. Once they are home, the haunting game begins as they are constantly reminded by flashbacks and nightmares of the images of death, violence, and decay. The traumatic experience of a soldier is, according to Caruth, "faced with sudden and massive death around him [...] who suffers this sight in a numbered state, only to relive it later on in repeated nightmares, is a central and recurring image of trauma in our century" (11). To survive and heal, the veterans have to face and confront all the bloody and graphic images, all the thoughts and feelings, which they have repressed. The writer is to translate this traumatic memory into the narrative.

2.2.2. Addressing Trauma through Semi-autobiography

Unexpressed emotions or the emotions that the psyche does not want to acknowledge are repressed. In 1915, Sigmund Freud wrote in his article 'Repression' that "the essence of repression lies simply in turning something away and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious" (147). Those repressed feelings can come forth in endless forms and ways. They can present themselves in the form of representations or actual behaviours. Trauma in particular is highly linked to repressed feelings and thoughts.

More importantly, trauma has disruptive psychological effects and some events can cause psychopathology. Plenty of mental illnesses are linked to the absence of emotional expression which is failed attempts to bury those emotions. For instance, being aggressive, depression, mania—where the psyche tries to protect itself from unbearable emotions and feelings by literally shutting down and going insane— and dissociation.

Expressing emotions is vital. Numerous prominent critics argued for the use of writing as a healing power from traumatic experiences. Some of these critics include Dori Laub, Dominic LaCapra, and Soshana. By the same token, in his book *History, Memory, Trauma in Contemporary British and Irish Fiction*, Piatek affirms that "literary fiction is a particularly well-suited medium for exploration of trauma" (184). Writing has proven itself to be an effective way for people to express their long-held emotions.

Creative writing offers solace. As put by Raphael and Meldrum: "one of the values of talking through the traumatic event is enabling the person to master, in retrospect, what has happened" ("Helping People Cope with Trauma" 12). In our case, talking equals writing.

people who choose to write to heal themselves see writing as centred on empowerment, process and voice. Trauma is not something you get over; you have to get through it to heal. The process of writing about the trauma makes the person work through his emotions and reflect upon their experiences. As Freud puts it, “unexpressed emotions will never die. They are buried alive and will come forth later in uglier ways” (*General Psychological Theory* 164). Creative writing can aid in processing difficult emotions through the control and/or freedom of expression it presents.

Creative writing is used as a safe and positive entrance to discussing difficult, emotional, and sensitive material. Numerous writers produced fascinating pieces of literature as they were in the process of dealing with their own trauma. Speaking about choosing literature as a safe haven, Maya Angelo who wrote one of the most fascinating autobiographies in literature states that, “when I look back, I am so impressed again with the life-giving power of literature” (Qtd. In Philips 182). Literature was a salvation for many writers.

Not expressing feelings especially negative ones leads to repression. Writing allows a person to display his inner world and it is a great way of expressing oneself. In a TEDx talk entitled *The Healing Power of Writing*, Kristin Pilz stresses the idea that,

Writing is way of slowing down so that you can become present to your own story as it is unfolding because in the end we cannot outrun our emotions, they will always; eventually, catch up with us. Writing is a way of bearing witness to your own story and the blank page is a safe space where you can show up authentically to speak your own truth and that is life changing. (4:16-4:51)

It is the idea if you do not control those repressed feelings, more specifically those that have their roots from trauma, they take control of you and dictate the way you live. Facing one’s inner self is crucial in the process of moving on from past experiences and not letting them define one’s identity.

On the same token, in her essay “Trauma and literary studies: Some ‘Enabling Questions’”, Elissa Marder states that, “literature is one of the ways we tell one another about aspects of human experience that cannot be contained by ordinary modes of expression and that may even exceed human understanding” (Marder 03). She greatly emphasizes the significant role of writing literature in enabling humans to have the chance to read and gain knowledge about events and experiences that—without the efforts of writers—remain untold.

At the same time, writing is a way for writers to come to terms and face their unspoken stories and repressed feelings, and also to heal the wounds inflicted from their individual traumatic experiences. It is best put in D.H Lawrence's words when he writes: "One sheds one's sickness in books—repeats and presents again one's emotions, to be master of them" (Dervin 30). It is a powerful metaphor where he compares the act of writing to being liberated from the inner chaos to a snake shedding their old skin off their body.

In short, writing is proven to have therapeutic qualities about it. More interestingly, creative writing takes the person to another level as it becomes a tool helping them to shift the narrative from negative internal chaos to liberating expressed emotions and thoughts.

2.3. Healing and Recovery

Not everyone who goes through trauma heals. Only the brave, those who go through the healing process can free themselves from the burden of carrying that trauma. Although not an easy route it takes, the journey towards recovery is worth it, it is a journey towards inner freedom.

