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by 32r23r Fwa3f2

Submission date: 22-Aug-2024 03:02PM (UTC+0700)

Submission ID: 2435986948

File name: MORFOLOGI_VOL_2_DESEMBER_2024_Page_1-10.pdf (1.22M)

Word count: 4784

Character count: 24521



Kate: A Voice to Sexual Abuse Trauma in Helen Benedict's *Sand Queen*

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Abstract, war trauma and its relationship to women in regions of conflict are conceptualized by the confusion of identities between male and female identity, soldiering, and even immigration issues. The majority of combat literature has been written by men, but *Sand Queen* distinguishes apart because it emphasizes the viewpoint of the female character and author. The story of Kate develops to depict the gruesome details and complexities of the conflict. Her experience demonstrates that women face particular challenges throughout combat as well as in civilian life. In *Sand Queen*, the consequences of the war trauma can be seen in the characters' reactions throughout the dialogical narrative that recounts the terrible experiences of a female soldier.

Keywords: soldiering, Kate, *Sand Queen*

1. DISCUSSION

The 19-year-old protagonist, Kate Brady, goes through several situations that have an impact on her relationships and sense of self. Before enlisting in the army, Kate deals with persistent men/ women issues. Her lover thinks she has too soft and gentle of a disposition for combat and that army service is not suitable for girls, while her father desires a son, not Kate. Her father and her fiancée both exhibit the stereotypical male viewpoint. Due to these reasons, Kate decides to challenge her environmental ideologies and joins the army: "I was sick of being the kind of girl people patted on the head...the girl everybody smiled at but nobody listened to" (Benedict, 2011:40). By joining the army, Kate hopes to overcome her sense of inferiority as a result of her rejection of marginalization and voicelessness. Her moral decision to enlist in the army was mostly motivated by her desire for social recognition. Kate appeared to have led a typical life before enlisting in the army, but a more thorough examination reveals that this was merely a fleeting, delicate, and readily shatterable illusion. Her boyfriend Tyler disapproved of her decision to enlist in the military and did not want to see her lose her charming tenderness from childhood, but he was unaware that Kate had grown weary of being the kind girl that was required in American culture. Kate had had enough of being the girl that people gave pats on the head. She thus attempted to pierce the delicate surface. Her desire to be acknowledged, appreciated, and important drove her to become a soldier. Kate decided to enlist after hearing the Army recruiter speak about the honor of serving one's nation, saying, "I wanted to do something impressive like that, something that'd make people sit up and take

notice” (Benedict, 2011: 40). She yearned to leave the American civic society, which devalued the contributions of women.

“It’s the biggest frigging spider I’ve ever seen in my life”, Kate remarks in *Sand Queen*’s opening scene (Benedict, 2011: 5). Kate is traumatized since she is not allowed any privacy or personal space because she is living in horrible conditions and sharing a bed with two other female soldiers and 39 males from her unit. Through Kate’s narration, readers will quickly discover that the spider was used to threaten and harass her sexually. It was also used to scare the male soldier who was sleeping next to her. During the summer military boot camp, Kate demonstrates her resilient nature and strength. Following enlisting, this girlish desire will soon be dashed by males due to the army being a masculine organization that is demeaning to women in particular. In her military group, Kate is unable to rely on male troops for their sexual words and ongoing harassment, Benedict states, “Kate’s comrades... sneered or hooted every time a woman walked by, calling them sluts, dykes, or both” (Benedict, 2011: 62). As a result, she endures numerous forms of abuse lacking complaining up until her commander makes attempts to rape her; when she attempts to complain about this, she gets moved to another location, which results in the death of her friend who was trying to assist her. Kate falls apart due to her inability to tolerate stress. Resilience is crucial for overcoming trauma, according to research, and this idea penetrates the whole of *Sand Queen* (Southwick et al., 2011).

