

War's Enduring Scars: Trauma In Alan Gratz's Ground Zero

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Abstract:

This essay delves into the portrayal of war trauma through the fictional narratives of two protagonists, Brandon and Reshmina, from different cultural and societal contexts. Through a comparative analysis, it examines the nuanced depiction of trauma in literature, shedding light on the diverse ways in which individuals navigate and cope with the devastating effects of conflict. Brandon's story highlights the immediate psychological impact of a singular, traumatic event, illustrating the profound disruption it can bring to one's life. In contrast, Reshmina's perspective offers a deeper exploration of the enduring and trans-generational consequences of prolonged conflict, revealing how the scars of war permeate every aspect of existence. By juxtaposing these experiences, the essay underscores the multifaceted nature of war trauma, urging readers to confront the complexities inherent in the human experience of war and its lasting effects on individuals and communities alike. Through a fictional lens, it invites reflection on the universal themes of resilience, survival, and the pursuit of healing in the face of adversity.

Key Words: Trauma, Conflict, Resilience, Survival.

Introduction

“Congratulations. You have survived the war.
Now live with the trauma.”

— War in the plenty of valley, Lori Jenessa Nelson

The term “War Trauma” defines the violence that happens as a result of both destructed circumstance and unstable emotion which brings long lasting consequences in a

person's mental health and well being. War has a significant impact on the mental health of the civilian population. Studies show that the incidence and prevalence of mental disorders increase after a war, especially among women, children, the elderly, and the disabled. Simply it means the traumatic acquaintance experienced by both the innocent civilians and the servants of the army. (Sarah Fielding, War Trauma: The Psychological Consequences of War, Aug 8, 2023) Soldiers experience war trauma in warfare when they witness destruction, bloodshed and mass death.

Many case studies evidence the reason for the trauma. It happens by experiencing the physical pain directly and also by hearing it from faraway places. Elizabeth Shockley, a 21 year girl from Georgia has lost her father and also her three brothers in a war. She becomes an orphan in an instant and that has made her mad. The four deaths have given her "disorder of the mind", later she was admitted in a Georgia insane asylum. In another incident, North California, Ida Murchison mentally disturbed and attained distress as she was frightened by the war news. (The Washington Press: Democracy dies in Darkness, 2020). Steve Sugden, a colonel, in US army reserves and a Psychiatrist given an account of psychological effects of war that "Long term effects of trauma are significant in war", he mentions that those who experience war through social media can also develop the psychological trauma. (The Mental Health Effects of war: Backed by Science, 2022).

In Alan Gratz's book, *Ground Zero*, this impact is vividly portrayed through the experiences of Brandon, Reshmina and her surroundings. Despite being in different places and times, both characters are deeply affected by the psychological toll of war. This paper explores how war trauma is exposed in this novel, focusing on common themes of fear, loss, and the challenge of finding inner strength.

Alan Gratz designed a plot with two distinct yet interconnected narratives that highlight the profound impact of war trauma on individuals and communities throughout history. The first narrative follows the harrowing experience of Brandon, a nine-year-old boy who becomes trapped in the Twin Towers during the 9/11 attacks. Despite his young age, Brandon is thrust into the horrors of war in a single day, an experience that profoundly shapes his perspective and leaves him with lasting trauma.

The second narrative shifts to Reshmina, whose story unfolds against the backdrop of the seemingly endless war in Afghanistan, a consequence of 9/11. Here, the trauma extends beyond a single event, becoming a generational inheritance. Reshmina's family bears the weight of war's devastation, passed down from parents who witnessed the initial conflict to children who grow up amidst violence and uncertainty.

Sarah Fielding in her article "War Trauma: The Psychological Consequence of War" has said that people who

experience war trauma might also develop into anxiety or depression. Stephanie Collier in his work "War anxiety: How to cope", has mentioned that 'War Anxiety' is otherwise known as 'Nuclear War'. This may lead to fatigue, worries and as a fragile sense of control, that can trigger anger. We can find this war anxiety both in Brandon and Reshmina's story. Brandon, whose name has been changed as Taz, was found by Reshmina as a blind soldier in her neighborhood. Brandon became a soldier to fight against Afghanistan in a way of taking revenge for his father's death. Like that, Reshmina was never interested in helping Taz in the first place. But she remembered the values taught by her elders and she lent her helping hands.

The lingering pain of loss wasn't new for Brandon. When he was nine year old boy, Five years ago, cancer stole his mother, leaving a gaping hole in their lives. Every day, he and his father leaned on each other, grappling with grief that resurfaced with every memory. Yet, beneath the surface, a new fear simmered. On September 11th, Brandon was headed to the restaurant in the Twin Towers where his father worked as a manager. The violence of the previous day hung heavy in the air, and the suspicion Brandon faced at school only heightened his anxiety. The world felt different, charged with an unsettling tension.