2.3.1. The Mourning Process: A Blueprint for Healing

Trauma resolution is possible. When it comes to recovery, a person must reconnect with memories for the pain to be gone and for him to be healed. Facing traumatizing experiences can be achieved when the person retells his story for the ultimate goal of facing them. Kristin Bourdeau states that: "sufferings can heal and humanize, provided that one can reorganize the painful events of the past and retell them in one's language" (105). Hence, storytelling and the healing narrative can indeed help writers overcome their agonizing memories.

The use of writing as therapy may help traumatized writers to face the repressed memories. Remembering and reconnecting memories is a vital step to be taken towards recovery and healing.

Mourning is the first step in the path towards healing. Freud wrote an article entitled "Mourning and Melancholia" in which he explained both concepts indicated in the title. For the sake of this research, we will focus only on mourning. He sees mourning as a normal and healthy process through which one deals with the grief of losing a loved object. By 'love object' we mean anything that one can lose, it can be a person, a principle, a piece of himself and it has to be something identifiable i.e., we know what we lost and what we are mourning. Mourning is considered to be vital for the process of recovery. Mourning is associated with

conscious mind: a person consciously mourns his loss. Eng and Kazanjian assert that, “mourning abandons lost objects by laying their histories to rest” (*Loss: The Politics of Mourning* 13). This is exactly what needs to be done: mourning to move on. Klein explains how “it seems that every advance in the process of mourning results in deepening in the individual’s relation to his inner objects, in the happiness of regaining them after they were felt to be lost” (qtd. in *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation* 62).

On top of that, it is this process of mourning that helps us collect ourselves and begin the real journey towards recovery. Mourning is to be taken, as RanjanaKhana asserts, “as an experience of transformation because one mourns when one accepts that the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly forever” (21). Each person knows what they lost, and only when they are able to mourn their losses that they begin to heal.

Taking the example of war veterans, they each lose something differently. Some lose their friends to war, others literally lose parts of their bodies. Some might change their views about the world, politics and life; while others change their perspective about their own life and what it means. It is a personal journey, and personal losses need to be mourned separately because “no matter how shared the experiences are, different people find different ways of mourning their losses and making sense of them” (*Rethinking Melancholia* 59).

2.3.2. The Healing Narrative

Writing is an excellent medium to reach intangible emotions. It enables the writer to manifest his pain and express his emotions through the use of ink and paper. In her book *Writing as a Way of Healing*, Louise DeSalvo proposes an outstanding idea which was the seed of the healing narrative. She affirms that:

We are the accumulation of the stories we tell ourselves about who we are. Through writing, we revisit our past and review and revise it. What we thought happened, what we believe happened to us, shifts and changes as we discover deeper and more complex truths. It isn’t that we use our writing to deny what we’re experienced. Rather, we use it to shift our perspective. (11)

In this sense, the healing narrative’s main objective is to unveil repressed emotions and thoughts and to fuse the conscious and unconscious mind. Writing from the heart allows the writer to claim his past experiences and re-visit and examine the significant moments. The process of writing for the sake of healing enables the person to open up to thoughts, memories

and realizations which otherwise would not come forth if they are trying to voice out a coherent narrative about the truth of what happened.

In addition to that, Kristin Pilz further explains her views about writing as a healing tool. She adds that “writing is a simple and very effective way to release those negative self-narratives that can hold us back and it is a way of slowing down to your inner dialogue so that you can change the script and that you can change your own narrative into a healthier narrative” (10:45-11:05). Writing helps to uncover the stories that need to be let out and told.

Notably, some unsettling aspects of trauma and PTSD which can be eased with writing are dissociative experiences like flashbacks and recurrent involuntary memories. Images are deeply associated with memories. As McCurdy indicates that: When we begin to put words to those [Traumatic] images we are using the parts of the brain that create narrative, and we begin to create a sense of control over those memories. They no longer control us; we can move them around, manipulate them, call them up when and if we wish because they are now a part of our own consciousness (*Mind's Eye* 92).

Psychoanalyst and poet Fredrick Feirstein states that “creativity has a healing power. It gives a safe place to reexamine emotions that have been stunned into silence by making a bridge of metaphors connecting creating distance between what we knew and felt and what we didn't want to know or feel” (255-256 Emphasis mine). Those feelings and thoughts that we did not want to know or feel are the repressed feelings and thoughts which need to be let out healthily for a person to recover from trauma. It is those feelings and thoughts that we cannot explain or articulate clearly that need to be let out and expressed through art; in our case writing.

Feirstein further clarifies his views saying “Psychoanalysis and the arts teach us that we are compelled to repeat our traumas, losses, and disappointments as a means of helping us find a form for what's hurt us, for making what's passively experienced active” (258). It is called a healing narrative because it has healing features. Writing is a form of therapy. Unloading and discharging all that is bothering us, all the horrendous images that reside in our minds regarding those traumatic experiences, releasing all the negativity and chaos from the inside is like cleaning it out from the dusty memories and images: it is a way of making it new, clearing the mind and vision and helping oneself becoming self-aware and conscious, instead of being passively controlled by this traumatic event.

