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**WOMEN IN WAR:
A STUDY OF *THE NIGHTINGALE* BY KRISTIN HANNAH
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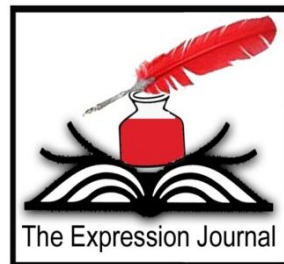
Abstract

War literature is not a new genre. Beginning with Greek to the modern literature, war has been a theme of many literary texts. But the narration is highly male-centered, as war literature glorifies men who leave their family to fight for their country. It is their narrative; they get medals and make long speeches while women take the backseat. However, the role women played especially in War World II cannot be ignored. The trauma that war carries is an important aspect of war literature. The present paper talks about Kristin Hannah's novel *The Nightingale* which narrates the story of two French sisters stuck in Nazi occupied France who leave no stone unturned in saving lives of many while putting a lot at stake. The Anti- Semitism, rape, mother-child relationship, dichotomy of choice between family and nation, form the basis of the novel. Hannah is poignant, brave, honest and realistic in her narration. She depicts what it means to be a woman, a mother, wife and a sister during war and how women are expected to return to their normal lives once war gets over. It is a novel of lifetime and it impresses in every read. The present paper analyzes Kristin Hannah's *The Nightingale*, examining its portrayal of women's roles and experiences during WW II. It explores how the novel challenges the male-centric war narrative by highlighting women's contributions, sacrifices, and challenges. Themes of Anti-Semitism, motherhood, and choices between family and nation are discussed, emphasizing the characters' resilience and post-war reintegration. The study underscores the novel's depiction of women's strength amid adversity and their complex societal re-entry.

Keywords

War Literature, World War II, Patriarchal Narration, Trauma, Anti-Semitism, Nation, Mother-Child Relationship, Rape.

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“For my Mothers’ Day gift this year
I don’t want candy or flowers
I want an end to killing.
We who have given life
Must be dedicated to preserving it.
Please, talk peace!

(“Another Mother for Peace”)

War has been an integral part of human civilization and the stories of war ravage literature. Whether it is Greek literature or Indian epics, war has been dealt magnanimously. The war heroes have been welcomed, revered, and talked about. The details have been filled with heroism, bravery, blood and horror. “Fascinated by violence, readers often find in war literature a questionable vicarious experience that may, at times, approach voyeurism, and which explains in particular the success of war films, with their easily appropriated images of destruction and suffering.” (Brosman 97). The genre hence is quite popular among readers as Franco Fornai opines, “The war phenomenon... is in the unconscious of every human being.” (qtd. in “The Functions of War Literature” 97) But the trauma that war carries, leave indelible marks on generations to follow. Hence, many writers have come up with the stories of the battlefield and the impact on family. G.B. Shaw, a very famous Modern dramatist, expressed his views on the futility of war in his famous work *Arms and the Man*. Poets like Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen painted real picture of battlefield in their poems. Yet, war has remained an unavoidable dilemma of 20th century.

War, however, is not only about bloodshed in the battlefield; it has layers. The deaths do not occur in the field of battle alone and about 50 percent of World War II casualties were civilians. By the end of 1992 more than 46 million people had lost their home; about 36 million of these were women and girls. (Turpin 4) Hence, the role that women played in World War II is the prime focus of this study. Women have been active participants in war, but once the war gets over they do not live on it; rather return to their roles of being wife and mother showing no physical signs of the horrors they have been through. Hope Norman Coulter in her

introduction to 'Civil War Women: American Women Shaped by Conflict in Stories by Alcott, Chopin, Welty and Others' says about women who stay at home during war:

"Someone packs the knapsacks of those warriors and bids them goodbye. Someone turns back to mundane labors, to the day-to-day responsibilities of a life that has suddenly, drastically changed. Someone runs the small farms and businesses that feed the hyperactive economics of wartime. Someone rears the next generation, and answers its questions about killing this one." (qtd. in "Reshaping the War Experience: Women's War Fiction" 16)