The brutality of war, as reflected in the painful reality of everyday combat duty, causes stress for Kate. The conflict between Kate as a warrior and her civilian state is sparked by this traumatic environment. Van der Hart asserts that “when we are traumatized, we have different selves—each with its voice—made a lot of sense” (Caruth, 2014: 180). The majority of the events in *Sand Queen* take place in Camp Bucca in Basra, Iraq. The Camp is shown as a place where two distinct cultures. This view is backed up by the Camp’s symbolic significance as well as the metal fence that isolates the American soldiers from the Iraqi people by blocking the prison’s entry as Naema states: “They have barricaded themselves in here, safe and blind behind their wire and checkpoints, while the rest of us, sisters and daughters, parents and grandparents, are out here in the real world, suffering the real-world suffering” (Benedict, 2011:18). The phrase describes how one adopts critical viewpoints while observing and reacting morally and empathetically to the pain of others. It alludes to the idea that the root of physical and mental pain in people is what they have in common with them. They both concentrate on the devastating aspects of this awful environment in addition to their traumatized response to its oppressive atmosphere, which is heightened by the stench of blood following a terrorist attack. They tell how they are covered in blood and how they are

completely unaware of their bodies, themselves, and everything. Their personal experiences which have a direct connection to the combat zone in Iraq, combined with bloody visuals, rotting corpses, flattened bodies, and polluted air, all have a significant impact on how their traumatized awareness and panic reactions are formed. The narrative depicts three phases of Kate's life: an ordinary citizen preceding the war, a female soldier who experienced trauma during the conflict, and an army soldier who later developed post-traumatic stress disorder. The physical and psychic devastation of war has caused a considerable gap between Kate's original version and her latest one.

Rape and sex discrimination are the primary factors that makeup Kate's traumatic narrative. She recounts the two soldiers trying to seduce her. Kate tries to file an official report of her sexual misconduct, but she is afraid that doing so will turn Camp Bucca into truck vehicles that are often assaulted and bombed, putting her life in constant danger. She is powerless to challenge the dominance of the masculine society within her unit of service, which pushes her into post-traumatic stress disorder and ultimately to suicide. The trauma that Kate experienced as an outcome of the war might be seen as the root of her ongoing feelings of hatred, disgust, as well as guilt. With her guilt-related feelings in special, Kate feels too filthy (Benedict, 2011: 221). She hopes to find respect when the military is changed by colleagues who view any female soldier as nothing except an object of desire into sexual abuse and humiliation. *Sand Queen*, by which Kate is referred, is a mirror of the dehumanizing and degradation that female warriors experience in this story. Benedict explains this in the following lines:

"The majority of the people who use this pejorative word are members of the military, and it is peculiar to the Iraq War. It refers to a woman who is not beautiful but who receives a great deal of attention from males due to the fact that there are so few women in the world...In the words of one of the soldiers, She's a mattress. The way in which they speak about women is really revolting. I made the decision to use it not just because someone has said it about Kate, but also because it encapsulates the demeaning attitude that a disproportionate number of males in the military have about women in the military"
(Benedict, 2011: 67)

Kate's consciousness is split since she is living two lives at once. According to Stacey Peebles, "War is a kind of second life, where many of the rules of civilian life don't apply" (Peebles, 2011: 20). Many war regulations aren't relevant to the civilian lifestyle. The elements

of Kate's second life in the Army and the traumatic elements of the war made her traumatic identity and her PTSD, in contradiction to the wonderful aspects of her previous life, which she misses and yearns for. The stunning scenery of gardens and parks in America subtly contrasts with the desert of Camp Bucca, where the sun is scorching in the sky and its rose-shining sand. With the unfamiliar new identity, she has developed as a result of each of those images, she is now caught in an unsolvable story involving trauma and PTSD. She is a different person now, afraid of starting a new life or having a courtship addressing trauma and gender jointly, to demonstrate how we may consider trauma as offering a sort of vestibule between the gendered spaces of public and private, Herman quotes Virginia Woolf's antiwar essay, *Three Guineas* contended that the "public and private worlds are inseparably connected ... the tyrannies and servilities of one are the tyrannies and servilities of the other" (Woolf 1966 [1938]: 147; quoted in Herman 2015: 32).

In every manner possible, the male soldiers in Kate's group demonstrate their masculine dominance. They send her to the border checkpoint alone and make sexist remarks about her inside the camp. However, Kate's emotional and physical struggle only starts after her leader, Kormick, tries to rape her. Jacqueline E. Lawson, a literary and intellectual scholar, addresses discrimination against women enlisting, saying that "war is the sine qua non of maleness, the agency of legitimized violence and the stronghold of undisputed male power where men are free to exercise/exorcise the thinly veiled fear of women that lurks beneath the surface of patriarchal culture" (1991: 56). After Kate swears to kill him once he touches her, Kormick replies, "put that thing down or I'll slap you with an article 91...insubordinate conduct toward an NCO. Not mentioning threatening me with a weapon, tut-tut. That can get you in serious trouble?" (Benedict, 2011: 79).

