



*Trauma and Memory in Jack Hilton Cunningham's Women  
and War*

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الصدمة والذاكرة في مسرحية النساء والحرب للكاتب الأمريكي جاك هلتون كينغهام

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## **Abstract:**

*War always leaves its indelible imprints on all realms of life and it produces sad memorable stories that cause an endless suffering. It is commonplace that women are susceptible to the atrocious nature of war and they have to pay high costs in time of war. They never forget how they endure the great brunt of war. Unimpeachably, the American wars have caused a great sensation and controversy at home and internationally, for these wars have never brought security and stability to all the parties concerned. Rather, they have brought to the fore what is shocking, negative, and destructive. The women in particular are often seriously affected during the outbreak of armed conflicts and civil strife. The traumatic experiences of women are encapsulated in a number of stories which betray the impact of war on the individual and the group just the same. Such women's thrilling narratives are best mirrored in contemporary literature. Jack Hilton Cunningham's *Women and War* (2012) demonstrates and documents women's reactions to the ghastly phantoms of war. This paper examines how Cunningham presents the female experience in his play *Women and War*. He weaves into the structure of the play many stories that showcase the horrific nature of modern American wars which brought destruction, chaos, and disintegration. These stories are closely related to female characters in this play. The research adopts a psychological approach to analyze the text under question, focusing on the PTSD syndromes that follow the catastrophic experiences of war.*

**Keywords:** War, trauma, drama, women, Jack Hilton Cunningham

## **المخلص:**

تترك الحرب دائما آثارها التي لا تمحى على ميادين الحياة كافة، ويتمخض عنها قصصا جديرة بالتذكر وتسبب بذلك معاناة لا نهاية لها. ومن المتعارف أن النساء أكثر عرضة لطبيعة الحرب الوحشية. وينبغي لهن أن يدفنن ثمننا باهظا في زمن الحرب. فلا يستعطين البتة نسيان ما تحملنه من عبء الحرب الكبير. وما من شك أن الحروب الامريكية قد أثارت جدلا واسعا على المستويين الداخلي والخارجي ؛ لأنها لم تجلب الأمن والاستقرار إلى جميع الأطراف المتنازعة، بل هي أحدثت صادم وسلبي ومدمر. تروي بعض التجارب الصادمة للنساء التي تؤثر على الفرد والمجتمع على حد سواء. والأدب المعاصر يصور مثل قصص النساء الصادمة هذه. ومسرحية جاك هلتون كينغهام. تبين وتوثق لردود أفعال النساء لأشباح الحرب البشعة. وهذا البحث يتناول كيف يقدم كينغهام في مسرحيته النساء والحرب من خلال حيك العديد من القصص التي تتناقش الطبيعة المروعة للحروب الامريكية التي جلبت الدمار والفوضى والتفكك ، وهذه القصص ترتبط ارتباطا وثيقا بالشخصيات النسوية في هذه المسرحية. ويتبنى البحث مقاربة نفسية لتحليل النص قيد الدراسة التي تركز على اعراض اضطراب الضغط ما بعد الصدمة التي تجارب الحرب الكارثية.

## **Introduction**

Trauma studies is a branch of what is termed affect studies, which is mainly concerned with how things have massive impacts on the individual and society alike. The word 'trauma' is traceable to Greek origin. the Greek trauma, or "wound," originally referring to an injury inflicted on a body(Caruth 3). The term trauma has acquired a new dimension which showcases the psychological aspects of life experiences, particularly those of war. Trauma is described as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena(Caruth 91). In her essay "Notes on Trauma and community" , Kai Erikson argues that "in classic medical usage trauma "refers not to the *injury* inflicted but to the *blow* that inflicted it, not to *the state of mind* that ensues but to the event that provoked it" (qtd. in Caruth (ed.) *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* 184).

In fact, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder( PTSD) is a corollary to the act of war which brings forth unforgettable incidents in the human life. Caruth is categorically right in claiming that "... PTSD seems to provide the most direct link between the psyche and external violence and to be the most destructive psychic disorder" (Caruth 58). Janoff-Bulman (1992) argued that traumatic events shatter people's basic beliefs and assumptions