Brandon's father was deeply troubled by his son's violent behavior. He sat down with Brandon to discuss it, opening up about his own struggles with Brandon's classmate, Stuart Pedleton. While Brandon never failed to apologize for his actions, he felt a pang of regret for taking up his father's time with such discussions. The tremble in his father's voice heightened his guilt; he never wanted to inflict further pain on a man already shattered by the loss of his wife. Witnessing his father's emotional breakdown once more was something Brandon couldn't bear. "The disappointment in his father's voice was like a punch in the gut and Brandon felt tears come to his eyes. It hurt way worse than if his dad had just been mad at him" (4).

After the Flight attack in the twin tower, Brandon, now separated from his father, grapples with intense regret over his deceitful actions. He can't shake the guilt of secretly purchasing gloves for his friend, betraying his father's trust in the process. The weight of his decision is compounded by the realization that he left his father unaware of the impending tragedy. Had he known about the attack beforehand, he would never have left his father's side. In Brandon's mind, the idea of facing trouble with his father pales in comparison to the terror of being separated from him. This sentiment, expressed early on, takes on a haunting significance as events unfold. As the chaos ensues in the aftermath of the terrorist attack, Brandon and the others trapped in the elevator are gripped by panic. Amidst their desperate cries for help, they come to the chilling realization that the confinement of the elevator is nothing

compared to the horrors unfolding outside its doors. "Brandon put his head in his hands and tried not to cry. He was scared and separated from the person the relied on the most-his dad" (36).

All the struggles he experienced in the tower until he came out of it with the help of Richard was something unimaginable and unbearable for a nine years old boy. He has witnessed so many death bodies for the first time in his life. He has witnessed many things which were far from his thoughts until that day. He has seen such things only in movies. He saw a woman burned alive right before his eyes, he saw an elevation run down without proper working and slimmed down into the dark. He heard the last words of his fathers who is there to comfort him and encourage him to run the future without him. Such things are too much for a nine years old boy. "Brandon felt his own tears coming back. How was it possible that he might never see his dad again, when just that morning they'd been eating breakfast together? Brushing their teeth together? Riding the train together?"(196). After reaching Richard home they learnt about Taliban's attacks on the tower, there Brandon decided to become an army man to take revenge on the people who are the reason for his father's death.

On the flip side, the narrative delves into the life of another protagonist, Reshmina. Hailing from a village in Afghanistan, Reshmina navigates her world within the confines of her family's traditions and societal norms, heavily dictated by her Muslim identity. Alongside her mother and grandmother, Reshmina faces numerous restrictions that limit her autonomy and opportunities. However, these constraints are compounded by the pervasive atmosphere of fear and uncertainty that shrouds their daily existence. For over a decade, the presence of the American military in Afghanistan under the guise of combating terrorism has brought not peace, but rather upheaval and chaos to the region. As a result, instability and turmoil have become endemic, casting a shadow over the lives of Reshmina and countless others across Afghanistan.

The war had become a relentless beast, devouring peace and leaving a trail of shattered lives in its wake. Many families, like Rashmi's, bore the brunt of its cruelty. The memory of peaceful days had faded, replaced by a constant undercurrent of fear and loss. Women, doubly oppressed by societal restrictions and the violence around them, struggled to survive.

Reshmina, a young woman with a bright spirit, shared this burden with her twin brother, Pagoon. A cherished older sister, Hila, had been their anchor – a symbol of hope and laughter. But a bomb blast, a casualty of the ongoing conflict, had snatched her away at the tender age of 16 during her wedding. This loss left an indelible mark on the twins.

Reshmina, whenever consumed by the memory of Hila, would be swept away by a wave of anxiety and grief. A sudden, crushing sadness would envelop her.

Pasoon, however, reacted differently. The constant threat of violence and the chaos unleashed after the American intervention fueled a simmering rage within him. He saw the Americans, who had come supposedly to liberate Afghanistan from the Taliban, as the architects of their misery. In his eyes, they had destabilized the country, leaving a trail of destruction and death. The Taliban, though driven from power with American support, remained a potent force. Pasoon, fueled by a desire for vengeance and a distorted sense of patriotism, took a drastic step – he joined the Taliban insurgency, his actions cloaked in secrecy from his worried parents.

Following Reshmina's act of aiding an American soldier, Rage contorted Pasoon's face. He couldn't fathom how the Americans, who claimed to be saving Afghanistan from the Taliban, had brought so much destruction. Their presence had cost him dearly – his beloved sister Hila, who had been a guiding light in their lives, was ripped away in a bomb blast. Blinded by anger, he made a rash decision. Ignoring Rashmi's frantic pleas and the potential danger to their family and village, Pasoon stormed off to join the Taliban. As anticipated by Reshmina, tensions flared, and hostilities erupted between the Afghan Government, supported by the Americans, and the Taliban. Sensing imminent danger, Reshmina hurried back to her village, where she promptly alerted her fellow villagers to seek refuge in the safety of nearby caves. Families scattered and sought shelter in the caverns, where they anxiously awaited, bearing witness to the unfolding chaos and violence directed towards their besieged village.

