

# **Traumatic Effects of War on Women in Masoud Behnoud's *The Knot in The Rug* and William Styron's *Sophie's Choice***

**Zahra Haghshenas, Alireza Anushiravani**

*PhD Candidate at University of Tehran, English Literature Department*

*Full Professor of Comparative Literature and Literary Theory Shiraz University*

## **Abstract**

This essay discusses Masoud Behnoud's *The Knot in The Rug* and William Styron's *Sophie's Choice* (1979), two novels with traumatized women as the main characters. Both of these female protagonists have the same destiny. There are similarities and differences between the novels, but in both, female characters experience war and trauma. We analyze the women's mental disorders and characters from the perspective of Cathy Caruth's trauma theory. These women both experience war and both suffer from its effects, but war is not the only element that causes psychological problems for the women. By applying trauma theory to the female characters, we see that they are victims more of patriarchal society than of war. Their patriarchal societies prevent them from coping with war and its effects.

**Key Words:** War, Trauma Theory, Women, Patriarchal Society

## **Introduction**

*The Knot in the Rug* (2002) and *Sophie's Choice* (1979) both describe a different kind of war history by focusing on female characters and personal hardship rather than on commanders and their victories. The protagonists of both novels are women of faith. They place the blame for their suffering not on war or religion, but on the patriarchal society which has victimized them. The identities, personalities, and indeed the entire lives of the female characters are shaped by men's control.

The female protagonists of the novel are not common people. Khanoum is from a royal family and Sophie's father is an intellectual. This feature alone is enough to separate them from the characters of other war novels, as most female characters in war novels are victims of the aristocratic class rather than members of that class. In *The Knot in The Rug* (2002), Khanoum is a princess who suffers her entire life because of freedom seekers' protests and wars against the kingdom and royal family. Sophie, from *Sophie's Choice* (1979), is the daughter of an intellectual who has written many pamphlets against the Jewish community. It is interesting to note that "literature written about trauma of others is qualitatively different from literature by trauma survivors" (Tal, 1991, p.217). Writers who

describe the trauma of others lack the credibility and authenticity of writers who have themselves experienced trauma, making it a bit hard to accept the reality of the novels. The two novels under consideration present very different views of the same war. Khanoum's husband is in a high level position in the government of Germany at the time of the second world war and Sophie is a prisoner of the German military. But both of them were victims of the same war.

The main focus of this research is an analysis of the mental disorders of the female characters of *The Knot in The Rug* (2002) and *Sophie's Choice* (1979) as described by Behnoud and Styron. Both authors describe traditional and patriarchal societies in which women do not have rights. We analyze the novels from Caruth's points of view and in this way we create a literary niche in which to place female characters who, due to their gender, do not have any involvement in shaping their own lives. They have the classic characteristics of victims and suffer from various mental disorders. We analyze their mental problems to show how the pressure of a patriarchal society combines with the stresses of war to crush their psyches.

### **Literature Review**

One of the most popular psychological theories in literary and comparative literary studies is trauma theory. As the writer of *On Railway and Other Injuries of the Nervous System* (1867), John Erichsen is considered by some critics to be the founder of trauma theory, whereas some other researchers regard Sigmund Freud (as the writer of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 1922) as the pioneer of modern trauma theory. The second chapter of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1922) is related to the traumatic effects of World War I on soldiers. Cathy Caruth is an eminent professor of trauma theory and comparative literature. She became a central figure in trauma studies by writing *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996). The influence of this book on trauma studies, literature, and comparative literature is incontrovertible.

William Clark Styron is a celebrated American novelist who has won multiple literary awards. In *Sophie's Choice* (1979), Styron's most famous novel, he presents a new perspective towards the victims of the Holocaust. He was awarded the William Dean Howells Medal of the Academy for *Sophie's Choice* (1979). There are numerous papers and books about this novel which analyze it from different perspectives.

Masoud Behnoud is a prominent Iranian novelist, journalist, and historian. Some scholars, such as Arash Sedighi, also consider him a sociologist because of his expertise in Iranian society and its history. *The Knot in The Rug* (2002) is a combination of literature and history. Scholars endeavor to find the relationship between historical truth and fiction in *The Knot in The Rug* (2002).

### **Trauma Theory**

The story of trauma is one of delayed impact- shocking and unexpected realities rising to the surface long after the incident itself has passed. Trauma tends to be recurring, as

a victim will often repeatedly relapse while recalling pain. Caruth believes that although trauma by its definition involves intense personal suffering, there are other aspects to it as well. Trauma is both the suffering itself and an attempt to recognize and accept unpalatable realities which we would prefer not to face. A traumatized person is like a new human being whose experiences have been built upon the trauma itself. According to Caruth's version of trauma and literature theory, the historical, social and cultural situations of the victim are important factors in the development of this new self.

Clinicians consider PTSD to include the following symptoms of trauma: the reexperiencing of events through nightmares and flashbacks, avoidance symptoms, and instances of heightened physiological arousal like hypervigilance, disturbed sleep, and a distracted mind. The experience referred to is typically limited to that of "white, young, able-bodied, educated, middle-class, Christian men" (Caruth, 1995, p.101) and hence excludes the reality confronted by members of other groups on a regular basis, often as victims of societal structures that favor the privileged group which makes the definitions.

If we are considering disturbed women or survivors of rape or incest, we have to find a different a definition of trauma. Such women are not included in the standard definition of trauma, so the definition must be expanded to include other groups. The current narrow definition of trauma within the realm of dominant groups leads to discourses which create an image of "real" trauma which narrows the definition of humanity. "The private, secret, insidious traumas to which a feminist analysis draws attention are more often than not those events in which the dominant culture and its forms and institutions are expressed and perpetuated" (Brown, 1995, p.102). Culture is a very important factor in the process of the survivor's response to a traumatic situation.