Getting back to one's normal life when one's world is falling apart; staying strong for the children and keeping them protected while constantly hoping about the survival of their husbands, fathers, or brothers is no easy task. Unlike the war fiction penned down by men, which often discusses combat details, revolution, bloodshed, trench details, women's literature "adds a human dimension to the study of war and an appreciation for the trauma endured by women who have experienced war." (Blackmore n.p) *The Nightingale* by Kristin Hannah is a story of such women during World War II in Nazi occupied France. The novel narrates the story of two French sisters—one calm and quiet, dependable and family oriented Vianne; the other rash and reckless, brave and fierce Isabelle; who separately yet together fight for their people against the rising atrocities of Germans. Having lost their mother when they were quite young and being left with a father who turned disinterested, avoiding responsibilities, unloving and uncaring after returning from World War I, the sisters have a hard time coping up. That is what war probably does to people; it robs one of emotions, making a hollow of heart. The story begins with the description of a perfect of life of Vianne with her husband Antoine and her loving daughter Sophie amidst the rising chances of Second World War. Her seemingly perfect world falls into pieces when Antoine has to go to join war, leaving Vianne with the responsibility of her daughter. Vianne, who as a mother, seeks ways to avoid any danger, keeping her family safe, listening to all the imposing orders of Germans until she can no longer bear. She cannot let Sophie, her daughter, grow into a world where people don't revolt against injustice. The novel takes a grim turn when Vianne's best friend, a Jew, is sent to concentration camp leaving behind her toddler Ari to Vianne's responsibility. The novel through the character of Vianne shows the extent to which a mother can go to save her children. In the novel she says, "I want to protect Sophie..., but what good is safety if she has to grow up in a world where people disappear without a trace because they pray to a different God?" (Hannah 262) From sending her rebellious sister Elizabeth away to save her children to killing a German to save her sister, Vianne emerges as a hero. She takes up the responsibility of saving Jewish children while putting her daughter and herself at stake. What starts with saving her best friend's son, goes on to forging identity papers for other Jewish children under the nose of a German- Vianne's bravery is impeccable.

Vianne's everyday inner battle on whether to take favors from the German or not is the central issue in her life. During the Nazi occupied France, the Germans often billeted in French houses. With increasing restrictions and decreasing rations, procurement of food became difficult. The novel encapsulates the sad fate of women who waited in lines to get meager amount of food for the family. Amidst all this, Vianne is caught in the dichotomy of being a perfect French citizen and being a mother. She chooses to take the favor of the German billeted in her house to procure food for Sophie, though she often went hungry. Oniango refers to this aspect of motherhood thus, "In conditions of food scarcity, women are more likely than men to give up their food so that children can eat." (qtd in "Many Faces, Women Confronting War" 8)

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Vianne is judged for taking help from their enemy, but “Was Vianne really supposed to let Sophie starve to prove her loyalty to France?” (Hannah 222) She even goes to the extent of accepting her physical violation to save her children. Hannah very poignantly describes the agony of a mother who is helpless but possesses insurmountable inner strength.

Mass rape or even individual rape has been a part of wars where mass rape is seen as a systematic genocide based on ‘patriarchal definition of ethnicity’ (Turpin 6) Rape as an issue is extensively discussed by Kristin Bumiller in her article “Rape as a Legal Symbol: An Essay on Sexual Violence and Racism” where she describes consent and non consent as a parameter by which the society judges any act of sexual violence against women. But the patriarchal society fails to understand that consent can be forced, and rape is not just a sexual act. Rape is violence against a woman’s body, her soul and her sex in general. It is a violation of her private space, her freedom and a way to punish her for crossing her boundary. Hence rape culture has become an important discourse. Vianne’s sexual assault in the novel is both coercive and consensual. She is forced to accept the violation of her body to save Rachel’s son Ari and she doesn’t think twice before choosing the child over herself. Yet she could never muster up the courage to break this news to her husband after he returns from war. As a mother, she cannot dare to abort the baby she conceived out of rape; as a wife she cannot tell her husband that she has been touched by another man; and as a woman she cannot expect her husband or society to understand that the rape was not her fault. Unlike other crimes where the victim is protected, rape is a crime where the blame falls on the women for luring the rapist or not trying ‘enough’ to retaliate. Vianne in the novel thinks of sharing her grief with her husband,

“Now was the time to tell him the truth. He might understand that rape was torture and that she’d been a prisoner, too. It wasn’t her fault, what had happened to her. She believed that, but she didn’t think fault mattered in a thing like this.” (Hannah 394)

Getting back to mass rape as a systematic genocide in World War II, the Anti-Semitism of Hitler is not a hidden story. His idea of purgation which involved wiping out every Jew from the face of earth was met through various means. The stories from concentration camps are full of incidents of rape of Jewish women and girls as a means to (i) quench the sexual thirst, (ii) to produce children having German genes in order to wipe out ‘pure’ Jewish breed as they called it. Hence it was a systematic genocide in a patriarchal society where ethnicity is decided on the basis of the father of the child.

