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## War, Trauma, Memory in Selected Short Stories of *Fire and Forget* Edited by Roy Scranton and Matt Ghalagher and *A Vital Killing* by Ahmad Dehghan

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### **Abstract**

This article is a comparative study of similar experiences in the American short story collection, *Fire and Forget: Short Stories from the Long War* edited by Roy Scranton and Matt Ghalagher and the Persian short story collection, *A Vital Killing* by Ahmad Dehghan as they belong to two different languages, different cultures, and different worldviews. It is an exploration of an overwhelmed psychology in the American short story collection, *Fire and Forget: Short Stories from the Long War* edited by Roy Scranton and Matt Ghalagher and the Persian short story collection, *A Vital Killing* by Ahmad Dehghan translated recently into English by Caroline Croskery, and examines the concept of memory within trauma criticism. From amongst the short stories of each collection, three have been selected: “Tips For a Smooth Transition”, “The Train”, and “Big Two-Hearted Hunting Creek” from the first and “The Passenger”, “Stamps”, and “A Vital Killing” from the second. The article shows that characters have undergone traumatic losses; therefore, they suffer a painful psychic traumatic wound that keeps haunting them repeatedly.

**Keywords:** *Fire and Forget, A Vital Killing, Short Stories, War, Trauma, and Memory*

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received: Sunday, May 19, 2018

Accepted: Monday, June 11., 2018

Published: Tuesday, August 21, 2018

Available Online: Tuesday, July 31, 2018

DOI: 10.22049/jalda.2018.26232.1063

## **Introduction**

### **Background**

To begin the issue, here is a quotation from the foreword part of the primary source of the book, *Fire and Forget: Short Stories from the Long War*: “All stories are war stories somehow. Every one of us has stepped from a war or another” (McCann, 2013, p. vii). In this world that we are facing lots of wars, the representation of it especially through literature is very important. War, memory, and its aftermath are what are supposed to be discussed in terms of trauma. The very literary criticism of 21st century - to use Julian Wolfreys` (2002) words - “is not a single school of criticism, no one methodology dealing with this” (p. 126).

This article is a comparative study between two different worldviews, languages, the same experience, and overwhelmed psychology in *Fire and Forget: Short Stories from the Long War* edited by Roy Scranton and Matt Ghalagher and the Persian short story collection, *A Vital Killing* by Ahmad Dehghan translated recently by Caroline Croskery.

### **Theoretical underpinning**

Although reading trauma needs to be traced back to first psychoanalysis, ethical criticisms, here to be concise, it has been focused on war trauma, its concept being memory, loss, and recovery, but we only focus on memory for the purpose of this article. All of these are well-represented in *Fire and Forget: Short Stories from the Long War* and *A Vital Killing*. In these short story collections the war veterans express their war memory of Iraq and Afghanistan. These characters are filled with traumatic memory which makes them lose their control over the present moment. Moreover, these characters feel pain at the result of losses they have experienced in the war, therefore, they suffer inner trauma and are haunted with past memories, consequently.

### **Purpose of the study**

This study aims to examine how both the collected short stories of American war Veterans included in *Fire and Forget: Short Stories from the Long War* co-edited by Roy Scranton and Matt Ghalagher and *A Vital Killing* by Ahmad Dehghan share some similar concepts of war and trauma. Having totally two different worldviews about war does not mean to stop talking about the memory work or the history of their war time experiences. Studying both texts show that although the events took place in different times and geographical places - one taking place in Iraq the other in Iran, mainly Khoramshahr - or the religious/cultural atmosphere of the book, mostly in *A Vital Killing*, where the author deeply believes in being at war, a kind of jihad or God-loving job, both of the works have the same trauma or wound not only in physicality but in their memory and long last dreams.

### **Significance of the study and research question**

The present study gains significance as findings can shed more light on trauma, memory. In *Fire and Forget: the Short Stories from the Long War* the authors represent the very history of the long war in Iraq and Afghanistan. The second aspect of the notion of history as Cathy Caruth argues “is not wholly and well perceivable, no one can better talk about history” (as cited in Wolfreys, 2002, p. 128). Talking about history reminds us of the work of Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921) in which the writer focuses on being the truth themselves. Like Pirandello’s work, this book talks about the reality of war.