## **Trauma and Silence**

Women are often victims of their silence. They accept masculine authority stoically and their silence eventually engenders alienation, emptiness, death, and hatred. Khanoum, the protagonist of *The Knot in The Rug* (2002), is mostly silent throughout Nezhat's troubles. As a result of her vulnerable personality, she remains silent all her life. Most of the time Khanoum is silent. Though she sometimes talks to herself, she does not have the ability to speak about the events occurring around her. She has a lot of questions, but she cannot ask them. Her reaction to her life's traumatic events is silence. Her muteness is a type of self-repression and denial in the face of traumatic events. She is so diffident that she has become incapable of action.

Khanoum wants to shout her feelings to Nezhat, but she is always cognizant of her role in society. Women do not have any right to speak; they should always be silent. She knows she has to remain mute regarding the events around her. She is a witness to rape and her father's violence, but she must refrain from discussing what she has seen and restrict her opinions to the confines of her own mind. She cannot speak about her aunt's rape and subsequent suicide, nor can she complain about her mother's tirades. She is very aware of the moral obligation imposed on her by society and knows she has to be silent. She should not

question. She is aware of the suffering in Nezhat's life and the painful death which resulted from her breaking the role imposed upon her by the masculine authorities of society. Khanoum prefers to remain mute but alive. Despite having lived through several wars in her lifetime, her most important problem is not war, but her own trauma-induced reticence.

Even after the passing of seventy years, Khanoum remains reserved. She cannot talk about her trauma. She is a survivor suffering in silence, and due to her silence, she cannot find the answers to her questions. She finds herself unable to talk about the past events which have so molded her life. Her culture, her society, and what they consider her "moral obligation" do not let her speak her mind. This inability to express her feelings is counterproductive, inhibiting the healing process of the survivor. If she could speak about her past, perhaps the burdens in her heart would be relieved, but she chooses instead to keep her feelings bottled up, a silent victim of her convictions. This unhealed wound within her festers, fostering additional troubles and further traumas. Consequently, the rest of her distressed existence is a kind of reaction to her traumatized mind. The traumatized mind affects her present and future. It keeps her a silent victim throughout her life.

Ashraf is a simple woman who is *sighe* (an Arabic word for a temporary marriage in Islam) to King Ahmad. No one among the aristocratic families accepts her, so she is forced to reside with servants. There is no one to inquire about her feelings or the goings-on of her daily life. Ashraf, though a member of a busy household, is completely alone. She continues to live her silent, isolated life until the day that Khanoum discovers Ashraf's true role as a spy in the palace. Khanoum learns that Ashraf was forced to become *sighe* to King Ahmad for the sake of the redemption of her father, and for the duration of her time in the palace, she has been a spy of the English government. That this quiet, unassuming woman would be a spy is surprising to the reader.

Ashraf believes she should live for other people, and she does not have any voice of her own. She is a victim of war and of her own family loyalty, suffering for the sake of her own poor father. When Ashraf finally spoke to Khanoum, her words were simple, with no sign of regret. Khanoum knows that those women who live in a haram have no power of their own and that they have no choice but to do whatever the king wants. But Ashraf, with her completely subjugated personality, seems to want no other role, quietly accepting her situation, every slight and humiliation, and believes that the world she lives in is the only world- that there is no other place for women.

Ashraf's personality is not complicated. All her life she remains reticent, and even before the English ambassador, she is robotic, as if her only mission in life is to report and as if she has no desires of her own. Ashraf doesn't even change her traditional appearance in Turkey or Paris. She is a conservative and traditional person. This lack of ambition made Ashraf into a naïve instrument for English governments and the Persian royal family at the same time. Her stoic personality persists through her entire life, and even on the day of her death there is no redemption for her.

In *Sophie's Choice* (1979), the female protagonist doesn't speak about her trauma. Since her childhood she has been under the control of various people and forces: first, that of her father, then the circumstances of war, and finally under the control of Nathan. Sophie is a

subjugated person who has no agency and does not desire any rights for herself. Sophie has never had any right to speak since her childhood, and it causes her to be misanthropic throughout the rest of her life. She learns to be silent and no trace of resistance can be seen in her. There have been signs of psychological subjugation in Sophie since her childhood and this subjugation developed while she was in the concentration camp and then while living with Nathan. She even ignores the events of the war and there are signs of denial in Sophie's personality. She cannot talk about her past and she does not know the reason, but the reason is her childhood in which she was under the control of her father who she had to obey absolutely.

Sophie's father subjects her to constant humiliation, and each time that she wants to speak he says: "Your intelligence is pulp, like your mother's. I don't know where you got your body, but you did not get your brains from me" (Styron, 2000, p. 371). She grew up under the control of a cruel and misogynist father who does not allow Sophie and her mother to talk. The only thing that the reader knows about Sophie's mother is that she has an interest in music. Sophie herself is guilty of silencing her mother's voice. Sophie speaks neither of her personality nor her reactions. There is no dialogue for her in the novel. She is completely unknown to the reader. It seems as if her lack of agency is not restricted only to Sophie's life but also her own.

Sophie is not able to unlock the past and it seems very complicated to her. She wants to speak, but her unconscious mind does not let her. She is in conflict with herself most of the time. Although she hasn't believed in any religion since the war, Sophie was a Catholic woman before the war. She was a very religious person who grew up in a religious family; her family did not allow her to speak. The father is the absolute authority of the family in such households, and there is no place for a daughter to opine. Consequently, after the war she is quiet and allows Nathan to do whatever he wants to her. She lives in a new prison with a new warden. She cannot bear the pain of living with many secrets. She wants to speak about her trauma, but she remains mute again and again.

In many cases, Sophie's silent and passive personality brings trauma upon her. Sophie's mind has been damaged by the suffering she has endured at the hands of her family, her religion and her several sexual relationships, not to mention the tribulations of the war. But her own submissiveness brings at least some of her troubles upon her. For example, Sophie's sick relationship with the sadistic Nathan and her suicide are the fruit of Sophie's masochistic, misogynistic, and subjugated personality. She prefers to be mute and obedient to a man. It is not important who the man is- her father, her husband, the Nazi Commander, Joseph or Nathan. Sophie's self-victimization makes her an unheard victim. She lives with the elements of death, emptiness, pain, hate, and alienation. Unable to forget her past and unable to heal, Sophie commits suicide at the end of the novel. All voiceless victims "explore the alienation and estrangement associated with the inability to communicate or share the traumatic experience" (Machico, 2008, p. 24).