Through recasting the time and revisiting the past, drawing out the emotions which were experienced in that place becomes possible. Most of the time, when facing a traumatic experience, the person becomes numb to emotions and incapable of understanding what is going on inside of him or what he is feeling. Nevertheless, revisiting the past enables us to address emotions that were too complex at the time to be comprehended.

Trauma makes the person lose aspects of himself. Trauma memory has a repressing nature which results in making some ideas, images, and moments unreachable and buried temporarily. Writing is a transformative process and through investigating and examining these images, ideas, and moments the writer can redefine the context of his life and embrace the changes that have occurred.

Personal expressive writing is a simple and powerful self-care tool, freely available to all of us that promotes healing, stress reduction, personal growth and inner peace. [...] Writing can be a helpful tool that builds resilience by allowing us to give voice to our messy inner lives and our negative emotions. Writing is a way to let go of storylines and memories that keep us stuck so that we can write empowerment self-narratives. Writing is cathartic.

2.3.3. Rising from the Ashes of one's Wounded Self

The recovery process from trauma and PTSD insinuates adapting to the traumatic memories as it is almost impossible to detach or completely break from these traumatic experiences and memories. Judith Herman declares that “the core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others. Recovery, therefore, is based upon the empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections” (*Trauma and Recovery* 133). Hence, recovery from trauma is hard and challenging and it is not a linear act. As harsh as trauma can be, recovery has always been the one thing people seek. In this sense, Meg Jean affirms how, “it is important to note that despite the overwhelming statistics on traumatic suffering across the world, the normative response to a terrifying event or events is, in fact, recovery” (*The Art and Science of Therapeutic Innovation* 247-248).

Recovery is the act of adjusting to the destruction caused by the traumatic experiences. It is about the capacity to reclaim oneself and recapture a normal life instead of giving up. It takes real courage, force and willingness to live happily to be able to fight and work one's way through trauma as resilience is triggered by one's own will to survive. One important aspect of recovery is that it does not happen in isolation. Humans are social creatures, and in traumatic events specifically one needs to be surrounded by people who can act as emotional

support. It is for that reason that support groups exist for drug addicts in rehab, and for veterans after serving because somehow, only those who went through the same experience can understand one another. It is also the reason why plenty of people refuse or avoid talking about trauma because they feel like they will not be understood. And we people crave to be understood.

It is for this very reason that Kevin Powers decided to write his novel. He stated, “I also thought that by emphasizing the language [...] I’d have at least a chance of connecting to another human being on an emotional level” (Bookbrowse). Herman explains the need for company, regardless of what form it might take, for healing. He argues that “recovery can take place within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation” (*Trauma and Recovery* 133).

People who went through trauma wish to connect with other people who are willing to listen to their stories without judgment and without dismissing their fears, emotions, insecurities, and anguish. Plenty of people found paper and ink to be their consoling friend. They can express themselves in whatever form they wish, they can articulate anything and everything, even the things that others might find to be nonsense. They can express their deepest thought relating to trauma without ever having the fear of not being understood.

War fiction is one important type of writing where veterans try to heal their PTSD through the process of writing. One writer who expressed similar ideas in his writings to those of DeSalvo is the American novelist, Tim O’Brien. He published an essay entitled “How to Tell a True War Story” in which he explains that “the angles of vision are skewed [...] in many cases a true war story cannot be believed. If you believe it, be sceptical. It’s a question of credibility. Often the crazy stud is true and the normal stud isn’t, because the normal stud is necessary to make you believe the truly incredible craziness” (67-68).

Telling their stories is a way of feeling themselves from that narrative, to not be only defined by that traumatic experience. That is why there is a whole literary genre dedicated to war: war fiction. What had once been an isolated and private dilemma then attains a community dimension due to writing and the act of sharing their experiences and the horrors of war that civilians do not see behind closed doors. Writing is the act of shifting the narrative from the passive experience which handicaps the victim preventing them from resuming their ordinary life, to an empowering act which fuels the positive aspect of growth which comes from suffering. This kind of recovery can be referred to as post-traumatic growth. In an article entitled “Post-traumatic Growth: Conceptual Foundations and Empirical Evidence”, Tedeschi

and Calhoun explain this concept as being “the experience of positive change that occurs as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life crises” (01).

On the same token, we must not confuse resilience with post-traumatic growth. The first is a mere adaptation of the person with his new reality and the changes that happened in an attempt to recover from the trauma and go back to the pre-trauma self. On the other hand, post-traumatic growth is superior as the person goes through a mental journey to recover, heal and eventually ameliorate his life. It is about the positive change coming from the traumatic event. It is as if a wiser and more mature version of the self is born by the end of the recovery journey.