This research will explore the following question and tries to have proper answer for it:

1. How does memory function in selected short stories of *A Vital Killing* and *Fire and Forget*?

### **Methodology**

This research is a qualitative study based on the theory of trauma and is a comparative study between the American war short story collection named *Fire and Forget: Short Stories from the Long War* and the Persian collection, *A Vital Killing*. The representation of war trauma in these two collections are compared and somehow contrasted with each other, each having in common with the representation of the concept of memory which causes pain in the mind. Therefore, this research attempts to know and see how these concepts work on these war books.

### **Discussions**

The present article will discuss how the continuum of memory operates in *A Vital Killing* and *Fire and Forget* comparatively in the light of trauma theories. The theoretical perspectives utilized in this article encompass trauma critics and their major works such as Cathy Caruth (1996) and her *Unclaimed Experience*, Dominick LaCapra’s *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001), and on major spectral works like Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok’s *Haunted Narratives: Life Writing in an Age of Trauma* (2013), Judith Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery* (1997), and Kate Mcloughlin’s *Authoring War: The Literary Representation of War from the Iliad to Iraq* (2011). Other relevant issues will be consulted as the backbone of this article. It seems that both short story collections deal with the concept of memory; the characters have experienced war in Iraq and Afghanistan and are therefore living with the memory of their past and in some cases are uncontrollably haunted with the past memories, that is, the traumatic memories that they have been given by the destructive war.

During 2001-2014, Iraq and Afghanistan had been in war with America. During these years, some soldiers and war veterans were eager to share their memories and witnesses with people. They did so by writing books about war

stories, events, and their own experiences. *Fire and Forget, Short Stories from the Long War* was written during the war times of both Iraq and Afghanistan. In this collection some of the well-known war veterans of America have written about their experiences, some of them including the editors, Matt Ghalagher and Roy Scranton, are suffering from mental trauma that they have narrated in this collection. The writers of this collection, says Colum McCann (2013), are telling the ambiguous realities of war beyond the unpleasant images (p. viii). As the narrators note in the preface of the book, “Grab it. We were there. This is what we saw. This is **how it felt**. And we’re here to say, it’s not like you heard in the stories” (2013, p. xv). This sentence remarks the attitude of most of the characters in both these collections and remarks how war has been imprinted in the mind of the characters like an un-healing wound. As Paulson and Krippner (2013) point out:

... for trauma victims fact is often modeled after fallacy. The traumatic memory fragment that overwhelms the present for a veteran acts like a supermassive psychic object whose gravitational field changes the way all other nearby systems behave. So, for instance, a gruesome memory from combat can permanently alter brain chemistry or prompt the body to respond as if the event were recurring, even when none of the original stressors are present. (p. xvii)

Characters in *Fire and Forget* are filled with war-memories that are not appealing. The first short story is “Tips for a Smooth Transition” by Siobhan Fallon, the story of a military husband and his wife coming to terms with him like a traumatized soldier. She narrates how a military wife feels when her husband deploys. Likewise, another short story, “The Train” narrated by Mariette Kalinowski represents a young woman that is haunted by her war traumatic memory; she is stuck in her past memories spent in Iraq during war, therefore losing her consciousness to present moment. And the third major short story that best describes and represents memory is “Big Two-Hearted Hunting Creek” by Brian Van Reet. This story like two others is concerned with traumatic memories of war veterans, like Reed, who struggles to deal with his losses, each time being reminded of the hardship they had endured and being haunted by past experiences that belong to the past.

Likewise, the Persian war short story collection, *A Vital Killing* represents memories that war veterans have to bear inside while they struggle to deal with its heavy weight heaped on. These stories are narrated by Ahmad Dehgan, an Iranian veteran, who has been in war zones in Iran, writing these stories by his own experiences. His first short story is “The Passenger” which narrates the memory of a veteran representing the story of Naneh Maryam and his lost son, Abdo. The narrator is concerned with Naneh’s lapsed psyche and her obsession with her dead son. He is worried about her preparing food and waiting for him; she is aware of the fact that he is dead. According to his survived son, Jaseem and the major character of the story, there is something wrong with Naneh; she suffers a haunted mind. Another story, “Stamps”, likewise, narrates traumatized soldiers who cannot

overcome their loss and who cannot forget the bitter memory that hovers over their mind. Nigel C. Hunt (2010) in his *Memory, War and Trauma* states:

Memory... is constructed partly through narrative and the social context. If we wish to understand war trauma, we need to take into account these narratives and the socio-cultural situation the person lives in. At the same time, there are also fundamental underlying universals regarding memory, the stress and fear response and other variables which also determine the response to traumatic experiences such as war, and through which psychologists have developed a good understanding via laboratory and other research. (p. 6)

The characters in “Tips For a Smooth Transition”, the military soldier and his wife, are obsessed with their trauma. Colin has returned back with a traumatic psyche and memory which is hard to deal with. Home, beside his wife seems a paradise for Colin. As the narrator opens the story, it is noted: “When your soldier returns, take it easy, take it slow. Your own backyard might be paradise enough for a soldier who hasn’t seen grass in a year. Let him just sit in a hammock and relax” (*Fire and Forget*, p. 21). This represents the fact that war has been the major cause of Colin’s mental disorder and traumatic psyche. He suffers a psychic wound and chaotic mind that Evie has to caress and heal.

Talking over war and soldiers brings forth the traumatic memory and makes Colin haunted by the after-effect of war experience. Krystal (1991, as cited in Felman, 1991) in his article “Trauma and Aging”, talks about the after effects of traumatic events such as Holocaust. He interviews the survivors of Holocaust and concludes that: “many of [soldiers] cannot face re-experiencing that event and they had lost the basic trust” (p. 85). According to Krystal, “The most after effects of trauma is that the victim severely faces with aggression, psychic problems until that his own feelings seem as stranger, however, as Krystal suggests the survivor should accept the pains and reach to a self-acceptance” (p. 85)

Furthermore, the major character in “The Train” is haunted with her traumatic memory, therefore, she has lost her consciousness to present. She lives with past memories that are the after-effects of her war experience:

The last solid part of her before the edges of her experience faded into that questionable fogginess of memory, that state in which a person could no longer be sure that what they recalled was true, or even their own. At times, when she was consumed by the tightness of Iraq and barely conscious on the train, she wondered if what she was feeling was even her own, as though she were living someone else’s memories, transforming into another person. (*Fire and Forget*, p. 63)

The character is got stuck deep in her memories that belongs to her past experiences though they seem not to belong to her memories. She is restless and

helpless in remembering the war memories belonging to those times of Iraq, as if she lives there back in Iraq, experiencing the same traumatic experiences:

Every recollection spins together flashes from every part of her tour, flashes of hajjis lining up to be frisked at the ECP, the world swept away beneath a roiling red cloud of sand, the staccato of an M16 firing or the distant *thoomp* of artillery firing that is felt deep in the chest more than heard. Frozen, each of these images floating across her memory, photographs that confuse the true progression of events. Reality on that day couldn't be trusted, because she was no longer sure which parts should be kept, which discarded. (p. 63)

The character is so much haunted with war images that she has lost her consciousness and therefore feels frozen regarding each image floating across her memory. Thus, she cannot trust the reality since she cannot recognize memory from the present reality. She is not sure which part she should keep and which part she should discard.

Additionally, in "Big Two-Hearted Hunting Creek", the characters are post-war soldiers that are going fishing. On the way, the narrator of the story is haunted by his traumatic war memories which are hard to deal with. He longs for forgetting the difficult times they had experienced and which they have no control over and the thought of which they cannot escape (p. 173). He wishes he could overcome the nightmarish situation he like other soldiers had undergone during the war. In fact, their bodies were helplessly transformed in a flesh (p. 174), let alone their wounded mind that rested unhealed. Afterwards, they cannot feel helpless in readjusting their sensibilities. The narrator insists that they had to "get used to loving [their] weapon" (p. 176). This is called a "phantom gun syndrome", accordingly.

Likewise, Ahmad Dehgan's first short story, "The Passenger", represents a character, Naneh Maryam, being haunted by her past memories that belong to the time she has lost her son and husband, suffering a psychic wound that makes her stuck in the past, being unconscious to the fact that Abdo, her son, has been dead. When, Abdo's friend calls her to get information about the incomprehensible letter she has sent him, he gets dumfounded by her saying that her "child is tired. He has [been] at war and now is tired" (*A Vital Killing*, p. 7). When the narrator introduces himself and asks whether she had recalled him, she answers as if she had not heard what Nasser had said. She says, "Oh, Abdo finally came back, I went myself and brought him back. I found him in the middle of the battlefield, my child" (p. 7). This represents the fact that Naneh is traumatized, suffering a memory lapse, therefore, losing her sense and consciousness to what happened in her surroundings. She lives in the past, being haunted by bitter memories that recall her losses.