## **Traumatic Dreams and Flashbacks**

After suffering trauma, most survivors are confronted by flashbacks and dreams. These mental disturbances can be intolerable to those who experience them. The symptoms of “pseudophobia” in a patient’s dreams and emotions are the cause of post-traumatic disorders that affect conscious identification of self-hood. In *The Knot in The Rug* (2002), Khanoum loses Nezhat and her mother at a young age but she lives with them for the rest of her life. She has a recurring dream about Nezhat. In her dream, she falls into a large well in which there is a black snake that wants to chase them. Her mother strikes the snake, but it remains alive and the events repeat themselves. She wakes up with a new trauma from the nightmare and to her, it feels real. Her throat feels dry and her heart is pounding. She cannot understand the difference between reality and dream. Her body’s reaction to the dream is the same as its reaction to the real events.

She goes to sleep repeatedly and she is in the horror of the traumatic dreams. She cannot believe Nezhat is really dead and that she must leave her alone. When the survivor encounters the death of others and cannot recognize the difference between death and life, she cannot fathom how it is possible to continue her life without her aunt, as a result she encounters her death in every single moment of her life.

Nezhat comes to Khanoum’s dreams with her golden hair and blue eyes exactly as they were in real life on many nights over the course of several years. In the first few nights Khanoum wakes up in a terror, but in the next few nights she talks to Nezhat and no longer fears her. Nezhat recites her last sentence repeatedly to Khanoum. These dreams are not a part of the trauma, they are new traumatic events for the survivor.

Repetition of dreams is not always a symptom of the same mental disorder in each patient or within the same patient when they find themselves in varying situations. Khanoum encounters whatever she was in touch with when they were alive. As a result, she is unable to appreciate any difference between actual occurrences and her dreams. There exists a repetition of the same dream in the case of Khanoum. Khanoum lives in the past and she sees all the past events in her dreams. She sees Nezhat who wants to shoot Khanoum’s father with a rifle. But the father does not just appear as one person, he is hundred or more duplicates of himself. She lived through this situation before in real life where Nezhat wanted to shoot Khanoum’s father but she could not, because Khanoum fled from that scene. She cannot appreciate the extent of the trauma experienced by her aunt in true life. These dreams are the continuation of the collection of traumatic episodes within Khanoum’s mind. Although Nezhat shoots Khanoum’s father there are other men there. These men symbolize the men in Khanoum’s life. All of them are very violent men who want to bother Nezhat. Nezhat’s resistance was not successful and she failed. Nezhat is riding a horse, and Khanoum and her mother are in Shababa’s garden exactly as they were when Nezhat was alive. In reality she died with Nezhat’s death and lives with what remains of her memories and dreams. Khanoum has never accepted and recognized the reality of her life and Nezhat’s death. There are many questions in her mind, but she does not dare to ask them. She does not want to break her muteness. So these questions do not allow her to be free and haunt her mind and dreams for several years. These unanswered questions are the reason for

the new traumatic events of her future life, their effects on her life are a part of her traumatized memory. Khanoum says “When I became an old woman I answered them for her in my dreams or even when deep in thought” (Behnoud, 2002, p, 115). She sought the answers to her questions in her dreams. But she wakes up, traumatized yet again, confronted with more questions. She wants to know where her mother was. Was she still alive and living with her father? These questions make her sick, she gets stomachaches because of the unanswered questions.

Sometimes the reader of the novel cannot recognize the boundary between fact and illusion. We do not know whether or not the narrator is reliable. This is particularly true in the case of traumatized individuals- the narrator is often a person who lives at least partly within her memories and dreams. She closes her eyes and thinks about the bullet and then tries to find an answer to her questions. In the case of Khanoum, the narrator believes that her father is the source of all of her troubles. Though Khanoum has lived through many wars, she is uninterested in speaking of war- she’d rather speak about her family.

Khanoum often experiences vivid dreams. She speaks of them often and tries to analyze them. Her dreams are important to her, but she is frustrated by her inability to remember all of the dreams’ details. Khanoum’s dreams mostly concern Nezhat and Khanoum’s own father. In her dreams she relives the events of that night, vividly recalling the place where the trauma took place. She remembers clearly her father’s quarters and his actions and the look on his face. The trauma she has suffered has made her a prisoner in her own mind, doomed to repeat the night over and over. The details of the dreams vary, but they always follow the same track as her mind creates new traumatic situations for her in an attempt to comprehend what has happened as it unsuccessfully attempts to heal her afflicted mind.

Flashbacks are commonplace in *The Knot in The Rug* (2002) The narrator confesses that every night she dreams of her mother and of Nezhat, who rests her head on mother’s knees. A feeling of safety prevails, and all is well, but then her father appears with his rifle. Nezhat and Khanoum hide behind her mother and her father, the man she calls monster, is looking at them with his red eyes. He is ready to shoot. Her mother throws Khanoum into the room and shuts the door. Her mother wants to throw Nezhat into the other room, but the monster grabs her hands and laughs. Nezhat cries as she feels an unbearable pain in her bones. Desperate to escape, she jumps into the tank and her mother jumps into the tank after her. But the monster drags her mother back with his extra-large hands. Repeatedly her mother has gone into the water, and she has never come back. Khanoum sees everything but she can do nothing. She is paralyzed. She hears her mother’s voice from the water, but as always, she is wordless.

In the survivor’s mind everything is as it was at the time that she became a traumatized person. Her mind does not produce any new images and instead it reproduces all the existing images continuously. At the end of the novel, Khanoum is an old woman, but she starts her days with the nightmares of her childhood and there is no difference between the nightmares of her adulthood and those of her childhood.