On the topic of post-traumatic growth, Tedeschi and Calhoun go on to explain that there exist five factors through which this growth can be manifested. They are as follows: the increased appreciation for one’s life, sincere relationships, changed priorities, a reinforced sense of personal strength, spiritual-life development, and lastly being open to new possibilities (06). In short, post-traumatic growth goes way beyond mere pre-traumatic functioning; instead, it is centred on positive change.

2.4. Conclusion

To conclude, trauma survivors' recovery is all about their capacity to articulate and liberate their emotions which are related to trauma. The journey towards recovery is daunting and challenging yet very fulfilling. Some people cannot heal without professional help while others can develop coping mechanisms and dive into the recovery journey with little to no help, except for a pen and blank pages. Changing one's narrative from the passive trauma victim to the active resilient survivor is an accomplishment that needs to be celebrated. The journey starts with mourning their lost pieces, reflecting upon themselves, process what happened, and ends with collecting the fragmented pieces of the self and reclaiming their identity, voice and self. War trauma in particular is far from being an easy thing to get through and this is what we will discover within the folds of the next chapter in which we will provide an analysis of the novel understudy.

Chapter III:
**Trauma and Healing in “The Yellow
Birds”**

Chapter III: Trauma and Healing in “The Yellow Birds”

3.1. Introduction

In his novel “The Yellow Birds”, Kevin Powers addresses the psychological issues of war through the protagonist Private John Bartle. He discusses themes like fear, violence and guilt, but he concentrates more on depicting war trauma and introducing the notion of healing. The purpose of this chapter is to analyse the novel and uncover the psychological wounds of the characters. This analytical research allows the reader to understand the traumatic experiences of veterans and the way they heal themselves.

This chapter is divided into five parts. We first try to depict trauma through Bartle’s psychological journey, then we shed light on the non-linear structure that is used and his fragmented memories. Third, we try to apply Freudian theory to Bartle’s character. Since it is a semi-autobiographical novel, we work also on writing as a coping mechanism. The last part will be about healing, which discusses the mourning process and some symbols of recovery.

3.2 Depiction of War Trauma: Bartle’s Psychological Journey

In his novel, Kevin Powers, with the voice of the protagonist John Bartle, narrates the struggles of soldiers during and after the war. He describes in detail how they collide a bitter reality i.e., how they encounter horrific views like mass death, rotting corpses, and headless bodies. In addition, they are obliged to kill because in the war either kill or be killed; they can defend only themselves because if everyone tried to defend his friend, for example, he would die instead of him. Contrary to what is said; that war calls for unity “War is the great maker of solipsists” (13). Hence, what transforms people in the war is their contact with these unexpected and shocking events. As we discussed in the previous two chapters these sudden violent events are the origin of trauma. Powers put most of his focus on the psychological dilemma.

Since Bartle is the protagonist and the narrator of this novel, the reader looks at the psychological problems of veterans through his words which are the mirror of his thoughts. His journey began when he went for military service at the age of 21. Although he felt a sense of responsibility and duty towards his country, he was still an innocent and naive young man. His life consists of psychological struggles, feelings of guilt, horror, trauma, and violence. The first mistake he made; was the promise to Daniel Murphy’s mother to protect her son, who had become his best friend in the military. This promise cost him lifelong regret. It is not

acknowledged as a mistake from a humanitarian perspective, but for him, it was a big fault to promise a mother that her son would return safely from a place where even you do not know whether you will come back alive or dead. When he arrived in the city of Al Tifar in Iraq, he realized that it was not easy at all, as he started to live the bitterness and the atrocities of war, which made him face traumatic experiences.

The first terrible thing in the war is the combat scenes. At the beginning of chapter one the repetition of the sentence “the war tried to kill us” is an indication of his feeling of constant threat and a state of panic, this is related to the concept of trauma which thoughts come on their own involuntary and become pessimistic. Added to that it is a new and difficult task for a young man to carry a rifle and find himself forced to put his finger on the trigger and fire a bullet. As we notice in the novel, the act of using the rifle was hard for him at the beginning, he was also surprised by Sergeant Sterling and how he used it easily and brutally.

Moreover, the hardest thing is witnessing the aftermath of the combat scenes and seeing dead people and encountering corpses; dead, battered and headless bodies (suicide bombers, the bodies lay bloating in the sun, worn and pale bodies, their bodies...were found in bloating piles, the faces puffed and green, allergic now to life ...). These views are trauma itself. One can imagine what would be his feeling when he saw his best friend dead in the most horrific sight.

The image will certainly remain in his memory and his imagination, and all these corpses will haunt him like ghosts. It is not a normal thing to see people get killed but maybe the inevitability of war forced people to defend themselves, to rest alive and to continue. When you compare Bartle’s psychological status from the beginning till the end of the novel, you can observe that he is struggling. In chapter one the expression “Nothing seemed more natural than someone getting killed” (13) caught the researcher’s attention. But later on, he justified that “It was necessary” (13). On the one hand, he blamed himself many times for participating in the killing of women, children and even men. But on the other hand, he could not escape the reality that war meant the existence of dead people and that he was obliged to hold a rifle and go ahead.

