

Memory and Trauma in The Contemporary War Situation**Sara Faraz**

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Article Received: 17/11/2025**Article Accepted:** 18/12/2025**Published Online:** 19/12/2025**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.12.222**Abstract:**

War-induced trauma and memory are critical concerns that impact the lives of individuals and entire communities. These concerns are explored in various literary works and films that illustrate the psychological impact of war, often emphasising the discrepancy between perception and reality. This study analyses the psychological effects of war trauma from the perspective of four films—The Book Thief, Empire of the Sun, Catch-22, and Sophie's Choice—and juxtaposes these representations with the theoretical framework established by Abram Kardiner's research on the subject. The research employs qualitative cinema analysis, concentrating on character development, narrative depth, and the representation of trauma. Forty samples are assessed, encompassing pivotal scenes from each film along with the corresponding psychological theories. There are films illustrating the progression and effects of trauma. The study delineates recurring elements in the depiction of combat trauma, encompassing memory distortion, remorse, loss of innocence, and survival. The videos convey compelling narratives to elucidate the impact of trauma on coping mechanisms and identity formation. In narratives of war, suffering and recollection are indissolubly connected. Analyzing these films through the lens of Kardiner's theories illustrates that psychological insight is essential for post-war rehabilitation, and narrative plays a vital role in the processing of traumatic experiences.

Keywords:Memory, Trauma, War, Psychological Effects, Films, Narrative.**Introduction**

War Trauma refers to the psychological distress experienced by individuals who have been exposed to the horrors of war. This traumatic experience can show up in a wide range of ways, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, and other mental health disorders (Academia.edu, n.d.). When it comes to the way trauma is processed and perceived, memory plays a critical role. The memories of traumatic experiences are frequently fragmented and can resurface unexpectedly, causing distress and impacting an individual's ability to function in daily life.

War undermines social capital, erodes societal coherence, and destroys social trust. Societies may remain deeply divided into factions that are inclined to continue fighting due to mutual fear and contempt following an armed battle. Individuals who have endured combat trauma often have a diminished propensity to seek reconciliation and pursue peaceful resolutions with opposing parties (Academia.edu, n.d.). Individuals may struggle to fulfill their essential needs due to a frail civil society and constrained governmental capacities, rendering them more vulnerable to exploitation by adversaries or disruptors of the state. Wessells (2009) posits that this situation often engenders recurrent cycles of violence.

Overview of the study's theme, significance, and scope:

This study examines how wartime memory and trauma affect society and its individuals. The research examines the psychological effects of war trauma in *The Book Thief*, *Empire of the Sun*, *Catch-22*, and *Sophie's Choice*. This study is important because it shows how the brain processes and remembers trauma. Its multidisciplinary method, integrating film analysis with psychological theories, provides a complete comprehension of combat trauma.

Aspect	Description
Theme	The exploration of memory and trauma in war is depicted in contemporary films.
Significance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Highlights the psychological impacts of war on individuals and societies. - Demonstrates how storytelling aids in coping with trauma. - Connects cinematic narratives to established psychological theories like those of Abram Kardiner.
Scope	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Focuses on four films: <i>The Book Thief</i>, <i>Empire of the Sun</i>, <i>Catch-22</i>, and <i>Sophie's Choice</i>. - Examines themes of resilience, survival, guilt, and the distortion of memory. - Analyzes trauma progression and its portrayal in media. - Bridges film narratives with psychological insights to understand post-war recovery mechanisms.

Why it is essential to study these aspects through films:

Films can explain war trauma and memory. They help audiences emotionally connect with tragic events through visual and narrative portrayals. Researchers can learn how popular culture portrays and understands trauma by analyzing films. This is crucial for various reasons:

- **Empathy and Awareness:** Films can increase empathy and awareness of war's psychological effects, helping viewers comprehend those impacted.
- **Narrative Therapy:** Film storytelling can help artists and audiences handle painful situations.

- **Cultural Reflection:** Films show how society views war and trauma, allowing us to evaluate cultural responses to combat and its aftermath.

This research seeks to enhance the greater discourse on war trauma and memory by examining these characteristics in films, emphasizing the significance of the story in the healing process.