Moreover, in Dehgan's "Stamps", the major character is narrating his non-healing story that he is haunted with. He narrates the bitter experience that he struggles to forget. The narrator recalls his childhood memories and his childhood

collected stamp Albums that mostly remind him of his childhood friend, Roya that he had lost catastrophically, therefore, suffering a traumatic loss that he cannot overcome. What he is concerned with is his childhood memory, his Album collection, and what he had seen before his eyes at the front, while returning back from the war. This fact is the main reason behind Idris, his friend, as well. They are suffering a traumatic memory that just reminds them of Roya's dead body before their eyes. This is what makes Idris suffering:

Nobody knows what happened to Idris... It's nothing anyone would be proud of knowing it. Idris has become a slovenly, Spacey creature that ventures out in the evenings to the park north of our neighborhood. He sits over in the corner of the park with the best view to watch the sun go down... from the moment the sun begins to disappear over the horizon and inches out of the sight, Idris takes on a strange quality. His face grows redder and redder until for a moment he looks like a blister about to burst. He yells and thrashes about and utters words that no one has ever been able to understand. Then his elderly mother approaches Idris. Weeping, she takes his hand and leads him home. (pp. 35-36)

Idris has been haunted by the bitter memory of his sister's death, therefore suffering a traumatic loss that hovers around constantly. In fact, he suffers a psychic wound that is un-healable and unforgettable. As Nigel C. Hunt (2010) in his *Memory, War and Trauma* puts it:

A traumatic memory is formed, a memory that is at once cognitive, emotional and possibly behavioral. The traumatic memory does not exist in normal 'stress'. The traumatic memory relates to the person's initial unconscious response to the traumatic event. As the person survived the event, the memory is indelibly fixed within the mind. This is adaptive. The person experienced a life-threatening situation and survived, and so if the same traumatic situation arose in the future, they should behave in the same manner again, hence increasing their chances of survival... Unfortunately, owing to the mechanisms involved... that response contains memorized bodily and psychological responses that are potentially damaging to the psyche. (p. 7)

In *Fire and Forget*, all the characters respond unconsciously to their trauma. They have survived a destructive war, now living with its after-effect. In "Tips for a Smooth Transition", Colin has returned home with a chaotic and traumatic memory. It takes time to realize where he is. He is in fact haunted with memories that keep him deep in the past so he feels separated from the present moment, away from the war: "Colin blinks. He uses his palm to push back whatever thoughts are there. Evie's fingers are still on her lips, her tongue feeling around her teeth to see if she is bleeding (she is not), and he turns back to his window, not even noticing she is hurt"

(*Fire and Forget*, p. 23). Colin is so much overwhelmed with his war memory that he cannot understand he has hurt his wife.

Moreover, Colin is too much preoccupied with his thoughts and memories that he cannot realize fact from fiction. When Evie thinks of exposing her secret with a man in his absence, she thinks of the thought looming over his mind rather than being a reality. As is mentioned, “a worried soldier is a soldier who is not focused on his mission; a worried soldier is a danger to himself and his fellow soldiers” (p. 29).

Colin is a soldier that is not concerned with present or future, he is just overwhelmed with his mission in the war therefore he is mainly concerned with war issues. So, Evie considers keeping everything from Colin since nothing would make him worried. Furthermore, accordingly, nothing more could weary Colin down than his bitter and traumatic experience in the war. As Wolfreys (2002) has pointed out in his *Introducing Criticism at the 21st Century*:

Trauma might be said to be a ghost. Given that ‘the essential character of traumatism’ is best described as a ‘nonsymbolizable wound’... to read trauma is to register the sign of a secondary experience and recognition of the return of something spectral in the form of a trace or sign signifying, but not representing directly, that something, having occurred, has left its mark, an inscription of sorts on the subject's unconscious, and one which, moreover, can and does return repeatedly, though never as the experience as such. (p. 133)