As a result, she experiences trauma, profound numbness, and a personality change that makes her aggressive. The loss of Yvette and the numbing effects of Kate's psychological anxiety enables her to act more violently on the outside since she is unable to handle the horrors that have been perpetrated upon her. She says "I feel hard and tough and cold inside. I feel like a soldier now. A real robot soldier. I know who I hate and I know who I want to kill. All the rest is bullshit." (Benedict, 2011: 54). Unsurprisingly, Kate is driven by the need for vengeance and the urge to damage and do violent acts, particularly towards people who have wronged her. She experiences ear buzzing and is offered a variety of medications to ease her discomfort, but nothing relieves it. The psychological state Kate suffers from and the hysteria she is imprisoned in are because of the unwanted sexual experiences and the silence she used

due to the culture of silence she lives in, as Louise A. Jackson describes it. (2018: 230). Those female soldiers are suffering from rape trauma syndrome as Carol Harrington argues:

In the 1970s and 1980s, feminists and anti-war activists established a theory that connected rape, torture, and battle as traumatic acts that break down and disorganize the self. For example, rape was linked to torture, and fighting was related to combat. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a sort of significant psychological damage that was said to be produced by the psychosocial model of trauma, which was supposed to prove, via scientific research, that rape, torture, war, and other events that make the person powerless caused extensive psychological harm. (Roger Kurtz, 2018:232)

The novel considers drawing inspiration from the moving testimonies and insights of women who have gone through tragic experiences stemming from their painful pasts. Kate is subjected to physical aggression by the prisoners in the form of a hail of stones. Kate shoots the convicts on an unconscious urge of aggression while experiencing a terrible numbness within her face along with blood on her cheek. This specific response encourages her fractured identity. While she fires, she also claims not to desire to witness any blood or dead bodies. Kate suffers from a serious psychological infraction, to which her traumatic reaction manifests as persistently repressed fury. Her rage is forcefully released because she lacks the skill to control her tension. Whenever Kate is given the chance to beat one of the prisoners, greater amounts of her aggressive behavior manifests. When Kate learns that the person, she hits is Halim al-Jubur, Naema's father, her vindictive reaction to the manner her fury is expressed does not make her feel satisfied; rather, it triggers her emotions of guilt. Because of her feelings of regret, Kate has made a vow to Naema that she would look for her father while he is incarcerated. She is locked in the awful memories of this traumatic episode because the ghost of this guilt continues coming back to torment Kate, again I feel her dad's head beneath my foot, see the blood clotting in his crushed face, and hear him trying to breathe (Benedict, 2011: 242). In addition, the DSM-III's description of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) includes specifics on probable stressors. There are a variety of traumatic experiences that are discussed, including those that are experienced by an individual, such as rape or assault, as well as those that are experienced in the company of other people, such as natural disasters or military conflicts. It then presents a picture of the many ways in which the horrifying event may be relived by the audience. To be more specific, the conversation sheds light on how the past event continues to have an impact on the present, sometimes to the extent that the individual becomes detached from the present moment, parts of the event are relived, and the individual acts as if they are experiencing the event at that very moment (American Psychiatric

Association, 1980:236). An argument that post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a disease of memory has been put forth by several critical theorists, including Ian Hacking (1995) and Ruth Leys (2000) (Leys 2000: 2). In addition, and maybe even more so than a memory problem, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in its first clinical manifestation might be considered as a time disorder, or, to put it another way, a disease of the sense of temporality. This is because PTSD is characterized by a lack of ability to remember memories. Both the present and the future are unstable temporalities in those who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); the past has the potential to devour the present and strangle the future.