about the world. Her view is that we have fundamental beliefs that the world is meaningful, that it is benevolent and that the self is worthy. Trauma disrupts those beliefs, and recovery is about rebuilding them, or developing a narrative" (qtd.in Hunt 62). Moreover, Kim Lacy Rogers rightly argues that "Traumatic experiences and their consequences often constitute the core of the life stories told by those who have survived natural disasters or war, or other kinds of social, state, or interpersonal violence"(1). Jay Winter neatly explains how war and its diverse ramifications contribute considerably to the scholarship and debates in this contemporary area. He further argues "... technological changes have ensured that war 'has moved out of the battlefield and into every corner of civilian life"( 6). Witnesses of war, those who have experienced its effects at close range, whether as soldier or civilian, have contributed their memories to the historical record. Their stories have helped to shape how war is collectively remembered. In addition, the remembrance of the war dead can be regarded as an important impetus to the study of collective memory (qtd. in Whitehead 147). In actual fact, man's existence and identity are totally meaningless without memory. If the past experiences complete the different aspects of the past. All processes in life such as reading, writing , talking ,and planning for the future necessitate the presence of memory and its essential role in shaping the concept of identity in its totality(Hunt 100).

Such an overall definition is exemplarily applicable to the stories of life narrated in the texture of Cunningham's play. These traumatic experiences and stories betray how memory and war are intimately interrelated in *Women and War*.

## 2. Trauma and Memory in Jack Hilton Cunningham's *Women and War*

Jack Hilton Cunningham is a well-known playwright, a novelist, and he earned his MFA graduate in Theatre Design from Brooklyn College in 1968. *Women and War* is his first production at playwriting, and this play is a project that he has worked on since 2006. The play focuses primarily on the entanglements of war and the female traumatic experiences. In form of correspondences and monologues, women tellingly speak out about their suffering and inevitable involvement in extremely ferocious and sanguinary combats. Initially, a number of married couples unearth their reactions to American wars, starting from the WWII till the much-debated American intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq. The stories of these couples, especially women, are remindful of the obvious fact that war is terrible and unreasonable in the very sense of the word. Then, these correspondences are followed by a series of monologues which

additionally demonstrate how women are traumatized both emotionally and physically in different situations.

*Women and War* is, quite understandably, a documentary play which draws on different wars fought in modern American history. It records the female acquaintance with these wars and they comparably react to the atrocity and the senselessness of this excruciating happening. In an interview, Jack Hilton Cunningham affirms that the idea of writing this play occurred to him when he started searching for materials that touch the role of women in American wars. He tried to find women's letters sent men on the front, but he failed to do so. Consequently, he decided to write these letters by himself. It is all accident that he "unearthed stories of women like the Hello Girls of WWI, the Mother's Movement of WWII, and the Doughnut Girls" (Katy, n.pag).

The first scene of *Women and War* opens with Buddy and Helen, a couple from the WWII, who exchange letters to show their emotions and their attitude towards the war fought there. They painfully recount how they exchanged letters how they desperately felt in the horrible times of the war. The moment they received, the heinous atmosphere of imminent strife loomed largely in the horizon (Second cue: sounds of Helicopters). All of a sudden, the audience is taken to another American war which is the Vietnam War ( 1955-1975). There is a Vietnam girl who had a dream to

tell. Her dream was to "become a nurse " because she had a big family to support. The moment she came into the scene of the war, she could hear "Get down, GET DOWN!"[Women grab her to safety.] (*Women and War* 13). What she saw with her own eyes caused her a shocking experience. She remembers her reaction when she was directly involved in the nonsensicality of the war" I lowered my head and ran as fast as I could-I was there-I was in it-I was a part of it, and it was, and is, a part of me ( 13).

Furthermore, the Vietnam Nurse continued her eyewitness account of the traumatic experiences of the war there when she is extremely terrified by this scene "A body was plopped on a table in the front of me- a boy no more than 18 years old – a bloody sheet over his abdomen and I was ordered to "prep" him- that meant clean his wounds, shave him, if necessary, and "Oh, yeah! While you are at it, remove his arm that's just hanging by a piece of loose skin"(15). Avril Maddrell and James D. Sidaway state that "There is the body as space, the corporeal living and dying person. There is the domestic space of the home; as site of dying and death, and locus for private, individual and vernacular remembrance, aspects of which are increasingly seeping into the realms of public space in 'spontaneous' or informal memorials. Other quotidian spaces interpellate us, often unawares, speaking to us of loss and consolation"(3).

Another woman gives a testimony to her experience in war. Special Fourth Class Delaney recalls her difficult experience when her legs were amputated in time of war. She reveals overmuch about how many women were victims of the traumatic occurrence the moment she and other female peers were severely attacked by a terrorist act. She unmasks her the sense of suffering she is experiencing :

I suffer from what they call post-traumatic stress disorder. When I started therapy it seemed to me that my symptoms was caused because I lost my legs.... I was a victim of a terrorist attack on my unit and three of my fellow soldiers were killed-two men and one woman(21).