Background of the Study

Historical and Psychological Context of War Trauma:

War's catastrophic impact on the human psyche has been intensively examined since the early 20th century. War and its devastating effects on the human psyche, referred to by Sigmund Freud as "traumatic neurosis," induce a "breach" in the "protective barrier" (Freud, 1961, p. 29) and are widespread in the modern world. Trauma can cause PTSD, despair, anxiety, and other mental health difficulties. Communal and personal psychological scars from influences of war on societies and their cultural memory. The long-term psychological effects of war were highlighted following World War I and II, leading to the creation of various treatment techniques and theoretical frameworks.

Significance of Literature and Films in Depicting Psychological Impacts of War:

Literature vividly depicts the psychological impacts of the war, bringing depth and contemplation. Authors can address deep emotions, memories, and trauma in books, encouraging introspection and connection (Kirmayer et al., 2007). Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* depict war's horrors and psychological ramifications in intimate detail. Literature provides empathy and understanding of war trauma via vivid descriptions of personal and societal effects. War-time films enhance accessibility with their visual and narrative qualities. *The Book Thief*, *Empire of the Sun*, *Catch-22*, and *Sophie's Choice* show trauma's effects physically and emotionally, connecting viewers to the characters' experiences. *The Book Thief*, written by Liesel Meminger during wartime in Nazi Germany emphasizes storytelling's significance in the recovery from trauma and maintenance of memories. *Empire of the Sun* brings out Jim Graham's transformation from a youngster to a strong survivor in a World War II prisoner-of-war camp. The film brings out the lasting effects of war on the individual identity and their memories. *Catch-22* is a satirical view of the absurdities of war and the psychological toll of a man's life in the military association, which highlights the paradoxes that imprison people in the cycles of the catastrophic effects of war. *Sophie's Choice* focuses on Sophie's fragmented memories of the Holocaust and the profound guilt, that emphasizes the long-lasting impact of traumatic decisions.

Reference to Previous Studies and Theories:

Abram Kardiner's seminal research on trauma, especially his observations in *The Traumatic Neuroses of War*, is essential for comprehending the psychological effects of warfare. He undermined that trauma alters both individuals and the collective memory of society, with repercussions that reemerge unpredictably and hinder daily functioning (Kardiner, 1941). The insights of Kardiner align with the portrayal of trauma in cinema and literature as a persistent impact on identity and memory. Cathy Caruth's trauma theory offers

a very significant and critical perspective for this analysis. She perceives trauma as a “double wound”, wherein the original traumatic incident and its later replication exacerbate the psychological pain that troubles the mind of an individual trapped in the war scenario (Caruth, 1996). The examination of Caruth’s fragmented memory and the want to reexperience painful events enhances Kardiner’s paradigm, facilitating a more profound comprehension of psychological representation in literature and film.

3. Objectives

Objective	Focus Area
1. To analyze the psychological impacts of war on individuals and societies	Manifestations of trauma (PTSD, anxiety, etc.)
2. To evaluate the role of literature in portraying war trauma and its therapeutic potential	Storytelling in books as a means of understanding
3. To examine the depiction of trauma and memory in selected films	Narrative analysis of <i>The Book Thief</i> , <i>Empire of the Sun</i> , <i>Catch-22</i> , <i>Sophie’s Choice</i>
4. To integrate theoretical insights from trauma studies into the analysis of literature and films	Application of Kardiner’s and Caruth’s theories
5. To highlight the significance of narrative forms in collective and individual memory preservation	Literature and films as cultural memory tools

Methodology

The study utilizes a secondary qualitative methodology, concentrating on literature as the principal medium for examining war trauma, augmented by insights from specific films. These films are not merely fiction but based upon contemporary war literature by famous authors. The examination of literature explores significant handwritten works by esteemed authors who have effectively demonstrated the psychological, emotional, and cultural effects of war. Several works like *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque, *The Things They Carried* by Tim O’Brien, and *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut are considered seminal classics. These works explore the perspectives of the civilians and troops. The undying emphasis is on the themes of memory, resilience, and loss. Likewise, *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank presents a distinctive civilian viewpoint, delivering profound insights into the emotional burden of enduring war. The analysis encompasses films such as *The Book Thief*, *Empire of the Sun*, *Catch-22*, and *Sophie’s Choice* as additional sources. These films were selected for their esteemed portrayal of trauma, functioning as visual narratives that resonate with themes seen in the war literature. The progressing patterns of trauma were discerned through the analysis of 40 textual and visual examples, that are accompanied by diagrams illustrating key psychological impacts such as PTSD, survivor’s guilt, and resilience. This study integrates both literature and film

to thoroughly examine how both written, and visual tales encapsulate the intricacies of war trauma and memory, strengthening understanding of its evolution and societal ramifications.