Furthermore, Bartle was talking as if the next bullet would be his fate, especially after the death of many people he wished would stay alive: the translator Malik, the old woman and her daughter who they did not fault that they were Iraqi, and Murph. The sentiment that he

was in a war made him expect to die at any moment. He began to thank God every time the bullet was not his demise, “Thank God he died and I did not” (79).

Even after he came back to his country, when he felt that others were grateful to him, he hated it because he felt what he did was criminal and he did not deserve gratitude:

Or should I have said that I wanted to die, not in the sense of wanting to throw myself off of that train bridge over there, but more like wanting to be asleep forever because there isn't any making up for killing women or even watching women get killed, or for that matter killing men and shooting them in the back and shooting them more times than necessary to actually kill them and it was like just trying to kill everything you saw sometimes because it felt like there was acid seeping down into your soul and then your soul is gone and knowing from being taught your whole life that there is no making up for what you are doing. (91-92)

In this passage, Bartle was going through depression due to the traumatic events he experienced. As a consequence, he wanted to sleep for a long time to avoid thinking and recalling his memories.

Through analyzing this novel, it is observable that several PTSD symptoms appear in Bartle's personality. First of all, the novel itself is a kind of flashback, Bartle's traumatic and violent memories come to his mind involuntary and permanently, which makes him constantly anxious and annoyed. He was always thinking about the war and its aftermath, about how many soldiers died, and Murph never left his mind. Using expressions like “I couldn't stop thinking about Murph,” (87) “We could not avoid thinking of him...” (123), “Thinking of Murph, who was not counted for a while” (134) and the repetitions of the word ‘remember’ reflects the internal over thinking of Bartle who is still rappelling with his traumatic memories, and especially the horrific death of his best friend.

Bartle also presented emotional numbing. After experiencing many painful events, happiness became difficult to feel. He has become unprepared for positive feelings and emotions due to the confusion of his cruel past. “I was supposed to be happy, but I cannot recall feeling much of anything except a dull, throbbing numbness,” (38) according to him his days became similar to each other, and everything became boring. That is why he embodied the profound lack of emotional responsiveness or sensation. It is as if there was a glitch in his limbic system that led him to numb his feelings.

Adding to that is the notion of hypervigilance; the excessive alertness and sensitivity to potential threats. Obviously, the panicked person cannot sleep easily and if he sleeps, he will have nightmares about the thing that shocked him. Bartle said: “We were supposed to sleep... Murph and I found a hole and tried to nod off but couldn’t” (78). They lost the ability to sleep due to the shocking events they saw, and their constant sense of threat and fear

Moreover, traumatized people feel guilty and self-blame because they survived and others did not. This is what happened with Bartle, especially when his friend passed away, “I didn’t die. Murph did,” (14) “By the end you failed at the one good thing you could have done, the one person you promised would live is dead” (92). As we notice from chapter one to the last chapters, Bartle does not stop beating himself up and holding himself responsible for Murph’s death, thus breaking his promise. The origin of his feelings is that he survived the war.

3.3. Narrative Techniques and Trauma: Non-linear Plot and Fragmented Memories

In this novel, Powers uses non-linear plots and fragmented memories to show how traumatic events that occurred in the past affect the present i.e. they make the mind troubled therefore difficulty in narrating previous experiences. This reflects Bartle’s mental health. He uses this type of structure because it grabs the reader's attention and makes him sympathize with the protagonist. This narrative technique has different sides.

The first thing we note is the table of contents. The novel as we said is divided into eleven chapters. The titles of these chapters are dates but these dates are not arranged chronically. The writer begins the first chapter of his novel on the date of September 2004 then shifts to another date then comes back to the first date, and like that, he continues writing his novel. This interweaving timeline mirrors the past memories that come to the writer and chase him.

His flashbacks and his memories are proof of his psychological imbalance. This appears in his irregular narration. He tells the novel over two periods, and each time he moves from one time to another. Once in the present; in his house by the river, and once in the past: Al-Tafar. Powers uses flashbacks to uncover the events that happened in the past and still had an impact on the protagonist’s daily life i.e., his psychological state. In chapter nine, when Captain Anderson from C.I.D came to investigate the letter, he was sending to Murph’s mother on Murph’s behalf. He thought back to February in Kuwait when the war had ended

and they had returned to their homes. He remembered the anxiety he had felt. “I remembered the long, weatherless February in Kuwait waiting for an unknown period of sequestration to be over, to go home...an officer began to speak. “Boys, you have fought properly and were well led, so you are alive. Now you are being sent home.” I had in me a profound disquiet” (114). We observe that even in the same chapter, he shifts from one period to another through his fragmented memories. His worry after the end of the war had a cause, and he admits directly his mistake to the captain. He thinks that his anxiety was justified and that the thing he feared; now happened.