Beyond any shred of doubt, part of the horrendous consequences of war is the sexual offending. Here, another woman appears to give a testimony to the trauma of war and its profound negative repercussions. She painfully undergoes an unforgettable traumatic experience.

The Western Union Girl is another female voice which gives a succinct account of the trauma of war. She remembers how she visited her brother's grave in France on the fiftieth anniversary of D-Day in 1994. Her brother Aron was killed in June 6, 1944 and he and soldiers fellows were "buried on the bluff overlooking the sea." Hunter (1964, pp. 14-15) proposed that memory [... ]



contains one common thread of meaning [ ... ] what the person does and experiences here and now is influenced by what he [sic] did and experienced at some time in his past. When we talk of [...] memory we are [ ... ] drawing attention to relationships between past and present activities. These relationships arise out of a fundamental characteristic of human beings ( qtd. in Owain Jones, Joanne Garde-Hansen 10)

Cunningham takes us back again to the much-charged atmosphere of WWII. Helen and her husband continue exchanging letters which reflect their shared anxiety about the future of their country and their prospective projects:

HELEN: Brooklyn, April, 1945

Dear Buddy,

Not hearing from you is agonizing. The Radio and newspapers tell us that the Germans are in retreat and that our Allied forces are advancing to end this terrible war. I pray every day that are safe and come home soon.

BUDDY: Germany, May, 1945

My dearest Helen,

I know you are worried since you haven't heard from me in months. As we crossed the border into Germany, we were ambushed and taken prisoner.

We were not allowed to send or receive mail. Then our prayers were

answered, and the allied forces arrived.

*(Sound cue: a song like Wing and a prayer underscores the rest of this scene.)*

.....

HELEN: When will you be coming home Buddy? Now that it is over, over there.

BUDDY: I 'm coming home Sweet Pea, hold your breath, I will be Brooklyn-bound on the USNS Buckner, a trusted old tub that will take me across the north Atlantic and into your arms. ( 24-25)

The dialogue between Helen and Buddy is clearly indicative of the fact that women represent an authentic testimony to the profoundly catastrophic impacts of the war at all levels. Helen remembers how they fell in an ambush and taken prisoners for a short time, a matter which confirms the natural trajectory of the war fought. Out of such aggravating circumstances , Buddy eagerly hopes to meet Helen after a long separation "I 'm coming home Sweet Pea, hold your breath,/ I will be Brooklyn-bound on the USNS Buckner, a trusted old tub that will take me across the north Atlantic and into your arms." Doubtless, when he dreams to be with his love Helen, he finds her a kind of therapy for his traumatic experience in the

war waged , precisely WWII. Such a story involves the interconnection of trauma and memory. In her interesting essay, "Notes on the Memory Boom War, Remembrance and the Uses of the Past", Jay Winter strongly affirms that "When we encounter family stories about war in this century, we frequently confront another kind of storytelling, one we have come to call 'traumatic memory'"( Bell 70).

Delaney is the most pitiable victims who have fallen a pray to the terrorist attacks of 11 September, 2001. "It's been ten years since 9/11. I am 28 years old, but I feel oh, so much older. How did I get here? Well, let me tell you- this is *my* story, but I am sure there many, many [*women randomly sit*] more women with stories just like mine. We serve; we are abused; we come home-we fight the demons(26). However long she lives, she cannot forget her traumatic experience in that intense situation, which left her amputated and dysfunctional at different levels. The shocking exposure of that trauma during those events is conspicuously expressed in her sorrowful words when she wonders whether she can practice her life normally as many people do," But will I ever be able to trust other men? Fall in love? Have a normal sex life, get married, and have children?" (27). She is quite apprehensive about the bitter actuality that women in California are diagnosed with PTSD who must be carefully

treated. Such a kind of self-understanding can be a cure- all for her traumatic situation .