Evie is a constant witness to Colin's dangerous and traumatic nightmares that he has been gifted in the war. She sees him gasping, a thick and struggling sound, that he cannot get enough air. In fact, Colin is a war victim, therefore, living with its after-effect, not able to overcome its holding grip even in sleep. This happens constantly, making Colin unaware and unconscious towards reality. He is too much haunted with his memory that Evie has to take care and set up a security plan so that she could not be hurt. Hence, Colin is haunted with spectral presence of his traumatic memory, being overwhelmed with the trace of what has happened in the war, being involved in traumatic memory that is marked in his unconscious; this is what happens repeatedly, making Evie alert and secure each time. According to Judith Herman (1997):

The traumatic moment becomes encoded in an abnormal form of memory, which breaks spontaneously into consciousness, both as flashbacks during waking states and as traumatic nightmares during sleep. Small, seemingly insignificant reminders can also evoke these memories, which often return with all the vividness and emotional force of the original event. Thus, even normally safe environments may come to feel dangerous, for the survivor can never be assured that she will not encounter some reminder of the trauma. (p. 27)

When Colin is haunted by his nightmarish trauma, Evie struggles to understand his traumatic disorder and realize what bothers him so much. “Colin’s legs are twitching, on the verge of kicking. He moans again” (p. 31). Evie tries to wake him up. She flicks on the main light and puts her hand on doorknob ready to run in order not to be injured. When Colin wakes up he is confused at Evie and her reactions, as if she has been crazy. Colin is ignorant of the fact that he has been haunted by his trauma. As Wolfreys (2002) points out: “the subject of trauma is rendered immobile, unable to move beyond the haunting effects left by trauma, and can only experience in a damaging, repetitive fashion, the disjunctive specters, remains of what is ‘nonsymbolizable’” (p.134).

Furthermore, in “Big Two-Hearted Hunting Creek”, the characters are constantly reminded of their past memories that belong to war. In the bus, driving towards Georgia, the major character recalls what had happened during his stay in Baghdad and the difficulties they had faced. Meanwhile, he had suffered physical injuries for which he had been hospitalized. It was just after his physical and mental damages he came to the conclusion that his joining the army was a wrong choice he had made for a remedy for the dishonor he had caused at a result of flanking out of school (p. 178). Afterwards, he had to live with a traumatized and wounded psyche and therefore a haunted memory that he had to bear to his grave.

Naneh Maryam, likewise, is haunted by her past memory. She lives in a mud-brick home located in a war-torn village located at the outskirts of a date palm grove. Naneh is affected by war and therefore suffers a traumatic loss that worsens her psyche and memory day by day. When she talks to Nasser, she says that Abdo is sleeping, which represents the fact that Naneh is haunted by spectral presence of dead Abdo, making her lose her consciousness to the reality, hence living with false belief and sensitivity that his son is alive, sleeping.

Afterwards, when Nasser calls Jaseem, he is shocked to hear that Naheh had been missing for ten days until she has returned back four days ago (p. 11). In fact, Naneh has lost her memory and consciousness. She cannot remember anything except repeating her past memories that concern Abdo and the war. After she hears Abdo’s death at the front, Naneh’s heart broke. When, later Nasser paid her a visit, she hugs and greets him, making fire and repeatedly asking about Abdo: “Where on his body was he wounded? Who saw him? Why don’t you go and bring my Abdo back? Why did you just leave him in the desert? Did he have food and water?” (p. 13).

After Abdo’s death, Naneh couldn’t deal with his loss, therefore undergoing a psychic lapse and traumatic disorder, losing her control over her feelings and actions. Therefore, Naneh’s life has changed to a nightmarish memory that is haunted with Abdo’s specter which keeps haunting her repeatedly. As is narrated, after Abdo’s death, he has been Naneh’s “every waking though” (p. 14). Moreover,

Naneh spends time cooking more food than necessary on the chance that Ando might return back and as well, she turned down his covers at night so that if he returned late at night, his bed would be ready for him. According to Zizek (1989):

There is an inherent link between the notions of trauma and repetition, signalled in Freud's well-known motto that what one is not able to remember, one is condemned to repeat: a trauma is by definition something one is not able to remember, i.e. to recollect by way of making it part of one's symbolic narrative; as such, it repeats itself indefinitely, returning to haunt the subject more precisely, what repeats itself is the very failure, impossibility even to repeat/recollect the trauma properly. (pp. 36-7)

Likewise, the narrator in Dehgan's "Stamps" is haunted by the memory of his traumatic memory, therefore, he struggles to escape this spectral presence that bothers him. He intends to burn the stamps so that he could forget what attaches him to the past and especially Roya, whose death is intolerable for both the narrator and Idris. The stamps remind him of the past that lingers on and which haunt his psyche repeatedly. It is noted: "I will keep on burning these stamps until I forget all of these memories. As I sit by this fire today, I will recall all the old memories one last time so that I can forget them once and for all" (pp. 44-45).