There are a lot of nightmares with the same plot and characters in the novel. Khanoum cannot understand that she is not a child and that traumatic circumstances are in her past. She lives with them like an innocent and passive child who is just a witness. These nightmares are parts of the endless struggle to uncover the reality of the traumatic event. What really happened? Why? They continue until the end of the survivor's life. These responses differ from person to person and we cannot say that all victims have the same types of nightmares and flashbacks. Depending on the victim's personality, background, culture, society and physiology their reaction to the trauma and resulting nightmares and flashbacks will differ. It is important to consider survivors to be unique individuals who are influenced by various factors within the same experience.

The dreams of different survivors often follow a similar pattern and are related to the trauma suffered. Like Khanoum in *The Knot in The Rug* (2002), in *Sophie's Choice* (1979) Sophie encounters nightmares and flashbacks. She is a survivor of a war in which she suffered terribly. She was forced to choose one of her children, she experienced concentration camp and prison, and she lost all her family and friends. As a result of these experiences, she lives with a sense of guilt. She struggles incessantly with herself, unable to get a good night's sleep. Sophie wakes up from the nightmares into a new trauma. Sophie's traumatized mind traps her, never again allowing her to experience a normal life.

Although Sophie lives in the United States and tries to start a new life by forgetting her trauma, she never ceases to identify herself as a Catholic Polish woman and believes Auschwitz still stalks her soul. She sees no respite from her memories. Not only the traumatic events of war, but also the trauma of her childhood imprison Sophie. Most of the time she dreams of her father and cannot remember anything about the details of the dream, adding frustration to the guilt and fear that she feels. She wants desperately to remember the details of her dreams, but she cannot. She only remembers the music in the dream, a very strange voice singing a haunting melody, which forces her to think about the dream frequently. She has never found respite from the flashbacks and nightmares.

Sophie often thinks of the children who were separated from their parents in Warsaw who have never met their families again. These countless children were victims of racism, and Sophie's children suffered the same fate. Since the days she lived in a concentration camp, she has dreamed of Jan. Even after the war Sophie has not been redeemed from similar dreams and flashbacks about her son. Repetitive nightmares and memories cause post-traumatic depletion in survivors.

In some trauma survivors who suffer repetitive dreams, a masochistic system will be activated. As Caruth mentioned in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) some survivors want to see their dead friends again in dreams. One survivor says: "I do not want to take drugs for my nightmares, because I must remain a memorial to my dead friends" (p. vii). Sophie is a masochistic survivor who thinks about her nightmares and follows her nightmares indirectly. The war and all of its related tragedies have never ended for Sophie. "All wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory"

(Nguyen,2013, p. 149). Sophie's traumatized mind and memory are active and their response to the war is mostly shown in flashbacks and nightmares.

Like Khanoum, Sophie is not able to find a boundary between reality, dreams and her past. Sometimes Sophie attempts to find herself in the middle of flashbacks and hallucinations, but she is not able to do that. For that reason, Stingo speaks about Sophie's psyche with surprise, he cannot understand her and just narrates Sophie's story. The other important point to note is the unreliability of Sophie in the eyes of the narrator. The narrator does not know why Sophie strives to deceive him, so he presumes that her hallucinations are the reason for her lies. Sophie is a person who could not find herself in the place in which she lived, at all times she lives with flashbacks and it seems to her as if she lives in a concentration camp. Perhaps, she is not lying after all, but cannot distinguish reality from dreams.

Sophie's flashbacks mentally destruct both the reader and narrator. Sophie speaks about her relationship with Hoss as an instrument for saving her son. She speaks about most of the events occurring in Hoss's house with such detail that for Stingo, it was as if he was watching a movie. She still works for Hoss and wants to steal the radio every day until several years after the war. She emphasizes, she was afraid when she wanted to steal the radio and signs of fear would appear on her face while she told her story to Stingo. A combination of fear and shame bothers Sophie, she believes the sense of guilt does not allow her to live comfortably.

Sophie does not possess the capacity to live with the flashbacks.

Sophie sleeps after she leaves Emma's room. She walks on a beach and waits to see her son in the dream. The beach was familiar and strange for Sophie at the same time, and she is not sure what the name of the shore is. She is aware that a German man follows her, but she does not recognize him, however he resembles a famous musician. His words are broken. Then she sees herself in the doorway of a church. She is not able to see anyone, but she senses the presence of a man. She sees the man again, but this time he rapes Sophie and does not say anything. When she wakes up, she is not able to recognize the boundary between the dream and reality. Styron (1979) says "That dream! She could not dislodge it from her mind after these many hours" (p.422). Sophie thinks about the man. Who was he? Was he Bronek? No, he was not, he was tall and Bronek is short. When Bronek speaks about the radio to Sophie, she just thinks about her dream.

Sophie wants to solve the dilemma of the dream in reality. The combination of reality and dreams on Sophie's mind bothered her and do not allow her to listen to Bronek's voice. She even forgets her mission to steal the radio. All men in Sophie's life have the same characteristic, they want a sexual relationship with her and she has no choice in the matter. The man who was in the dream is similar too. Even when a man is different, Sophie's mind assumes that the man wants the same. This is because there is no other dimension to men in her subconscious mind.

## **Latency and History**

The history of individuals reflects on their life and causes different psychological disorders. There is a period of forgetting for the victim and then the trauma captures the survivor again after a while. *The Knot in The Rug* (2002) and events narrated therein, are nothing other than a chronicle of the burdens carried by Khanoum. She has a very cruel, drunken, habitual gambler for a father, one who killed her aunt and her mother when she was a young girl. She fled from her father, but the process of leaving and coming back recurred in her life. She experiences the cycles of departure and return in her life. Khanoum has not fully recognized all the dimensions of her trauma, she finds herself in a constant struggle to understand herself as a survivor.

