

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER

ISSN-2321-7065

IJELLH



**International Journal of English Language,
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed) Journal

UGC Approved Journal

Special Issue

National Seminar on Culture, Anthropology and Literature



Organized by

Department of English



**Shri Nehru Maha Vidyalaya College of Arts and Science
Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India.**



Volume 6, Issue 11, November 2018

www.ijellh.com

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Silenced Suffocation in the Journey of Women Soldiers

Abstract:

Helen Benedict has presented the lives and experiences of women caught in the web of history. Benedict's *Sand Queen* shows how women from the Iraq war are in the unique position of being combat veterans and sexual assault survivors. Their sorrows are silenced in every way shaping them as fragile beings. They try hard to overcome the sexual assaults but are subjugated. Every progress of their life at war is underlined with the need for protection and freedom to exercise their identity. This paper traces the hardships, sufferings and mental warfare undergone by women during war. It also focuses on the sexual harassment of women soldiers in the military camp

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Keywords: Assault, Freedom, Harassment, Suffering, Women.

Women were always considered as weak and fragile. They were secluded inside the house. In the present world, as war has changed the year old convention and practice, women are also brought out to protect the world. Their brave contribution in war made them to encounter challenges both psychologically and socially.

In *Sand Queen*, the female soldier Kate underwent tons of troubles caused by the male soldiers of her own unit. There is severe patriarch domination in the military. Also they were psychologically disturbed by the discourteous behaviour of the male prisoners in the camp. Women in Iraq lived with fear of being raped and kidnapped. All through the major wars of the world, it is the common women who endures all the hardships and agonizingly wait for the homecoming of the men who went to fight or imprisoned in war.

Kate Brady joined the army to bring honor to her family and democracy to the Middle East. Instead, she finds herself in a forgotten corner of the Iraq desert in 2003, guarding a makeshift American prison. She has trouble adapting to the harsh conditions at Camp Bucca. There is no proper accommodation at the Camp; their tent is always hot and dusty. The tent is overcrowded and there is no floor but sand. Her physical and mental health deteriorates steadily, but there seems little she can do about it. She expresses her pitiable condition as:

We work twelve-to-fifteen hour shifts, and even so I can never sleep. It's too damn hot and I'm sharing a tent with thirty-three snoring, farting members of the male sex, not to mention the prisoners only a few meters away, chanting and screaming all night long....God, what I would give for a breath of clear air, one that isn't filled with dust and the stink of burning shit and diesel. (Benedict 7)

The morbid atmosphere of the war turns each person unhealthy. The desert heat is unbelievable. Soldiers are passing out from dehydration all the time. Nineteen-year-old Kate finds herself toiling in the hot Iraqi desert. The heat is burning her life and she gradually loses her health and longs to go back to her hometown, Willowglen. Kate struggles to survive the

boredom of long days in a guard tower keeping watch over endless stretches of sand that reach to the horizon. The female soldiers avoid the stinky bathrooms due to its unpleasant condition. They also constipate on purpose to avoid stinky problems. They also drink less because the unhygienic condition of the latrines threatens them. As a result, they get bladder infection, “When you try nothing comes out, or if it does it burns like acid. If the infection goes on too long, you get a fever and start pissing blood” (Benedict 39).

Helen Benedict interviewed around 40 female veterans of the war in Iraq to bring out the particular difficulties of being not just a soldier, but a female soldier. For the women, it's not just the threat of combat, but the threat of men within their own units. The level of harassment and sexism that Kate and her fellow female soldiers face is horrific. As a young, female soldier, she routinely gets harassed by her fellow soldiers and by prisoners. They were not allowed to walk to the latrines or anywhere else at night without another female as a battle buddy. In this way they can protect each other from getting raped by one of their own comrades. Women carry weapons more with the idea of protecting themselves against the men on their own side. The Vietnam nurses and first Gulf War pilots who were getting treated in the same hospital as Kate stands as a witness to the ruination done to their life by war, “ They look like a bunch of washed-out alcoholics in their sloppy sweats...They're older than she is, too, fat and shapeless. She doesn't want to hear how, thirty friggin' years after the Vietnam War, they're still as screwed up as she is” (Benedict 107-108). After the invasion there is also threat to the physical safety of the Iraqi women. The walk to the prison camp is fraught with physical dangers—landmines, cluster bombs, packs of wild dogs, hurtling convoys and the Iraqi militia groups create further perils for women.

Most of the women in the military would report sexual harassment while they were serving. Kormick, a sergeant assaults and attempts to rape Kate during the day at her guard post. Kate is severely injured and beaten while she tries to save her during this violent act.