Moreover, this character is haunted by the image of the woman splayed out on the ground at the foot of the road (p. 51). This image fills the mind of the narrator constantly, making him lose his control and furthermore making him suffer the traumatic loss that he faced at the front.

Also, the major character in "The Train" like other haunted and suffering characters is uncontrollably involved in her war memory. She constantly and repeatedly remembers heart-rending images of the destructive war and the women and children struggling to survive the fire. She recalls the women wearing chadors, weapons beneath their breasts. She feels stuck, unable to keep track of weeks turning into months. Meanwhile, she is seeking memory of anything that stood out from the routine of her life. All remembers is gray, such as sky and sand. She sees "men shuffled behind the other, their worn-out clothes beginning to look like the gray sand and gray sky" (p. 64).

Furthermore, the character in this short story is surrounded by her past memories that belong to war. Her trauma repeats itself, filling her mind repeatedly. Each time she flashes back to the time she experienced war trauma. She constantly feels back, she feels as if she "stood at the Entry Control Point for the main gate of the base. The ECP was a wide, sandy lane leading out from the main gate, about 100 meters long and framed on both sides by Hesco barriers, tall, canvas and wire baskets filled with sand built to stop shrapnel and small arms fire" (pp. 64-65). The narrator is surveying in her war memory, each time feeling terror and fear all along. "On that particular day, with its heavy clouds and stretched-thin feeling, she glanced

over at the line of hajjis queuing up for their pat down, and an alarm somewhere inside her went off, her fear screaming loud and long, leaning into her gut, making her wonder, making her think” (p. 65).

The character remembers the time her fears were screaming aloud and long, leaning into her gut, making her wonder and think. The memory of Iraq fills her with fear, being numb and thrilled at each image that flashes in her mind. This war experience had cost her too much, leaving her with a traumatized psyche that she could not deal with or overcome the fears. Marilena Zackheos (2011) in his *The Ex-isle Reinvention: Postcolonial Trauma and Recovery in Contemporary Island Literature* argues that:

The traumatized has become an “ahistorical” subject. Temporally, she is in one sense, overly engrossed in the particular time of the traumatic event, and in another, over or beyond linear time’s hold. Plagued by the repeated memory of a particular traumatic space, the traumatized is frozen in time and overly preoccupied with this place. She is thus beyond the influence of her current surroundings. (p. 78)

As the story progresses, it portrays clearly the haunting memory that the character is faced, therefore, she is kept in the past, feeling loss and moreover preoccupied with what concerns Iraq and war:

She could feel Iraq everywhere, feel the dusty film of the desert covering every object and surface, her skin. She couldn’t wash the desert away and all she saw was gray: gray sky, gray tinted sand, gray movements of bodies rushing. Or lying still. Darker gray pools spread across the ground. She smelled flesh and sweat and bile and she couldn’t tell if these sights were solid or ghosts. (pp. 66-67)

Something of past has returned back which makes her haunted. Throughout the story, the character gets involved more in her trauma, therefore feeling the past memory persistent and running, hence, keeping her unconscious. This is well expressed, moreover, in her lack of recognizing the smell of flesh, sweat and bile as being solid or ghosts (p. 67). Consequently, the character is exhausted and tired with the haunting presence of her past memories, therefore, being consumed by the fear that makes her annoyed even at the sound of the two-year-old child moving above the apartment. Cathy Caruth (1996) in her *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* states:

For what returns to haunt the trauma victim in Freud’s primary example of trauma ... is not just any event but, significantly, the shocking and unexpected occurrence of an accident. The example of the train accident—the accident from which a person walks away apparently unharmed, only to suffer symptoms of the shock weeks later—most obviously illustrates, for Freud, the traumatizing shock of a commonly occurring violence. Yet the recurring image of the accident in Freud, as the illustration of the

unexpected or the accidental, seems to be especially compelling, and indeed becomes the exemplary scene of trauma *par excellence*, not only because it depicts what we can know about traumatizing events, but also, and more profoundly, because it tells of what it is, in traumatic events, that is *not* precisely grasped. (p. 6)

Here, the post-combat invincibility refers to the post-war trauma that Colin as a deployed soldier suffers from. As a result, he unexpectedly and uncontrollably is haunted with a trauma that Evie has to deal with and take care of.