When Khanoum grows up she marries a person who has her father's personality, but she does not realize the nature of her husband in the first year of her marriage. She describes her husband as a tall, handsome man from an aristocratic family with a big mustache- as a man who never lives with his wife, a drunkard and a gambler, a person who has no humanity and a person who annoys Khanoum a lot. To the reader it is clear that Khanoum's husband bears a strong resemblance to her father, but Khanoum does not understand their resemblance and accepts her husband Said as a gentleman who is not like her father or any other aristocratic men in the world.

But over time, Khanoum comes to recognize Said's similarity to her father. She says, "'You filth, you animal,' and then I remembered my mother saying the same to the monster: 'animal'" (Behnoud, 2002, p.411). Khanoum's marital life is a clear echo of her mother's, and she compares herself to her mother. "... the traumatic event problematizes our notion of what history is and how we relate to the past." (Whitehead, 1998, p.690).

Though Khanoum is the narrator of the novel, after her death an omnipresent narrator speaks of the events which came after her death. Nanaz and Maryam go to the United States, where Nanaz gives birth to a daughter one century after Khanoum's birth, naming the girl Khanoum. After the baby's birth, war and death again sweep the world. There was war in the world with the first Khanoum's birth which subsided after her death, but it resumed once there was a new Khanoum in the world. The first Khanoum bore witness to wars and violence, and the second Khanoum, it seems, brings death with her as well. Nanaz gathers her grandmother's diaries and accounts. She is the second generation of Khanoum's memory. This novel refers to Nanaz's collection of stories as memories of memories and second-generation survivors' memories of their parents' recollections of traumatic experiences. "These children's upbringings were dominated by their parents' narratives of a past life" (Diedrich, 2014, p. 3). The past starts a new future with the same aspects.

In *Sophie's Choice* (1979) Sophie always has to choose. In Birkenau she has to choose one of her children, after a while she has to choose between going with Wanda's resistance or letting her go, and at the end of the novel she has to choose between dying and living. She always finds herself in the struggle to choose; she must either choose one child over another, one philosophy of living at the expense of another, or death versus life. She always lives with doubt and a sense of guilt. It is an endless process in Sophie's life. Even the novel's "title is doubly ironic" (Vic, 2005, p. 138).

When Sophie was a little girl, she was in eternal fear of losing her parents; their absence bothered her. After thirteen years she was in the same fear of losing Nathan. She knows that was an unreal fear, but she cannot overcome the phobia. The latency that presents in the case of Sophie and her relationship with Nathan is influenced by her history. In fact, she is not in conflict with Nathan and his sadistic personality, rather she finds herself in love with him and afraid to lose him.

When she was a child, her father dictated to her. She was a prisoner in his house and she always obeyed him. Twenty years later, when she was a prisoner of the Nazis, Himmler dictated letters for her to type, and then she is being dictated to in a different way, but no less under the control of another person. Sophie never fully masters her life. In all her life she lives in a prison, a prison of her father, a prison of the German military, and Nathan's prison. She has never tasted freedom in her life and she is always languishing under the effect of someone's control.

In the years Sophie lives in Auschwitz, she is tortured by the system there. The experience of Auschwitz was a "systematic program of terror and humiliation and was often a means of gradual but intentional killing" (Lifton, 1986, p. 155). The sense of humiliation that the Nazis inflicted upon Sophie continues to oppress her throughout her life, including in her relationship with Nathan. She lives with a man who humiliates her again and again, and it seems that Sophie is accustomed to this way of living. She does not expect any respect from others and she actively seeks out such relationships, as if she prefers to be humiliated. Sophie's life is like a one-way street that she follows to her own gradual death. Although Sophie did not die in Auschwitz, the influence of the concentration camp remained with her until her eventual suicide.

Sophie and Nathan want to find the reality of history. They dress in vintage clothing in an attempt to relive the glory of the past. They want to show the effects of the past on their lives and personalities, so they wear old-fashioned clothing. They're happy with the clothing even though it looks strange on them- they enjoy looking weird. Perhaps they feel a sense of nostalgia for the past, or perhaps they feel like they want to escape modern life, or maybe they want to show that history permeates their lives and they are nothing more than their history. History is a major aspect of this part of the novel- the changes effected on them by history, their sense of history, and the unknown, unseen influence of history on their unconscious minds.

Sophie is not a strong woman. She remembers her father's voice complaining about her and telling her, "You do everything wrong." For the rest of her life, the echo of her father's voice has been on her mind and its lingering effects control her life. She cannot do anything well. She is always a loser. She could not steal the radio. She is not able to find her son. Although she is beautiful and kind, she can't have a good relationship. She does everything wrong for the rest of her life.

## **Concept of Witnessing in Trauma and The Survivor's Mission**

Many war novels are writers' testimonies of war, a "textual testimony which can penetrate us like an actual life" (Felman, 2002, p. 2). They speak about a different war. They describe war from their points of view, and these fill the gaps in other histories. These war novels are typically written by unreliable narrators of war because the language of the writer is the "language of forgetting". The survivor tries to restructure her memories, but the memories are fragmented.

The concept of witness in trauma theory proposes that different people will react differently to similar events (Heidarizadeh, 2015, p. 789). Nezhat condemns herself because of Ebrahim's death. When a person survives an accident or traumatic situation she feels guilty and this sense of guilt can conflict with effective therapeutic action. Nezhat's responsibility for Ebrahim's death bothers her a lot. Caruth believes that the language of trauma is the language of forgetting. Therefore, she believes that history is a recreation of a false recognition of traumatic situations. Nezhat's reaction to Ebrahim's death is an example of the forgetting described by Caruth. We can consider Nezhat an unreliable witness. Because she cannot accept his death completely, her testimony is unreliable and is therefore more anecdote than true history. In fact, she creates a new history in the middle of the old history.

Nezhat's witness of trauma restructured her memories regarding the traumatic situation.

And though this is a literary text rather than a history, Nezhat's behavior accurately reflects the behaviors of individuals who witness real trauma. We can consider them to be witnesses of a traumatic event. In *The Knot in the Rug* (2002), the narrator creates a testimony of a new history, an unknown history about an aristocratic woman who suffers mental anguish which clouds her mind. Sometimes she cannot understand the difference between days and months. When she escapes from her father with her mother and Nezhat, she says: "It wasn't four days but rather four months, or perhaps forty years, or even centuries; the three of us were still in that room" (Behnoud, 2002, p.105).