The name *Sand Queen* perfectly captures both Kate's tenacious will and the harsh environment of both combat and the human brain. By revealing her confused situation as a female warrior at the outset of the novel and displaying her weakness and fragile struggle, a portion of her earlier image of herself being the strong, masculine-style personality she thought to develop before enrolling seems ruined "All day long I try to act like a hard ass, but it just isn't me, she says. I can't be convincing" (Benedict, 2011: 57). Although Benedict establishes a framework for narration that places sexual assault attempts at the roots of Kate's traumatic state, Benedict conducts to construct disruptive circumstances that focus on the gender-based trauma of masculinity. In a certain sense, Kate experiences trauma and violence that shatters her sense of self just as a female in addition to being a soldier, and that causes her to lose faith in both herself and those around her. Benedict makes her criticism of the military culture audible on numerous occasions. Naema states:

"It is the business of war to be unjust and cruel, I realize this. To imprison and kill the innocent. To crush hearts and families, cities and lives. And yet we humans seem no more able to stop waging war than we are able to stop breathing." (Benedict, 2011:195).

The severity of Kate's psychological disturbance has affected her ability to operate emotionally and cognitively. Her terrible reaction does not match the pleasant and wonderful tone. "She flinches and scoots to the far side of the bed, pulls herself to her feet, and backs up against the wall" (Benedict, 2011: 28). This kind of body-affirming is her reaction to her traumatizing experience, which made her less confident in herself, her external world, and those around her. In addition, the bodily discomfort that results from her traumatic awareness "shoots through her neck and her mouth twists into a grimace. Her face feels hard and immobile...she doesn't feel like talking" (Benedict, 2011: 47). The traumatized does not like to talk, but the conscious retaining of a painful reality necessitates a social framework that

prioritizes and safeguards the traumatized individual, Herman in her book *Trauma and Recovery* focuses on the social role developed by connections with friends, lovers, relatives, and family to enable traumatized one to testimony and narrate the terrible events that he \ she experienced (Herman, 2015). Geoffrey Hartman (1995:537) argues that “literature can help us to read the wound of trauma” and Joshua Pederson (2018:97), sees that it is very important for veterans to share their horror stories about war with groups and also through literature for healing from trauma:

[the] veterans to discuss their experiences of the atrocities that occurred during wartime, as well as support groups for victims of domestic violence, in which women recounted their accounts of the terrible things that were done to them and their children. The relationship between trauma and story is complex and intertwined in all of these and other contexts. As a result, it should not come as a surprise that when trauma theory emerged on the scene in the middle of the 1990s, some of its most prominent advocates started suggesting that literature, and literary stories in particular, could have a privileged (if not unique) value for conveying our most profound psychological sufferin”gs.

The technique of being anonymous is used in the narrator's perspective of The Soldier, a character that mirrors Kate herself, to suggest a disregard for the social context, it symbolically conveys the departure from people and separation from the local community. Kate is recognized in this way by her scarred identity, which gives her trauma. Having worries that she might hear cars backfire...a shout or a scream” (Benedict, 2011: 234) causes Kate to say prayers not to hurt anyone or not to do something dumb (253). Her perception of being haunted by ghosts, which represents Kate's tormented psyche, serves as the focal point for her anxiety. Outside the glass doors in her parent's house, she observes ghosts of soldiers who have died in battle staring at her, Mr. Al-Jubur s face, the faces of many prisoners, and the faces of the men who attempted to rape her. She is prevented from realizing things by a condition of non-realization, which is largely triggered by her painful memory. She finds herself in settings characterized by growing passive and defensive reactions as a result of this specific PTSD event. She takes pills all day (253) to prevent any traumatic memories and violent dreams. These memories are purposefully suppressed by her.

The distinction between Kate's exterior clothing and her body represents the identity crisis. She appears to be the center of attention in her relationships more so than her uniform because of the way she looks. Kate has limited emotional and psychological support because the unit only has Third Eye and Yvette as female soldiers. The identical two men who tried to rape Kate also commit the crime against Third Eye who later blames Kate for failing to protect her

and shield her from sexual assault. With Third Eye being excluded from any relationships within the camp after being raped and eventually perpetrating suicide, this burden only serves to exacerbate Kate's suffering and trauma. The previous company Yvette, on the other hand, helps Kate establish a genuine alliance. This Latina soldier shows her concern for the mental and psychological state of Kate after the rape attempt and demands action against the incident. Yvette persuades Kate to report her exposure to the rape incident, and she even suggests to accompany Kate to a female major named Sara Hopkins in the hopes that this powerful woman will be helpful. Instead of helping them, Hopkins sends the two females to a riskier assignment which leads to Yvette's death. The armed services cultural bureaucracy in particular and society at large appear to have the same mindset of marginalizing women. Essentially, as Herman concedes, aggression against women should be disregarded.