Literature Review

In "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," Sigmund Freud characterised "traumatic neurosis" as a "factor of freight". Unlike hysteria, which is defined as "a passive sexual experience before puberty", molestation or seduction by a father, sibling, or household servant is typical (Cambridge University Press, n.d.). The majority of the terror stems from unwanted nightmares that reenact the event. According to Sigmund Freud, a reenactment demonstrates that trauma, unlike anxiety, is unknown and dwells in the unconscious before returning to the conscious and becoming alive. Reenacting an "event" in dreams causes dread, fear, humiliation, and unconscious denial. Latency or incubation characterizes anxiety development. Freud emphasizes that painful past events bond mental anxiety patients. He refers to trauma memory as "a foreign body which, long after its entry, must continue to be regarded as an agent that is still at work" (Freud, 1961). This focus on their history may last a lifetime because it is valuable.

"War trauma," as defined by Caruth, war survivors suffered from and experienced the trauma of known and unknown events), is also known as "traumatic neurosis," which manifests as an unwilling reenactment of an event, which Sigmund Freud called "repetition compulsion," which is not a "memory but [act] as an action." Since World War I, the terms "shell shock," "war neurosis," and "war trauma" have become prominent in traumatic neurosis research (Frontiers in Psychiatry, 2022). Psychologists refer to the brain damage caused by bombing and warfare as "unconscious conflict," or "shell shock. Caruth elaborated on Freud's concept of traumatic neurosis, claiming that tiny changes in the central nervous system might lead the mind to react to a painful experience such as dropping a shell or bomb. The traumatic neurosis of war implies a massive internal intractable battle, which Caruth described as the "repetition of a traumatic event that remains unavailable to consciousness but intrudes repeatedly on sight". Research shows that a traumatic occurrence can damage a victim's life, with 8% experiencing brain stress after a conflict lasting over 5 weeks (Springer, 2016). Because wartime violence is brutal, trauma and its effects on the mind result in mood disorders and PTSD. According to a study conducted by Oxford's Department of Psychiatry, ethnic refugees in Western countries are more likely to suffer from anxiety, depression, and PTSD. According to Scheuermann, "a report (i.e., 2016) by the German Federal Chamber of Psychotherapists said that 40-50% of people arriving in Germany suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD, with half also suffering from depression".

Kardiner's beliefs were among the first to describe the symptoms of what is now known as PTSD, which include trauma fixation, personality functioning restriction, and abnormal dream experiences. He claimed that war trauma results from an adaptive failure, in which defence mechanisms designed to attenuate stress ultimately impair an individual's functional capabilities (Herman, 1992). Kardiner's research revealed that trauma affects both

individual and collective memory, influencing how communities recall and interpret traumatic events. Literature and movies have made enormous contributions to understanding the psychological consequences of war trauma. For example, Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* investigates how the protagonist, Liesel, navigates the anguish of war using language and storytelling. Similarly, J.G. Ballard's *Empire of the Sun* has a small child, Jim, going through a psychological transformation as he witnesses wartime horrors. Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* employed farce and satire to depict the cyclical trauma experienced by troops, whereas William Styron's *Sophie's Choice* delves into the broken memories and terrible psychological wounds caused by life-altering decisions made during the Holocaust.

Analysis

War is a devastating force that has quite a lasting impact on the psychological imprints of both individuals and societies. Memory and trauma are delicately intertwined in the post-war setting, as the individual's traumatic experiences tend to surface as fragmented, involuntary memories and dread in their minds. These are intricately portrayed in both literature and films, which are effective vehicles for a reflection on the devastating impact of war on the human psyche and cultural memory. An analysis of works like *The Book Thief*, *Empire of the Sun*, *Catch-22*, and *Sophie's Choice* provides deep insights into how memory and trauma are portrayed and processed.