Additionally, Colin and Evie have undergone changes that are noted as normal after his war experience. This is represented in his option for a peaceful vacation with his wife after his troublesome and traumatic experience at war. Instead of choosing a comfortable place, Colin prefers shark encounter that seems the most dangerous and awe-struck hobby for everyone. For Evie, Colin's hobby list is best for soldiers, he opts for a fruity rainbow drink that a soldier can just drink in a place like Hawaii, cliff jump, rock climb, and devour pit-roasted pig which are rough and dangerous for common people.

When Colin initially tries "shark cage", he grins at Evie's cowardice and fear. At this, he feels more defensive and says:

I've seen kid toys loaded with explosives, snipers hiding in an elementary school. I've been in a Humvee with soldiers singing 'Brown Eyed Girl' and a second later it was upside down, full of fire and screams.' He motions his thumb over his shoulder. 'That, back there? That wasn't anything to be afraid of. That was nothing but a bunch of fat fish having lunch. (p. 36)

For Colin sharks' attack is nothing comparable to the fire and screams in the war. This is why he addresses Evie and says sharks are nothing to be afraid of.

Colin's traumatic experience was too much shocking and dangerous affecting his life afterwards, making him haunted with terror and trauma, therefore, making him freeze in time and lose his consciousness especially in dreams and while asleep. When Colin is struck with trauma, it is Evie that has to be cautious of his disorder and lack of control. Colin is repeatedly haunted by the past experiences, towards which Evie has to accept and come to terms with. According to Lacapra (2001):

The past is misperceived in terms of sheer absence or utter annihilation. Something of the past always remains, if only as a haunting presence or symptomatic revenant. Moreover, losses are specific and involve particular events. Such as the death of loved ones on a personal level, or on a broader scale, the losses brought about by apartheid or by the Holocaust in its effects on Jews and other victims of the Nazi genocide, including both the lives and the cultures of affected groups. (p. 49)

The major character in "The Train" like all other affected characters is haunted with the spectral presence of her war memory which has resulted from losses she had experienced there. She is affected by her traumatic memory, hence, she cannot

act normally when doing minor issues. She even cannot swipe her card right. Everything in her interactions reminds her of the past; every sound and everything takes her back:

Each step forward would take her one step into the future, should take her one more step away from Iraq, but really took her directly into the past. Circling about, retracing scuffed footprints wearing down into a track, and she witnesses again and again that clear, determined look in that hajji's eyes, an explosion through the center of the earth, flames licking at the darkness and sending new stars whirling up into the night ...At any given moment she exists in the very same place that she existed in Iraq, the exact same instant that she stood over Kavanagh bleeding out, or the moment she snatched her weapon up, or the instant before that when she should've already been snatching her weapon up. (p. 69)

This represents how the character's life is tainted with fear and trauma even after the catastrophic events that occurred and got finished in the past. This is also highlighted in her insisting on her mother's not knowing of the truth and holding on to her untainted part of life (p. 70). This time, the character is reminded of her good and clean memory which is in contrast to her current traumatic and chaotic memory.

When she wakes up, it takes a minute for the character to figure out the reality and dream since she wakes "hescos, contorted and slumped" (p. 70). In fact, she is haunted by her traumatic memory. Each time, the bitter images come back swinging in her head. She recalls the girl with licking leg which she cannot share with mom. Other time, when she wakes up, she finds herself at the heart of the war: "her head ached and her ears rang. Her sling was up around her collar, pulling against her throat, her weapon twisted awkwardly around her sling, the barrel jammed into the sand. Her face ached and she tasted blood in her mouth" (p. 70).