By the same token, she has to heal herself from the traumatic event since she is suffering from the postwar symptoms. Delaney self-diagnoses her health condition:

I suffer from what they called post-traumatic stress disorder. When I started therapy it seemed to me that my symptoms was only caused because I lost my legs. I don't remember nothing-I might have passed out- I don't know –but I was the victim of a terrorist attack on my unit and three of my fellow soldiers was killed-two men and one woman. (21)

It is crystal clear that Delaney really realizes his psychological agony because of her terrifying experience. The loss of her legs in the sudden attack causes her a restless sense, and she is not able to forget her experience. She goes on to say:

Did you know that one out of every ten men serving in the armed forces today is a woman and I read somewhere that over 220,000 or 11 percent of troops sent to Afghanistan and Iraq were women? In the Vietnam War the percentage of women to men

was much, much smaller and almost of them women was nurses.  
Not so in today's army. (21)

Militarizing women in this era has become an established fact beyond comprehension. This process of using women in the war clearly implies how women became the pitiful victims of the war. Jack Hilton Cunningham launches a strong criticism on the American wars all over the world, and how these wars were the main source of destruction, chaos, and terror and shock.

The second gulf war (1991) is another example of the futile American wars which caused a great havoc to all the parties involved in the action. The soldiers were especially negatively affected by the war and the results consequent upon this war. Hank, a Desert Storm Capitan, remembers how they "...lost our first soldier yesterday-she was only a supply office, but still-Women and War!"(19). The woman has committed no crime to be punished for, and she caters exclusively to supplies and food for other soldiers. She is no more than a victim of the madness and the senselessness of war. It seems quite transparent that Hank recalls painfully the horrible experience of losing one of their female soldiers in the devastating crucible of the war. Women in particular are invulnerable victims to war whether they are at home or on the trenches.

The monologues annexed to the text of the play demonstrate some women's narratives in the time of war which are best crystallized in the stories of Gold Star Mother and Hello Girl. The Gold Star Mother "...belong[s] to the most honorable club in America. The Gold Star Mothers "(30). In time of war, different colors of banners are hung in the window. The choice of color relies on the member of the family who has been affected by the flames of the war. If a husband or son participates in war, a banner with a blue star is raised. If one of them is wounded, a silver star is chosen. More importantly, if soldiers are killed, a gold star is shown to tell people that the family have scarified themselves for their own country. She cannot forget her boys and the beautiful days they spent together. How her memory works about missing her boys in the throes of the war is strongly felt in her affective words:

My boys never left me ... I still see them every day. Climbing that big tree in the back yard, scraping a knee while skating, chasing the cat and running after the dog, collecting cans and newspapers for the war effort. Before they left they started a victory garden and gave me strict instructions on how to keep it growing. Giving a son to war is the agony of motherhood. No more will I sit up at night worrying when they come late... no more will

I fall fast asleep in peace when I hear the key in door... no more... no more... (31).

The maternal feelings clearly demonstrate how this much afflicted war woman suffers from a hear-rending experience inasmuch as she lost her boys in the war". Giving a son to war is the agony of motherhood." She remembers her past days when they were children. Before her boys grew up and joined the army, the family had a very reposeful and happy life.

As regards the Hello Girl, she represents another feminine voice during the outbreak of WWI. The Hello Girls worked as telephone operators. She remembers her bitter experience and other girls. She seems utterly astonished and angered by the fact that these girls suffer greatly at home and abroad. They could not have the right to vote in the local elections, and they had to participate in the war," We were sworn into the U.S. Army Signal Corps Telephone Units as Soldiers. Think of that, the first women to serve in the Army and yet, at home we didn't have the right to vote(31). As the Hello Girl continues unfolding her past memories, it has become increasingly conspicuous that women are socially marginalized and underestimated. She openly announces that when these Hello Girls

were demobilized, they were no longer "...sworn in" members of the Army(32) upon returning to the United States.

Viewed from the lens of trauma theory, the correspondences and the monologues in *War and Women* ostentatiously display the traumatic experiences encountered by women in particular. The female characters are subjugated to the disastrous repercussions of the American wars in the course of history , and these individuals are severely traumatized and strongly emotionally impacted by the wartime experiences.



### 3. Conclusion

Unimpeachably, the American wars have caused a great sensation and controversy at home and internationally, for these wars have never brought security and stability to all the parties concerned. Rather, they have brought to the fore what is shocking, negative, and destructive. The women in particular are often seriously affected during the outbreak of armed conflicts and civil strife. The traumatic experiences of women are encapsulated in a number of stories which betray the impact of war on the individual and the group just the same. Such women's thrilling narratives are best mirrored in contemporary literature.

Jack Hilton Cunningham's *Women and War* demonstrates and documents women's reactions to the ghastly phantoms of war. Therapy for the traumatic experiences of war resides in rehabilitating the afflicted individuals in a way as to generate in them a psychological resilience.

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