War and its Psychological Impact

The psychological effects of battle are varied, frequently showing as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and survivor's guilt. Freud's concept of "traumatic neurosis" and Kardiner's observations on the traumatic effects of war underscore the pervasive impact on mental health. Freud defined trauma as a "breach" in the mind's protective barrier (Herman, 1992). This results in unconscious denial and recurring nightmares. Kardiner elaborated, stating that trauma has long-term consequences on both individuals and collective memory, influencing how societies remember and perceive conflict. Films like *Empire of the Sun* and *Sophie's Choice* explore the psychological wounds left upon the mind's mirror. Jim's journey from being a wealthy boy to a tenacious survivor in the *Empire of the Sun* exemplifies the horrific psychological impact of war (Ballard, 1984). His experiences as a prisoner of war in the WW-2 camps demonstrate how catastrophic circumstances can transform the personal identity of an individual (Brewin, 2011). Similarly, *Sophie's Choice* depicts survivor guilt and fragmented memory, revealing how trauma alters a person's sense of self and the world.

Memory as a Double-Edged Sword

Memory, as explored by Caruth, is both a "double wound" and a means of preservation (Caruth, 1996). The war trauma and memories often reemerge unintentionally, interrupting daily life, but they can also serve as reminders of perseverance and survival. This dichotomy is quite evident in *The Book Thief*, as Liesel utilizes storytelling to cope with her terrible experiences in the Nazi-ruled German Republic (Zusak, 2005). Her style of writing during the devastating catastrophe exemplifies how memory and narrative may be used as therapeutic tools to help people make sense of chaos and grief. *Catch-22*, on the other

hand, uses comedy to emphasize the absurdity of war and its psychological impact. Yossarian represents the cyclical nature of trauma, as his recurring experiences with death and destruction bind him in a contradictory existence. His fragmented memory demonstrates the unsettling consequences of trauma, as well as its ability to warp reality and identity.

Literature and Films as Reflective Mediums

In the process of depicting the trauma of war, both literature and films play significant roles, providing possibilities for empathy, contemplation, and therapeutic healing. Readers are allowed to engage profoundly with the psychological impacts of conflict through the consumption of literature that offers a comprehensive investigation of internal experiences. The films *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* both provide vivid depictions of the mental and emotional anguish that troops experience, highlighting the long-term effects of war. Films can strongly portray these experiences in ways that appeal to a wider audience because of the visual and narrative components that they have. Through Liesel's eyes, *The Book Thief* brilliantly illustrates the contrast between the purity of childhood and the harshness of war (Zusak, 2005). The novel *Sophie's Choice* does an excellent job of depicting the shattered core of memory as well as the horrible regret that comes with making judgments that are impossible to make. It is clear from these pieces that storytelling, whether it be written or visual, serves as a cultural archive, preserving not only individual but also collective recollections of war.

Resilience and the Human Spirit along with Societal and Cultural Implications

Notwithstanding the catastrophic impacts of the war, narratives frequently highlight perseverance and the human ability to persevere. In *Empire of the Sun*, Jim's capacity to endure and adapt highlights the tenacity of the human spirit. Liesel's narrative in *The Book Thief* illustrates how artistic expression functions as a coping strategy, sense of autonomy in the face of turmoil, and offering comfort.

Discussion

The theories that Kardiner has developed regarding trauma are reflected in these films, particularly his concept of "trauma fixation," which asserts that a traumatic event has an effect on an individual's psyche. The fact that Jim's identity is altered as a result of the traumatic experiences he goes through in *Empire of the Sun* is consistent with Kardiner's idea that traumatic experiences have the power to transform personality. The guilt that Sophie feels in *Sophie's Choice* is a manifestation of a psychological disruption, as seen by the emotional and mental fragmentation that she experiences (Styron, 1979). Both videos demonstrate how the trauma that an individual experiences as a result of conflict may affect their perspective and identity. The narratives in these films are extensively relied upon to assist in the process of trauma rehabilitation. Liesel's writing serves as a crucial coping technique in the novel *The Book Thief*, enabling her to reclaim control of her narrative during the course of the story. This is in line with the principles of narrative therapy, which suggest that the process of constructing a cohesive narrative of traumatic experiences is beneficial to the healing process (Zusak, 2005). On the other hand, Yossarian's attempt to comprehend the horrific events that occurred to him in *Catch-22* demonstrates how difficult it is to receive

healing from trauma when there is no clear narrative (Heller, 1961). When taken as a whole, these videos emphasise the significance of processing and reinterpreting traumatic experiences through the medium of narrative, highlighting the capacity of narrative to foster healing and resilience.