He uses also symbols and motifs to express the two periods and to pass from one to another. In Iraq, he uses a semantic field for the themes of war and violence, employing pessimistic words like battle, mortar, skirmish, explosion, attack, conflicts...While in Virginia, he starts writing about hope and healing. He utilizes words like calm, promise, light, dream, future, faith...

By using these techniques, Powers achieves a coherent narrative that is understandable by the readers. He embodies the torn psychological state of the protagonist through his disjointed memories, and this is what can be generalized to the feelings of veterans after the war.

3.4. Freudian Analysis of Bartle's Unconscious Mind

The bad unconscious thoughts and ideas come to one's mind involuntarily due to the traumatic events. This later shapes the repressed desires which control the behaviour and the responses of human beings. Hence, Repression is a defence mechanism which pushes the undesirable memories to the unconscious mind. After coming back to Virginia, Bartle admits, “I woke with my head against the window, unaware that I'd been sleeping. My hand went to close around the stock of the rifle that was not there” (67). In this passage, the act of sleeping is unconscious, Bartle is not aware but he is tired which is why he slept involuntarily. Also, he closed around the stock of the rifle because he is used to it as a means of defending himself. This physical response also came involuntary, indicating the lingering impact of his traumatic experience in the war.

Dreams and nightmares also can be considered as a window to unconsciousness. If we escape from anything, it will come to us in the form of dreams. Bartle's fear and trauma cause him nightmares. They represent his sense of guilt and the traumatic memories he had

repressed. In addition, the repressed fear causes emotional numbness, which is why Bartle could not feel happiness.

The repressed can return to the conscious mind through many forms like flashbacks, emotional responses, and involuntary actions. It often excites due to external stimuli. When Bartle went to Germany and after passing from the cathedral, he met the priest and the priest asked him if he would like to pray for him. He answered no since he was not a catholic. The priest asked him again if he wanted to pray for a friend, “when the priest called out, “Do you want me to pray for you?” ... No... “A friend, perhaps?” (42). This was an external motive for Bartle to return again to his memories with Murph, he faces details, his eyes and his predestination.

3.5. Writing as Coping Mechanism

As we discussed in the second chapter, writing is one of the best therapeutic and coping methods that may lead to healing and recovery. It can help traumatized people to make sense of their fragmented thoughts and memories. In this vein, this part will be first about the narrator's voice in the novel, and since it's a semi-autobiographical novel the second title will be about the writer's creative expression.

3.5.1 Bartle's Narrative Voice

In literature, and especially when the writer discusses psychological issues like trauma, the narrative voice is important, and it is good to narrate with first-person narrative ‘I’ because each one narrates these issues in his own way. Feelings, sentiments, and shocks are not common but personal. Even brothers for example cannot see the war in the same way. Bartle in this novel reflects his personality first by using the pronoun “I”, this allows the readers to get access to what is in his mind directly. The novel also is full of monologues, since every time he comes back to his memories and past thoughts. Added to that, his voice is introspective; this helps him to understand his experience by his self-examination:

“My fingers closed around a rifle that was not there. I told them the rifle was not supposed to be there, but my fingers would not listen, and they kept closing around the space where my rifle was supposed to be and I continued to sweat and my heart was beating much faster than I thought reasonable”. (38)

In this passage, Bartle is aware of his loss of control; and that the rifle was not supposed to be there. Although he is unable to stop his finger to close around it. He is also conscious of his symptoms and these what is called self-examination.

The expression of responsibility, guilt, fear, pain, and trauma also reflects the existence of Bartle. When he described these feelings, his words were plainly expressive. As he was narrating to admit his mistakes, therefore ease his conscience, heal his wounds, and recover his trauma, “I could have gone to Murph, but I did not. I didn’t want to. I didn’t want to be responsible for him. I had enough to worry about. I was disintegrating, too” (78). In this passage, Bartle expresses all the feelings previously mentioned, showing that he is aware of his internal struggles. These emotions related to his fragmented memories make him use the non-linear plot to represent his temporal disruption which is one of PTSD symptoms.

3.5.2 Powers’ Creative Expression

In his novel, Powers uses creative writing to discuss his traumatic experiences with the readers. Since he was a soldier in the Iraq War, this permitted him to convert his story to literary fiction “The Yellow Birds”. By reading closely the novel, we can notice many semi-autobiographical elements.

He uses writing as a therapeutic means by taking out his bad sentiments and emotions and externalizing his trauma, this can be a form of catharsis i.e., he transforms his pain into art and the novel is a mirror of his life in the Iraq war and post-war period. At the beginning of the chapter Powers makes his protagonist repeat the expression “The war tried to kill us” (8). This expression expresses the extent of the threat he felt and the feeling that death would come to him at any moment

The military service that Powers performed in the Iraq War made him experience the pain of war and live with realistic facts. Thus, he would be able to embody the psychological dilemmas that the soldiers and the veterans experience with authenticity. Another point is that Powers’ creative writing choices enhance his relationship with the readers i.e., readers sympathize with Bartle’s character and feel pity for him, especially since he was traumatized; felt guilty; and held responsibility for mistakes that were not his own.