As an unreliable witness, Khanoum's testimonies are questionable. She wants to speak about all details of her life, but the death, traumatic situations, and war she has encountered have clouded her mind. Her testimonies are the creation of a new history and we cannot rely on her suffering mind to be able to recall the traumatic situation completely. When she was young she was completely silent. "Among many factors, children are often unable to distinguish fantasy from reality; they are more easily intimidated; they do not understand the whole context of the situation and do not realize the importance of telling the truth. (Hron, 2013, p. 32-33). She cannot distinguish between reality and fantasy. She is a witness, a child who suffers from symptoms of mental distress. She is unable to understand all facets of the events she has witnessed, and even her testimony in her adulthood is not a reliable testimony. "When trauma theory emphasized the role played by memory, both in shielding victims and in aiding healing, it shows how literary works can reflect on the relationship between the memorialization of past events and the formation of current national identities" (Bayer, 2018, p. 222).

All survivors of death become witnesses. Some survivors do not speak about the trauma, but others believe they must. In the case of Sophie, in *Sophie's Choice* (1979) speaking about her trauma is very hard. She hides everything, tells lies about the past and finally tells her secrets to Stingo. Unlike Khanoum there are many lies in her testimonies and she confesses some of them at different times throughout the novel. So the narrator of the novel is unreliable- this is a trauma fiction and the traumatized mind is not reliable. In each part of the novel Sophie narrates a new story of her life. In the first one, her life was wonderful. There were no traces of pain or sadness there, and war is the only reason for her miseries.

Sophie believes she has to speak about war and the hidden layers of the war that no one knows about. But silence is the main part of her personality. She wants to break the silence and tell the truth. She decides to write, but not in her native language. She prefers to write in English, because English is disconnected from her identity, her unconscious, so Sophie can flee from her own Catholic identity. She believes she can say many things in English that she cannot say in her native language. She says, "dirty words in English or Yiddish sound better than they do in Polish" (Styron, 2000, p. 202). She lives with a sense of guilt and self- condemnation, but although she does not believe in any religion, that sense of guilt does not allow her to live a normal and happy life. It makes her trauma deeper and deeper.

Sophie wants to write about her memories in English because she wants to write whatever she wants without any sense of guilt or hesitation. On the surface, the United States is the country of freedom for her. She tries to start a new life but actually cannot save herself from her trauma and cannot write her novel. She wants to do it, but as a passive victim, is unable to take a direct stand and force herself to tell her story, so she eventually commits suicide after losing the battle with her own nature. The reader never learns the true details of Sophie's life and experiences.

One of the most distinctive features of survivors is a sense of guilt because they confronted death like other victims, but they survived. They think about their dead families and friends and cannot forgive themselves for being alive. They believe they somehow caused the death of the others and if only they had done something perhaps they may have remained alive too. This sense of guilt does not allow the victim to live with a clear unencumbered conscience for the rest of her life. Sophie is a symbol of sense of guilt that caused self- reproach and she never was able to live happily after the war. "Grief, guilt, self-loathing, and the feeling of being trapped in impossible social situations or incurable mental illness can drive people to escape from their own minds in the only way possible: escaping from life itself" (Carroll, 2012, p. 10).

Like Nezhat, Sophie is a witness who suffers from a sense of guilt and reproaches herself over the death of others. She is a silent and passive character, who wants to rid of her guilt by writing about her war memories. She considers writing about her memories her mission as a survivor. Sophie is not the only survivor of the war, when she was in Sweden,

there were many survivors there. Sophie says: “Stingo, I have lived long with this very, very strong guilt which I can’t lose, even though I know it has no reason” (Styron, 2000, p. 94). Sophie tries to feel a sense of freedom from guilt and anxiety like the Jewish woman who believes, love is the only reason to live and they should not think about that war any more. There is no reason for a sense of guilt, but in contrast to the Jewish woman’s outlook Sophie lives with strong guilt.

### **Aging, Anhedonia and Alexithymia**

Alexithymia is a disorder of the cognitive pattern of mind. The patient is not able to express her senses. Though most of *The Knot in The Rug* (2002) is about a young woman, the story is told through her eyes as an old woman who suffers from anhedonia and alexithymia. She has lost her cognitive abilities. For most of her life, she wished to remain silent, but now, in the last years of her life, she wants to tell her story. It’s natural for a person’s mind to try to heal itself. A trauma survivor does so by reviewing her life and the history of her country or her family. In the process of reviewing the traumatic events, memories cause the return of repressed feelings and as a result the patient experiences pain permanently. Khanoum does not consider herself to be a patient and she never considers that her mind may be unbalanced. She sometimes cannot understand her own feelings and “psychic numbing” is one of her prominent disorders.

In some patient’s cognitive patterns will be closed off, resulting in automaton-like behavior. This destruction of free will is usually seen in victims of prisons or concentration camps. Ashraf exhibits this robotic behavior. The other members of King Ahmad’s harem are likewise subjugated and reduced to automatic behavior, despite their positions as queens of Iran. The harem is little more than a prison, despite its royal trappings. Ashraf experiences the same cognitive constriction that prisoners of war exhibit, manifesting in emotional dullness and episodic freezing brought on by stress. She is completely lacking in volition being no more than a passive servant.

In *Sophie’s Choice* (1979) Sophie was not able to cry and speak about her emotions after the war. She suffers from numbing and alexithymia at the same time. Sophie did save herself from numbing and alexithymia, but if she had been old she would not have been able to do so.

As she mentions she can cry again and therefore there is no psychogenic death for Sophie. Sophie’s robotic behavior during the novel engenders a sense of sympathy in the reader. Sophie experiences the “surrender patterns”, and she exhibits continued stress behaviors and pseudologia as a result of the traumatic experiences she has undergone. Sophie’s cognitive constriction, episodic freezing in times of stress, and passive behavior follow her everywhere.