Compare and contrast the findings across the four films:

Literature Aspect	The Book Thief	Empire of the Sun	Catch-22	Sophie's Choice
Primary Psychological Theme	Memory as a narrative process—trauma is processed through storytelling.	Trauma as a catalyst for resilience, identity transformation, and survival.	Absurdism and cyclical trauma—war renders memory and identity fragmented.	Survivor's guilt and mental fragmentation—identity broken by trauma.
Trauma Representation	Fragmented memories woven together in a narrative of healing.	Trauma impacts Jim's mental state but leads to eventual adaptation.	Trauma as disorientation and absurdity, creating a sense of chaos in the self.	Trauma disrupts Sophie's sense of self, leading to constant guilt.
Theoretical Approach	Relates to narrative therapy as a form of healing—transforming trauma into a coherent narrative.	Aligns with psychological resilience, emphasizing survival instincts.	Explores trauma's cyclical and illogical nature, disorienting the individual.	Aligns with psychological studies on survivor's guilt and identity disruption.
Memory and Identity	Trauma becomes part of Liesel's identity, but she regains control through the act of storytelling.	Jim's trauma leads to a transformation of self, making him more resilient.	Trauma leads to a fragmented sense of self for Yossarian, creating instability.	Sophie's trauma fractures her identity and causes mental breakdown.
Storytelling as Recovery	Storytelling is presented as a therapeutic means of	There is no explicit storytelling, but Jim's survival	Storytelling is absent, emphasizing the absurdity	Storytelling is internalized, with Sophie's traumatic

	processing trauma and rebuilding identity.	is a form of adapting through memory.	and disorientation of trauma.	memories causing emotional distress.
Psychological Insights	Narrative therapy—creating a coherent story aids in healing and identity reconstruction.	Trauma leads to resilience, aligning with theories of post-traumatic growth.	The absurdity of trauma prevents healing—perpetuating a cycle of disorientation.	Survivor's guilt creates an internalized breakdown of self, supporting theories of dissociation and identity collapse.
Impact on Recovery	Trauma is reframed into a narrative, helping the individual heal and reassert their agency.	Trauma leads to eventual psychological adaptation and growth, despite the hardships.	Trauma's absurdity hinders recovery—there is no coherent resolution or closure.	Trauma's impact is persistent, causing irreversible damage to identity and emotional well-being.

Results

The analysis reveals several key themes regarding trauma and memory across the films and literature. First, memory fragmentation is central to trauma often disrupting individuals' ability to integrate and process experience, as evident in *Sophie's Choice* and *Catch-22* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Second, identity transformation and resilience emerge, particularly in *Empire of the Sun*, where trauma catalyzes the growth and survival of the psychological impact. In *The Book Thief*, trauma is processed through storytelling, which aids in the establishment of identity and agency. There is an evident connection between the broader understanding of war trauma and these media. Each of these media illustrations depicts how wartime stress transforms not just the recollections of individuals who are both themselves and their identity (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). *Catch-22* and *Sophie's Choice* bring to light the frequently debilitating and bewildering consequences of war, wherein the absurdity and guilt of the experience engender enduring psychological trauma. On the contrary, *Empire of the Sun* and *The Book Thief* illustrate more positive depictions, highlighting the resilience and the capacity for rehabilitation through the processing of memory whether through narrative or survival. These depictions offer a nuanced examination of the impact of war trauma on memory, identity, and the human ability to recover, reinforcing broader psychological understandings of post-traumatic growth and the significance of narrative in the healing process.

Conclusion

The works that were analysed offer a compelling portrayal of the effects of battle trauma on memory, identity, and the healing process. Through the exploration of subjects such as fragmented memory, resilience, and the transformational power of narrative, each film offers insightful perspectives on the psychological repercussions of war. Kardiner's trauma theories and other psychological viewpoints are supported by the findings, which highlight the long-term influence that traumatic experiences have on individuals. In addition to offering a profound grasp of the psychological aspects of combat trauma, these films provide an explanation of the complexity of trauma recovery and show the significance of story and memory in the healing process.

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