3.6. Pathways to Healing

Healing from trauma is not an easy task. This may cost the whole life and may not happen. Only the brave people can recover themselves. This subsection will be about healing and the way to reach it. It is divided into two parts: the mourning process and symbols of healing

3.6.1 The Mourning Process

As the concept of mourning is discussed in the previous chapter, it can be said that it is the most important part towards healing. Traumatized people cannot heal if they do not face their pains; they need to dispose of them. This process has five steps. Throughout the novel, it appears that the protagonist lives all the steps until he reaches recovery.

Bartle had many causes for his trauma, but the most influential reason was the death of his friend Murph. He first experienced shock and denial. Certainly, he searches for his friend for a while. then found him murdered most horrifically (his eyes had been gouged out, his throat had been cut nearly through, his head hung limply and lolled from side to side, his ears were cut off. His nose cut off...). As he reports the scene, “I took my woodbine out of my pack and covered him. I couldn’t look anymore. Most of us had seen death in many forms... But none of us had seen this” (128). He cannot see the reality of the war, the end of his friend and the brutality of hostility. As he refuses to see the fact, he denies it and rejects it.

Second, through Bartle, Powers projects his guilt and remorse. Bartle feels pain and guilt, it is common for a war survivor to always feel that he could have done something. This is what happened with Bartle, who spent most of his life thinking that he could protect Murph, therefore changing his fate. He uses many expressions of remorse “Murph’s always going to be eighteen, and he’s always going to be dead. And I’ll be living with a promise that I couldn’t keep” (24). He holds a sentiment of self-recrimination which is why he cannot feel even the happy moments such as his safe exit from Iraq, as if he is numb.

The third step is anger and bargaining. And here the traumatized person starts thinking accurately of what happened exactly. Bartle sometimes gets nervous, other times he tries to avoid reality. He often curses the war, while sometimes sees it as “a big joke” (98). Then the important and maybe the long stage: depression. It is not easy to examine depressed people but surely a traumatized person goes through depression on his journey to healing. After coming back home Bartle prefers to stay alone and not to contact people. At this moment, he

becomes aware of his loss. He cries, regrets, and experiences his sadness. He remembers every detail of what happened to him. Powers allows him to give up, “And you can’t go back. So, you want to fall, let go, give up, but you can’t. And every breath you take reminds you of that fact.” (86) In this quote Bartle expressed his inability to return and change the reality of Murph’s death, the difficulty to forget also his desire to surrender and not resist.

The last and fifth step is acceptance, and it is the access point to healing. It does not mean that the person completely got rid of his trauma, but lives with it. War trauma and Murph’s death here would be a part of Bartle’s life, not the centre of it. Self-flagellation decreases; he feels somehow hopeful and optimistic, and he also starts to see other beautiful things in his life as symbols of his freedom and recovery. Especially after he was imprisoned and received his punishment, also because he meets Murph’s mother and he feels like she forgave him.

I was glad she came. Not because there was any unexpected reconciliation, but because she was tolerant and seemed to want to understand what happened to her son, why I’d made her read a letter that wasn’t real...She hadn’t offered forgiveness and I hadn’t asked for it. But after she left, I felt like my resignation was now justified, perhaps hers too (137-138)

Maybe he is happy for the first time, since the time he went to the military service. He begins to feel that there are no restrictions; he justifies why he wrote the letter, he tells her what happened to her son as he was the last witness of what happened to Murph.

People need to see their pain, live with their trauma and accept the fact. If they escape from their realities and do not face them, their past bad memories will hunt them, kill their souls, and shatter their desire to live.

3.6.2 Symbols of Healing:

Symbols of healing are important in trauma literature. It gives the reader a sense of optimism and the possibility of treating traumatic experiences. Although psychological therapy is useful, people can heal themselves, or let's say time heals them as is the case with the protagonist. Throughout the novel, Bartle’s recovery appears in four aspects.

The concepts of nature and environment are very symbolic in literature. Writers often use them to give a sign of renewal and hope. This idea is visible in the last chapters of the novel. While Powers in some chapters (September 2004, December 2003, October 2004)

discussed the brutality and the violence of war, his last chapters (August 2005, November 2005, April 2009) are plain of natural elements which is evidence of recovery. The following concepts reflect “healing” in the novel:

The night sky may represent calm, relaxation, and peace away from the noise of the war

Stars may represent the beauty that appears even in the darkness i.e., difficult moments

Birds may represent freedom i.e.; the veterans are freed from war and its aftermath and his ability to fly symbolizes the veteran’s liberation from their traumatic memories

The river may represent the continuity of life; it goes on and it doesn’t stop for anyone

Rain and the water may represent purity, serenity and renewal i.e., renewal of feeling and moving forward, washing from trauma and the ability to start freshly

Yellow may represent hope and healing i.e. the Yellow Birds means the veteran who regains his healing and freedom from his past trauma.