## **Psychosomatic Patients**

Sometimes traumatic events cause psychosomatic disorders in victims. Some examples of psychosomatic symptoms are observed in the characters of *The Knot in The Rug* (2002) and

*Sophie's Choice* (1979). In Behnoud's novel after Khanoum's escape from her father she could not talk or hear anything and these symptoms are elements that converge in the numbing process experienced by Khanoum. Both of these are a result of the trauma she has undergone. Khanoum as the narrator of the novel says, she wakes to the feeling of "a cold bloodless hand as though of a corpse rested on my forehead and I opened my eyes. I must have been dead for some time as Nezhat looked rather old" (Behnoud, 2002, p.102).

Nezhat's body was suffering from psychological trauma. Her hand is very cold and bloodless, her face is that of a woman much older than one of her age. It seems that she is the other version of Nezhat. No trace remains of the powerful girl that existed before the traumatization. She is motionless and can neither recognize the voices nor speak. Khanoum and Nezhat experienced various chronic pain syndromes. Furthermore, they cannot eat anything for they are pained victims of Khan's rape and violence. Sometimes "Nezhat had a temperature, and whenever Khanoum held her head it felt like she was on fire (Behnoud, 2002, p.106).

Nezhat's traumatized mind is not able to manage her body, these pains are inescapable and inevitable reactions of her body to the trauma. Nezhat cannot even wash her face or sit without help.

Khanoum lives with psychosomatic symptoms most of her life following her victimization at the hands of her father after the death of King Mozafaredin and civil war in Tehran. She says: "The first night on the boat I had insomnia (Behnoud, 2002, p. 130). This is a report from the first night and there are many disorders in the following days and nights. The novel is a testimony from Khanoum as a psychosomatic patient who has suffered all her life from depression, sleep disturbances, numbing, repetitive dreams and various chronic pain syndromes.

After the rape in the church Khanoum was sick for a while, she says "I was about to stand up but my weight was too much for my feet to bear" (Behnoud, 2002, p. 264). She could not do her daily tasks and nuns helped her all the time. She was completely motionless. She experienced fever too. In this part of the novel the reader understands the extent of Khanoum's trauma and she expects the illness from the character.

Like Khanoum and Nezhat, in the case of Sophie there are psychosomatic disorders. When she talks to a librarian, she is reminded of a Nazi doctor and suddenly falls to the earth and she finds herself both unable to move and to understand anything. She tries to stand up, but she can't and Nathan helps her and she feels better after a few hours. There are various psychosomatic symptoms such as characterological difficulties, repetitive dreams and numbing, and various chronic pain syndromes.

## **Forgetting and Traumatic Memory**

There are two types of memory: narrative memory and traumatic memory. Traumatic memory is activated when the traumatized person finds themselves under the similarly traumatic circumstances. Traumatic memory causes the survivor to return mentally, emotionally, and psychologically to their traumatic episode. Sometimes a seemingly mundane sight or sound can in fact be a trauma trigger which awakens the horrific memories stemming from that trauma. In *The Knot in The Rug* (Behnoud, 2002) Khanoum has not seen her father since her childhood, but when she encounters his picture, she says: “he had the same expression as when Nezhat had emerged from behind the curtains.; for days he kept looking at me in the same way and at night the fear of him kept me awake. I consequently spent a couple of feverish days in bed” (p. 186).

Khanoum’s mind cannot appreciate the difference between her father and her father’s picture. His picture triggers her traumatic memories. Khanoum’s response to the picture causes a mental breakdown and physical illness.

Khanoum cannot go to any crowded place or any gathering of people because they remind her of Tehran and Odessa, that all of her family’s troubles were caused by the gatherings of people. When she was in Tehran she observed the gathering of people in streets and their resistance to aristocratic families. She is reminded of all the suffering that occurred when she was in Tehran and had to escape with the king’s family. And she has never been back to Tehran because of these people. She remembers her unfortunate fate. That hatred which the people had for her family weighed on her thoughts. Escape she could from her father but from those people she could not, and the bonds of her royalty were even more inescapable. People threw stones at them and insulted them. She experiences the same state of affairs in Odessa and she has to escape with her family again. She is not only a victim of war and gender but of her status as a member of the royal family, as a member of the Qajar dynasty.

The reason for Khanoum’s traumatic life was her father’s violence which ultimately caused her to hate all men. Any and all men awaken her traumatic mind. In fact to her, her husband Said was a symbol of her father and Said mistreats her as her father did. Khanoum cannot stand any man after her divorce, all men cause her traumatic memory to awaken and remind her of her suffering. She cannot even think about men, if she does it causes her pain. After thirty years Khanoum has to encounter her father, when she thinks about him, she describes her feelings with these words, “once again I became the child who was struggling at the hands of the monster. Once again I fell on his large bed with the tiger skin at the side and the heads of the hunted animals on the walls” (Behnoud, 2002, p. 402). Khanoum’s traumatic memory starts working when she sees her father. Traumatic memory comes back to her mind by even thinking of encountering her father in thirty years.

When Khanoum sees her father and Said places her hands on her father’s lips she no longer feels anything. When she is conscious again, she is lying on a bed surrounded by nurses. She says them: “I had suddenly felt dead at that moment: I was finished and saw my spirit leave my body. I then seemed to be reliving my life and my childhood pains came back. I saw my mother, Nezhat, our home in Tehran and the man who was beating my poor

mother (Behnoud, 2002, p. 407-408). This setting brings back all of the traumatic occurrences despite the fact that one of the chief functions of human memory is to forget traumatic events. An aftermath of a traumatic experience is a complicated process. Khanoum is reminded her all tragedies of her life when she encounters her father. Every time she even thinks about her father, she is confronted by the ghosts of her mother and Nezhat, who had fallen in the well. "Post memory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because the connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation" (Hirsch, 1997, p. 22).