Every detail of the story is filled with memory if the war story. The character is haunted with presence of her traumatized mind and memory which lingers on and makes her senseless and imprisoned. The character's mind is filled with every image of the heart-rending loss and trauma. She recalls and feels the bloodshed in the war that promised death each moment. Meanwhile, she has a flash back in her mind:

She finally pulled herself to her feet, gritting her teeth as she stumbled over to Kavanagh. Kavanagh was on her back, blood splashed all around her body. She looked only at Kavanagh's face, somehow untouched, pale and brushed with those Irish freckles so many guys liked... For several minutes, for such a long time, she could only watch. A soldier passed with an armful of body bags, and she took one from him, then found a pair of surgical gloves in the medic's trauma bag. She lifted the young Iraqi girl in her arms—five, six years old?—cradled her and slid her awkwardly into the body bag, head and shoulders first, then her broken torso, then the legs, that leg cool and pliant in her hands. (p. 71)

Likewise, the character in “The Stamp” is haunted with heart-rending and traumatic images flashing back in mind and making him haunted and involved with his trauma. All that is remained is the character’s traumatic memory that he is helpless to escape and overcome. He says: “I’m helpless and alone, I’m so alone. All I have are a world full of memories that I’m trying to escape from” (*A Vital Killing*, p. 50). This is the case with the narrator. Resultantly, he cannot deal nor overcome and survive his traumatic memory that lingers on and makes him haunted repeatedly.

Each time struggling to forget his past, the narrator remembers the corpse of the shot and dead woman that was nobody but Roya (p. 51). The narrator is constantly heaped by the burden and ghost of this dead body, so he wishes to get rid of it.

Likewise, the narrator of “A Vital Killing” is haunted by his memory, therefore, he suffers consequently. In order to release the tension burning him inside, he intends to write a letter to his dead friend’s father so that he could confess the story of his intentional death. He points out that he has been forced to kill his son, now suffering quietly while he is repeatedly haunted by that bitter memory and hence suffers a guilty conscience (p. 86). Furthermore, after that incident, the murderer, who had killed Mohsen unexpectedly and forcibly had to bear the consequences of his action and get involved in repeated trauma that haunted him. According to Caruth (1996):

Trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language. (p. 4)

In Mohsen’s burial ceremony when his friend’s eye falls on the murderer, he recalls that incident therefore being affected by that past memory, stopping his talk because the wound in his cheek opened and started to bleed (p. 88). This wound refers to the psychic wound that the traumatized suffers from constantly. As Freud in his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* puts it, “the term trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” (p. 3). This wound is not,

like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that ... is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor. (p. 3)

This is therefore the main reason behind all the narrators' inability to overcome their trauma and get past the traumatic memory that repeatedly haunts them and makes them suffer the pain of the past incident they had once experienced. All the characters in both *A Vital Killing* and *Fire and Forget* suffer traumatic wound which resides in their psyche. Thus, the characters cannot easily deal with their memories nor can they forget what has befallen them. Generally, all the characters in selected short stories of both the collections suffer traumatic memory which according to Jonathan Shay (as cited in MacCurdy, 2007)

is not narrative. Rather, it is experience that reoccurs, either as full sensory reply of traumatic events in dreams or flashbacks, with all things seen, heard, smelled, and felt intact, or as disconnected fragments; these fragments maybe inexplicable rage, terror, uncontrollable crying, or disconnected body state and sensations. (p. 172)

## **Conclusion**

Afterwards, the major character feels uneasy, obtaining thoughts, caught up between traumatic thoughts and memories; she sank into a spinning mind making her pulled down (p. 74). Kavanagh's ghost made her confused. She believed as if she really existed, therefore, keeping up living with it as a real presence and existence. She could see her constantly sitting on her rack reading magazines. Then she remembers her bleeding out into the sand. The character lives in the past memories unable to escape them, nor can she talk about them with her mother.

It is concluded that both short story collections deal with the concept of memory. All the selected characters in both of the short story collections have experienced war in Iraq and Afghanistan and are therefore living with the memory of their past and in some cases are uncontrollably haunted with the past memories, that is, the traumatic memories that they have been gifted by destructive war. These characters' cannot deal with their trauma nor can they escape the traumatic disorder that makes them frozen, unconscious to reality.

## **Acknowledgement**

I am grateful for the help I received from my dear Supervisor, Dr. Dasht Peyma, for his suggestions and wholehearted support during the writing of my thesis and Dr. Esmaeeli for his suggestion of *Fire and Forget*. I would also like to thank other professors who have been a new asset during my study years. Finally, I feel myself indebted to Ms. Croskery, the translator of *A Vital Killing* who shared her translation freely with me. And, then, thank you my dear husband and beloved son for your presence and help at every step of the way.

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