Rashmina's heart hammered like the explosions outside. "Reshmina wanted to scream partly from fear and partly from anger" (113). She blamed Taz, the American soldier she helped, for the attack. Blinded by the war's fury, she threw stones at him, furious and scared. But she didn't see the sadness in Taz's eyes, a sadness much like her own. Taz wasn't the enemy. He was another victim of war. He wanted to tell Rashmina his story, about the huge hole left in his life when his father, his best friend, was taken away in a terrible attack. That memory burned in his mind and made him want revenge, which is why he ended up in this war-torn country. The one day experience has damaged so much in the life of Brandon.

For decades, war had been the grim melody of Reshmina's life. Loss was a constant companion, a heavy weight that pressed down on their hearts. Her mother, a woman weathered by hardship, had become emotionally distant, her focus narrowed solely on the safety and survival of her family. Gone were the dreams and aspirations that might have bloomed in a life untouched by violence. Cooking and household chores became the repetitive rhythm of her days,

the only life she had ever known. This, in turn, was the reality Reshmina inherited. Her mother, raised in a society choked by war, had never known the carefree laughter or simple joys of peace. War was the air they breathed, the landscape that shaped their every experience.

Reshmina and her twin brother, Pagoon, learned about the vibrant life that once existed in Afghanistan only through fragments of stories whispered by the older members of their family. Stories from older relatives painted a picture of a happy life, way different from their own hard reality. This difference made them secretly wish for a life without constant fear, where they could dream big.

Reshmina's father voiced his frustration when Afghan soldiers barged into their home, searching for Taliban weapons. He lamented the enduring pain of their losses, knowing that many in their community had suffered the same fate, losing fathers, mothers, sisters, and brothers to the relentless war. This confrontation prompted Reshmina to reflect on her own family dynamics.

Growing increasingly irritated by her mother's fixation on household chores and her insistence that Reshmina follow suit, Reshmina turned to her grandmother, Anaa, for insight. Anaa shared the poignant story of Reshmina's mother, a woman who, like her, had never tasted freedom or joy. Born into a world scarred by conflict, Reshmina's mother had known only sorrow from a young age. Her father's death at six, her brother's passing at eleven, and the loss of two children before they reached the age of five, followed by the tragedy of her eldest daughter's death on her wedding day, had left her heartbroken.

Adding to her burdens, Reshmina's father had been injured by an old Soviet mine, leaving him disabled. Throughout her life, Reshmina's mother had been immersed in sadness, deprived of the happiness and freedom her grandmother had once enjoyed in Afghanistan during the 1960s. These tales painted a stark picture of resilience in the face of adversity, shaping Reshmina's understanding of her family's history and the enduring impact of war on their lives. Anaa mentions that "She wore her sadness like Chador" (47).

Extreme fatigue may arise in such cases. In both the plotlines, someone becomes numb, anxious, worried and void. They decided that they could do nothing in their situation and everything was over and they became tired of the situation and gave up their hope. Reshmina's mother became numb and decided that this was their life and they could expect nothing more from it. Reshmina's brother became furious and joined the Taliban in the means of taking revenge. Brandon also desired to take revenge on the Taliban without knowing so many innocent lives are victims like him. Reshmina's disabled father was annoyed, still not in the position to fight against anyone. Like it is with Brandon's father, though he connected

with his son through a phone call, he never took steps to join with his son. Even as a child Brandon climbed over some collapsed floors with broken steps without proper escalators in the hope of finding his father. But from the side of his father no efforts were taken and it proves his hopelessness. He simply decided that he can do nothing anymore and his life was over.

(Paul B. Tchounwou, Nuclear Anxiety amid Russian-Ukrainian War 2022: Descriptive Cross-Sectional Study, 2023) Both the army people and the common man have to get scared during wartime. It might be the fear for life, fear for the loss of a loved one or fear for the future. In other words, when we are afraid, our bodies and minds react in ways that help us to survive. We may become more aggressive, or we may try to flee from the danger. We may also experience psychological challenges, such as anxiety or panic. These changes can be triggered by both real and perceived threats.

Here in the novel we can evidence the situation to be afraid of and roar against their injustice. The protagonists fight against all the difficulties with so much bravery and decide their destiny. Brandon wants to escape the building as his father advised him and also lean on his own self after losing his father. Somehow he got the most respected position of serving for his country. He also reaches the position to advise a small girl who is struggling in her life almost like him. He gave her the hope to achieve her aim. Reshmina amidst all the hindrances as an Afghan woman desired to become a translator like Mariam, a Afghan translator. Though the other characters represented the long lasting scars of war the protagonist overcame it hopefully.

By weaving together the experiences of Brandon and Rashmi, the novel delivers a powerful message about the multifaceted nature of war trauma. Brandon's story serves as a stark reminder of the immediate psychological impact a single, horrific event can have, leaving scars that linger long after the physical danger has passed. Reshmina's perspective, however, takes us a step further, highlighting the enduring and transgenerational consequences of prolonged conflict. Decades of war have woven themselves into the fabric of her family's life, shaping their world view, limiting their dreams, and leaving a legacy of grief that transcends generations. This unflinching portrayal of war's toll compels us to confront its true cost. It's not just the immediate casualties or the physical destruction; it's the invisible wounds inflicted on the minds and hearts of those who endure its relentless grip.

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