Sophie in *Sophie's Choice* knows she has to heal herself and that she has a long way to being cured. She tries but experiences her trauma once again. Her body and her mind were destroyed in the war. She tries to retreat into music as an escape, but music awakens her traumatized mind again and pushes her into a deep depression. When Sophie talks to Hoss about her experience with a homosexual woman in prison who wants to rape her in the prison, it activates her traumatic memory. "Like a strip of film run at antic jerky speed through the projector, she saw that morning's mad charade, saw Wilhelmine's mop of flaming hair draw back from her groin, the famished damp lips parted in a petrified perfect O, eyes sparkling with terror" (Styron, 2000, p. 285). It seems as if she is back in prison and is enduring life as a prisoner once again.

At another time when Sophie listens to the radio and hears about the hangings of Nazi commanders she becomes very glad but at the same time she feels sick because those names reminds her of the things that she wants to forget. This reaction occurred once before when she sees a picture of Rudolf Hoss with a rope around his neck. Sophie wants to escape her traumatic memory and does not want to hear the names again.

One day Sophie goes to the library and encounters a librarian behind the desk with a black and white engraved nameplate identifying him. His engraved nameplate reminds her of a Nazi, of Warsaw, of all of her personal disasters. Her traumatic memory is activated and it makes Sophie ill and very weak. Sophie cannot recognize the difference between a true Nazi soldier and the librarian. The traumatic memory takes over her mind and her body reverts to its responses to the trauma.

## **Conclusion**

There are similarities and differences between the female characters of *The Knot in The Rug* and *Sophie's Choice*. Although both Sophie and Khanoum have experienced war, Sophie is more damaged by war than Khanoum. Traces of the destruction war has wrought upon her are clearer and sharper than the more indirect effects on Khanoum and the other female characters of *The Knot in The Rug*. In the case of Khanoum, the reader forgets that Khanoum has suffered through multiple wars in multiple countries, and that she is a victim of them all. Perhaps her experiences seem less distinct because she is in touch with the other experiences in her life, but Sophie has no such distractions: to her, war is vivid and ever-present. The societies in which they live play at least some part in their different responses to their trauma. The society and the family which Khanoum lives in is more traditional than

Sophie's family and society. Perhaps this keeps Khanoum from seeing herself clearly. Sophie knows she is mentally sick and needs to heal, but Khanoum never thinks about such matters.

Patriarchal societies make women into victims of their gender. Women are consigned to positions of little or no importance in such environments. This relegation of women to insignificance causes mental stress which results in psychological disorders in women. Although there are some similarities and differences between the female characters of the two novels, both of the novels' protagonists are victims of their patriarchal societies. They experience war, but their most significant mental problems are not related to war. Indeed, the reader may sometimes even forget that there is a war in the novels, becoming engrossed instead in the stories of the daily lives of the characters. The wars fade into a distant historical background whose effects linger to the present day, placing stresses on the passive and silent female characters. There is no trace of resistance in these women. The novels show another side of war, one which is often overlooked. They describe individuals' personal lives and they delve into the very intimate lives of women who are not just characters, but who are people, describing war from their points of view in a way which dismisses their battles and victories and brings to the forefront the effects of war on the everyday lives of its noncombatant victims, victims who slowly, hesitantly, reveal details of their personal lives, wishes, and problems which show war's other side.

## **Works Cited**

- Bayer, G. (2018). Trauma and the Literature of War. In J. R. Kurtz, *Trauma and Literature* (pp. 213-225).
- Behnoud, M. (2002). *Khanoum*. Tehran: Elm Publication.
- Behnoud, M. (2012). *The Knot in the Rug*. Berkshire: Garent Publishing.
- Brown, L. S. (1995). Not Outside The Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma. In C. Caruth, *Trauma Explorations in Memory* (pp. 100-112). Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University.
- Carroll, J. (2012). The Extremes of Conflict in Literature: Violence, Homicide, and War . In V. A. Todd K Shackelford, *Oxford Handbook of Violence, Homicide* (pp. 413-434). Oxford University Press.
- Caruth, C. (1995). *Trauma Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University.
- Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, and History*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press.
- Diedrich, A. (2014). The Grey and the Coloured Truth": Memory and Post-memory in George Tabori's Holocaust Plays. *Journal of Literature and Trauma Studies*, 1-21.
- Felman, S. (2002). *The Juridical Unconscious Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth*. Harvard University Press.
- Heidarizadeh, N. (2015). The Significant Role of Trauma in Literature and Psychoanalysis. *Procedia- Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 788-795.

- Hirsch, M. (1997). *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*. Cambridge : Harvard University Press.
- Horn, M. (2013). Pleasantly Easy”: Discourses of the Suffering Child in Rwanda Postgenocide. *Journal of Literature and Trauma Studies*, 27- 44.
- Lifton, R. J. (1986). *The Nazi Doctors Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide*. New York: Basic Books.
- Machiko, O. (2008). Becoming a Feminist Writer: Representation of the Subaltern in Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra*. In E. a. Emenyonu, *African Literature Today* (pp. 60-70). Mangal Plaza: Heben Publishers Plc.
- Nguyen, V. T. (2013). Remembering War, Dreaming Peace: On Cosmopolotanism, Compassion and Literature. In S. L. A, *Four Decades On; Vietnam, the United States, and The Legacies of the Second Indochina War* (pp. 132-154). Tripadvisor: Duke University Press.
- Styron, W. (2000). *Sophie Choice*. New York: Rosetta Books LLC.
- Tal, K. (1991). Speaking the Language of Pain: Vietnam War Literature in the Context of a Literature of Trauma. In P. K. Jackson, *In Fourteen Landing Zones: Approaches to Vietnam War Literature* (pp. 217-248). Iowa: University of Iowa Press.
- Vice, S. (2005). . *Holocaust Fiction from William Styron to Benjamin Wilkomirski*. Oxfordshire: Routledge.
- Whitehead, A. (1998). Open to suggestion: Hypnosis and History in Pat Barker's *Regeneration*. *Modern Fiction Studies*, 674-694.