He also begins to recall memories of what he lived before the trauma, that is before he went to war. He starts seeing his friends and remembers some events from his childhood. This is evidence of his recovery. “They were my friends, right? Why didn’t I just wade out to them?” (91) Here he saw his friends whom many days he neglected them, he finally starts asking himself why he was doing that, why he insisted on staying alone.

Moreover, the sentences and phrases used by Powers are full of compassion, kindness, and sympathy. He writes his novel in a humanitarian spirit, he clarifies his hatred of injustice, murder and violence. This contrasts with the war and its trauma, that why this can be an aspect of emotional healing.

Adding to that the contrasting idea of light and darkness appears in the novel. The scenes where Bartle encounters light express the healing part which is full of safety: sunlight; and firelight... while the scenes where he encounters darkness express the war, fear and trauma. There is another expressive symbol which is the dusk and dawn. It is the period between darkness and light. It represents the feeling of betweenness (Hope/ Despair). Bartle wants to escape his traumatic memories but he finds himself stuck in it.

3.7. Conclusion:

This chapter was an analytical part about War Trauma and Healing in the “Yellow Birds” by Kevin Powers. It aimed to shed light on how private John Bartle experienced trauma, fear, and violence in his psychological journey, adding to, how his fragmented memories and traumatic events became repressed feelings, these feelings were stored in his unconscious mind and appeared later in a form of dreams, nightmares actions... This reflects on the structure of literature i.e. The non-linear plot and the techniques that are used by Powers to show his presence. Finally, the notion of healing and recovery is widely discussed in the novel through the protagonist.

General conclusion

General Conclusion:

The current research was an overview of the concepts of trauma and healing and how they are explored by scholars and researchers. Its goals were to introduce trauma fiction and clarify how it can show what is hidden and what is unspoken in literary texts. So writing can be used as a mechanism of defence i.e. veterans need to liberate their negative sentiment in their way of healing, and creative writing is a good method. Hence, people need to confront and then accept their pain to reach recovery; this later was achieved in the mourning process. The main purpose of this study was the analyse Kiven Powers's novel "The Yellow Birds" which is full of traumatic and shocking events based on the aforementioned theoretical ideas.

By using a psychoanalytic approach and some semi-autobiographical elements, the researcher was able to analyze both the feelings and the behaviour of the protagonist "Private John Bartle" who reflects Powers's personality. His creative narrative voice was a window to show his thoughts, and through the understanding of this narrative technique, the researcher was capable of getting a deeper perception of his shift from traumatized to recovered person. These two theories enabled the researcher to recognize and diagnose Bartle's unconscious mind process, his exposure to trauma and his ability to heal. Therefore, comprehend Powers's thoughts and experiences. The reader should know what is hidden in contemporary wars, and understand the veterans' psychological sufferings to be fit to help them, and to give them support.

This work found that some psychological troubles like trauma became the focus of debate among psychoanalytic literature researchers and writers like Kiven Powers, who wrote this novel to highlight his real traumatic life during the Iraq War. It is also concluded by analysing Bartle's struggles that trauma can be depicted by examining first the PTSD symptoms and observing the behaviours. Also, writing can be a useful tool in the way of healing which the person unleashes the repressed emotions that were stored in his unconscious mind.

The present research confirmed the existence of a significant interrelation between the historical, social, cultural, and psychological phenomena in the context of contemporary war. In the process of collecting data, the researcher read various pieces of literature that discussed different subjects concerning the research. Therefore, this paper contributes first to literary studies: the creative structure of writing and understanding the aspects of the non-linear plot, the symbolic and the figurative language that is used, and cultural and social understanding.

Second, psychological studies i.e. comprehending the inner dilemmas those veterans can face like guilt, trauma fear and violence. Autobiographical studies enable the reader to take a brief look at the writer's life. It can be said that the contribution of this research is represented in three sides: literary, Psychological, and autobiographical.

In this regard, achieving in analyzing the theme of war trauma and discussing the steps Bartle passed toward recovery made the research new and original. The researcher had used not only psychoanalysis but he added also semi-autobiography. He also gave necessity to the theme of healing which is generally neglected in trauma fiction literature. On the one hand, the analysis was somehow interesting and enjoyable, since the researcher himself experienced "trauma" and "healing". On the other hand, it was hard to discuss psychological issues in an academic context; the researcher could be influenced by emotional biases.

Based on the findings of this study, the researcher suggests the following topics for further research:

- Examine how Iraqi civilians are characterized in *The Yellow Birds*. In what ways does the novel deal with the ethical ramifications of war and its effects on civilians
- Compare the *Yellow Birds*' portrayal of PTSD with writing from other battles, like the Vietnam War or World War II.

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