Similarly, Third Eye, the strongest female soldier in Kate's unit is raped by Kormick and Boner. Men continue to repeat this act irrespective of fear and punishment. Instead, the victimized women are afraid of reporting the crime, for being thrown in the brig for fighting a sergeant. They are also scared of being considered as whiners and weak soldiers. Most of the soldiers do not offer their hands to help these women. The men have closed ranks and always protect their brothers in arms. Women who have reported rape have been met with threats of punishment or actual punishment rather than judicial action. After the attack, Kate is moved from her comparatively active assignment at the checkpoint to the passive position of prison guard. The Male soldiers spread rumours and make the fellow soldiers believe that the woman has done it voluntarily, in which case the woman will get harassed to death, "or them knowing she was raped, which will get her treated like a leper. Either way they'll say she's a tramp" (Benedict 145). Kate and the other young women always walking on eggshells, self-conscious of how everything they say and do, and how they appear are observed by the men.

Kate begins to experience a state of near-constant rage, possibly a sign of mental woe from the attack and a side effect of her enforced passivity on the tower. Kate suffocates between the prisoners who throw feces at her and comrades who gossip about her supposed promiscuity,

For two months now I've been stuck up in my tower like a scarecrow on a broomstick while those prisoners fling shit and spiders at me all day, and I'm sick to death of it. I feel like Hester Prynne in that book we read in high school, the girl who had to stand up on a pillory so the whole town could jeer and throw things at her 'cause she slept with a priest or something. Only I'm not noble and long-suffering, like her. I'm mad as a pit bull. (173)

Largely helpless apart from her daily walk to the prison camp in search of news, Naema finds her thoughts circling over imagined tortures of her father and brother: "I have to stop thinking like this. The not knowing, this is what drives one mad" (113). Her challenge to the

soldiers at the American prison compound causes a fellow petitioner to worry that she is “going mad” (117). A desperate situation like war drains a person’s common sense, love and family bondage. Kate fails to remember her sister’s birthday. She also acts indifferent towards the love letters send by Tyler. Jimmy identifies the confused state of Kate through her response to the death of Zaki and tries to console her, “You’re talking wild. You’re just messed up ’cause of all the bad shit that’s happened. You’ll be all right, sweetie, you will” (283). The cruelty around Kate torments her from having a peaceful sleep.

Kate suffers from psychological fragmentation. Having not reported the sexual assault on herself, Kate suffers when she discovers that the same soldiers have raped another woman in her company; she calls herself a “friggin’ coward” (145). She carries guilt and loses her self-esteem. When Kate does attempt to file a complaint, she takes Yvette with her for support, and both of them end up on a highly dangerous mission as punishment for speaking out, a mission during which her friend is killed, leaving Kate with an even greater burden of guilt. The last line of Kate’s narrative expresses her guilt: “I didn’t protect Yvette either, or Naema’s dad or her little brother. I’ve killed so many of them. Oh God, when will it stop?” (305). She feels dirty for doing the job and believes herself unworthy of love.

Another reason for the emotional struggle of Kate is the lack of companionship in the U.S military. Of the two other female soldiers in her barracks, one barely speaks to her, judging her to be a sand queen; the other, her friend, Yvette is often away and is eventually killed; and the female superior officer to whom Kate reported the sexual assault apparently betrays her. In Kate’s military world, women cannot unite.

Residing away from the family is one hard punishment during war. In *Sand Queen*, when Naema’s father and brother are taken prisoner by the Americans, she, her mother, and grandmother find themselves experiencing a trauma they have gone through before when Naema’s father was imprisoned under the regime of Saddam Hussein. Naema yearns for the

reunion of her family, “Come home, little brother, and be a child again. Come home, Papa, and take us in your arms” (Benedict 171). With the imprisonment of the family members, the happiness of the household is shattered. “The boys Zaki played with imprisoned, exiled or killed. And Granny Maryam is too unhappy to joke or tell stories. Just as Mama and I are too unhappy to listen” (68). Naema desires to put an end to all this fear and suffering.

There is a constant sort of psychological degradation in women when people refer them as nothing but a sex object day after day, night after night, and month after month. In an interview, Helen Benedict answers concerning the sexual offensives of male soldiers:

It is a historical idea that soldiers have a right to women’s body as a kind of reward for their sacrifices and bravery and so on. And that attitude goes back to the first armies ever. You see it in the Greeks, in the Bible, in the old epics. And so, it really is deep in the military culture to not take women seriously as comrades, but to see them as objects. As prey. (Krishna Andavolu)

In *Sand Queen*, male soldiers and the prisoners of the camp abuse the female soldiers with constant vulgar jokes; they make remarks about their body, looks up and down and stripping them with their eyes, “I’m the prison guard here, I have the weapon. But those burning eyes of his won’t leave me alone. They even get into my dreams” (Benedict 127). At times it is worse, more aggressive and nasty. Kate is getting this harassment from all sides all the time, and it begins to eat her and change her personality. Boner and Macktruck often address her as “Tits” (26). Rickman mistreats her through words like, “Brady’s ass, Pinkass, cunt” (45). Kate feels humiliation when she sees the vulgar words abusing her on the walls of the latrine. She is puzzled by the double behaviour of the male soldiers, “Almost every day something obscene is up there about females, words or a crude pornographic drawing. I will never understand how guys can act like your brother one minute, then hit on you or write shit like that the next. What makes them do it?” (155). She struggle more and more to try and keep a

moral center in the midst of all this nastiness. Likewise, on one of their daily trips to the prison, Naema and her elderly neighbour Fatima encounter men in black who challenge Naema and call her a whore, “You walk like a whore alone in the streets. And he spits at my feet” (198). They retreat only when Fatima claims Naema as her granddaughter, “She’s with me, her own grandmother! How dare you call my grandchild such names! Have you no respect for your elders?” (198).