However, the true state of affairs in the lives of women was concealed inside the realm of their personal and private lives. A major barrier to awareness was formed by the highly valued concept of seclusion, which had the effect of rendering Women's experience almost completely invisible. When people discussed their sexual or domestic experiences, they were inviting public shame, mockery, and skepticism about what they had been through. The fear and humiliation that women experienced led to their quiet, and the silence of women provided permission for every sort of sexual and domestic exploitation during the time
(Herman, 2015: 28)

The army adds to the misery and suffering by placing both of these young girls in a vehicle convoy, so they frequently come under bombardment and are killed by explosive devices. The only source of optimism Kate has to face the challenges of her service is her relationship with Yvette. Three times mortars strike their vehicle one of them results in Yvette's death. Because the move was caused by Yvette's assistance Kate blames herself that she is responsible for Yvette's passing. With Yvette's passing, Kate loses her final link to anyone and is thrust into a dangerously stressful traumatic consequence. Herman explains, "Traumatic events destroy the victim's fundamental assumptions about the safety of the world, the positive value of the self, and the meaningful order of creation." (Herman, 2015: 51)

The portrayal of male characters as powerful is a noteworthy aspect of this novel. Benedict is successful at generating difficult situations between two ladies who are morally and mentally on opposing sides. The promotion of male dominance and patriarchy by military authorities does not, however, imply that all male soldiers abuse and exploit women. To

prevent Kate from being sexually assaulted, Jimmy and DJ build a powerful partnership. Jimmy is morally honest when he offers to help Kate if she decides to report the attempted assault. In the wake of Yvette's passing, Jimmy progressively expresses his love for her. He does want to assist Kate, and his motivations are good. He expresses saying: *I love you, and I want us to help each other when we get home* (Benedict, 2011: 285). Kate, however, has become completely absorbed by her present circumstances and is unable to create a relationship out of the destruction of her personal life. She then rejects his request for love and affection by saying, *I don't want to be the person I am with you, Jimmy. I hate who I am here. I hate who I am even with you* (286). Kate is dealing with a psychologically challenging circumstance that is typical of trauma victims. In this term, Herman explains:

The severe breakdown in fundamental trust, the typical emotions of shame, remorse, and inferiority, and the urge to avoid reminders of the trauma that may be found in social life are all factors that contribute to the retreat from intimate connections when someone is experiencing trauma. In spite of this, the dread caused by the traumatic incident makes the urge for protective bonds even more intense. Since this is the case, the traumatized individual regularly switches between isolating themselves and anxiously clinging to other people (Herman, 2015: 56)

Although she declines Jimmy's offer, Kate believes that he will still be waiting for her to emotionally stabilize or at the very least, assist her in getting through her sorrow. Kate exhibits the behaviors of a traumatized individual oscillating between scared avoidance of deep relationships and being open to interactions. She is driven by her survival instinct to go to Jimmy's house, abandoning her family, her fiancé, and the hospital in which she is receiving treatment for her injury to the spinal. She seeks relationships and security. Jimmy grants Kate a place in his residence to stay in while she recovers, even though he currently has a girlfriend. Kate responds "It makes me feel safer than I've felt in months. Or maybe it's only knowing he's so close." (303) and here, proximity is essential. The notion that trauma victims, particularly female soldiers, cannot handle personal relationships the way regular individuals can is one of the notions this book espouses. Kate needs to be near enough but refuses to get into a relationship. They experience trouble building healthy connections when their minds are damaged and they are experiencing mental difficulties. Since a strong bond must be built to help the traumatized recover from her wartime experiences, Kate picks Jimmy since he is aware of both her physical and psychological requirements as an anxious, broken woman.

To conclude, *Sand Queen* involves truly connecting with someone else's encounters, respecting their suffering, and taking on the obligations of dealing with the understanding, not merely listening or watching. It highlights the importance of listening to stories as well as sharing them, highlighting how important it may be to identify a moment of association amid upheaval like that caused by war. In the backdrop of the Iraq War, Benedict examines the numerous facets of trauma that women have gone through. Experienced in Kate's story, Benedict highlights the traumatic events that female soldiers suffer from, which is sexual abuse.

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