As a woman guarding male Iraqi prisoners, Kate finds herself subject to sexual harassment and intimidation from the very men over whom she is supposed to have power. The prisoners daily taunt her with insults, masturbate in front of her, and throw excrement at her, “They point. They jeer. They gesture at me. And then one guy swaggers up, pulls out his dick and jerks off right in front of me” (98) “One day, though, he tries something new. He drops his pants, squats in the sand and does his business. Then he wipes his ass with his left hand and throws his turd at me” (127) causing her rage at them and at her own impotence to build until she is offered an opportunity to beat one of the prisoners. She hits him brutally until she suddenly recognizes him from Naema’s photo: the prisoner is not the one who threw excrement at her, he is Naema’s father, for whom she promised she would look, the one good deed she thinks she can do in the war. She even thinks of taking revenge on the prisoners by poisoning their cigarettes, burying toe poppers in their compounds and shooting off their fingers one by one. Horrified at herself, Kate’s psychological state continues to deteriorate, ultimately landing her in the psychiatric hospital.

War brings numerous difficulties in the social life of women. In *Sand Queen*, Naema finds her world and her possibilities reduced to the struggle to survive amid violence and an abrupt change in attitudes toward women. Many girls and women were being raped. Naema could not get to her “classes at Baghdad Medical College for fear of being raped” (Benedict 30). In Baghdad, Naema studied to be a doctor and chose her own fiancé. After the invasion,

local militias begin to impose Sharia law, restricting Naema's opportunities and threatening her physical safety. Naema must learn to wear a hijab, forcing herself into strange body movements to prevent its falling off. After the War, the 1959 family code that protected Iraqi women and gave them more autonomy than Muslim women anywhere in the Middle East outside of Turkey has been dismantled, taking women's rights fifty years back. Naema thinks:

We are sliding backwards in my country. We are becoming narrower than we have been for decades. Soon we women will be forced to live the life Granny had to lead—married off as little girls, beaten by our husbands, shrouded, enslaved—our rights as human beings obliterated. I know that some fundamentalist clerics, who have taken advantage of the current chaos and fear to gain new power, are already trying to obliterate the rights that Iraqi women have had for fifty years. They want to put us under the Sharia laws that treat us as slaves. If this comes to be, how are we women—how is our culture—to survive? (169-70)

In *Sand Queen*, Naema's family struggled to live with the few supplies of food from the local market, "the flatbread which is all we have now to make bearable our wartime diet of watery soup and goat yogurt" (Benedict 89). They have only one or two hours of electricity a day. Naema utilizes the meagre time to heat the water, clean the dust, cook some rice and recharge the cellular phone. The telephone is their lifeline, as they "have no computers or Internet, no landline and receive no letters. This war has isolated us as effectively as if it had sent us to Mars" (141). There is deficiency of medical facility at the hospitals in Iraq. When Naema takes her grandmother to the hospital, the nurse informs, "We have twelve beds, no electricity, and no water. There is only one doctor! Thousands of people have come for help. But there isn't any help! I have no gloves, no equipment to offer you" (250).

Like the civilians, the soldiers correspondingly suffer in war. In *Sand Queen*, the mortar incident which killed Yvette reveals the danger of being a soldier. In an enemy territory, a soldier's life is always at stake. And once the soldiers return home, the hideous memories of war prevents them from leading a normal life. The female soldier, Kate loses her innocence, experiences trauma, and comes home to a world in which she feels she no longer belongs. She locks herself in the room to keep everyone out and spends time by drinking and taking pills. Her body and soul were wounded, "Every step I take hurts my back, every thought hurts my heart. Can't sleep or eat either" (Benedict 299). Similarly, when Third Eye comes home after her deployment; the wickedness of war thrusts her to shot herself in her father's garage. In *Sand Queen*, female soldiers end up dead by enemy combat or suicide or, like Kate, psychologically destroyed.

Naema's brother Zaki could not go back to school for fear of being kidnapped or killed by criminals, "a little boy of twelve, was shot dead in the street for nothing but his CD player" (Benedict 30). Even the prison is not a haven for children as it is filled with criminals and perverts who will rape little boys. Men were beaten, snatched and incarcerated in the American prison. Women mourn at the loss of their husbands, brothers and sons. People were afraid to walk on the streets which are swarming with thieves and thugs. There is betrayal by friends and colleagues, spying and denouncements, rivalry and revenge. At the prison, the guards burn the letters of the prisoners and tell cruel words about their family to frighten them.

History often fails to expose the numerous sufferings confronted by women. Women faced terrible challenges and struggles during war time. Both their physical and mental health is ruined. They were affected directly and indirectly by the elements of war. Benedict brilliantly uncover the pathetic journey of women in war.

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