Isabelle as the younger sister is a rebel since her childhood. As a child she revolted against abandonment by her father and then her sister, followed by rebelling against baseless rules in her boarding schools. She tries hard to fit in but on her own terms, and seeing everything in black and white Eliza grows up to be a woman who knows what she wants in her life. She has never depended on anyone else to fight for her rights even in her childhood, and she refuses to sit back at home and wait for the government to do something. The perspective of society towards women’s contribution in war is evident in the lines of Christopher who says, “Don’t be mad...it’s a fact that women are useless in war. Your job is to wait for our return.” (Hannah 27) But Hannah, through Elizabeth’s character, makes sure to let the world know the role women played in World War II. She based her character in honour of the famous Nightingale, a Resistance operative who helped many downed Airmen to find a safe route from Pyrenees to France. Isabelle is strong headed, and brave and no danger deters her from her goal. The blood of her warrior father runs in her veins and she leaves no stone unturned in fighting against the Germans. As a mere eighteen year old girl, her determination is unfathomable. The novel encapsulates the daring choices she makes and the loss she accepts as

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a result of her choices. It is a choice between dependence and independence, between love and life, between family and nation, between self and the society. Every choice is difficult but Isabelle (Nightingale) is fierce. She says, "If there's one thing I never do, it's stop" (Hannah 235) She starts with distributing pamphlets against the Nazis, gradually turning bolder by saving downed airmen under the name of Nightingale. She saves a number of them until she is caught and tortured. Hannah paints a moving picture of Isabelle in custody of Germans and the near death situation she faces. Turpin in her article "Many Faces, Women Confronting War" talks about how the torture of political prisoners was gendered. (5) Isabelle is almost at the brink of death before she is released, and she becomes unrecognizable because of what she had been through.

Emily Yellin in her book *Our Mothers' War* quotes a bride from the book *1942 Good Housekeeping* regarding love and marriage in War, "Perhaps my reasoning is perverse. But it seems to me that the world's chaos and uncertainty are reasons for marriage, not for postponement." (4) Women have been strong in their proclamations of love in hard times because they find strength in love. It is love that drives them- either it is love for husband, children, lover, or nation. Hence they do not wait for the war to end to fall in love or choose marriage. Hannah through the character of Isabelle has also shown what it is like to fall in love during war. The aim of this love angle is not to transform the novel into a love story; rather to unravel how difficult is the achievement of small happiness in times of crisis. Her feelings for Gaetan are not carnal; she just wants even for a moment to be embraced in his arms and forget the grim reality of the world around. For at least once in her life she wants to feel loved. "She wanted to bottle how safe she felt in this moment, so she could drink of it later when loneliness and fear left her parched." (Hannah 236) She who was deprived of love all her life found her love for Gaetan, her nephew, sister and father as her strength, a reason to fight for a better tomorrow.

Emily Yellin in "Our Mothers' War" further writes: "And from my mother's writings, I was understanding for the first time what ultimate sacrifices women made for the war. While women were not usually the ones killed in combat, they were the ones who bravely had to endure the news, and keep going after husbands, sons, and brothers were killed." (xii) The present novel of study begins with Vianne, old and sick, opening her old trunk and remembering her life in France. At the old age home, her son hands her a letter from France, an invitation attend to passeurs' reunion in France which takes Vianne into a reverie. Her son, unknown of his mother's past, not even in the faintest of his memory realizes that his mother could be war hero too. He automatically believes his father to be a war veteran, and his mother to be a soft, submissive woman in need of protection. When he ultimately realizes that Vianne did contribute in war against Germans, he asks, "What did you do in the war, Mom?" to which Vianne very coolly replies, "I survived." (Hannah 436). The dumbstruck son next asks, "Why have I never heard anything about all this?" (Hannah 436), and Vianne sums up the reason beautifully, thus, "Men tell stories. Women get on with it. For us it was a shadow war. They were no parades for us when it was over, no medals or mentions in history books. We did what we had to during the war, and when it was over, we picked up the pieces and started our lives over." (Hannah 436)

Hence, Kristin Hannah has very deftly pointed out the role women played in World War II with all their responsibilities, fears, traumas, having 'a steel exterior while protecting their candyfloss heart' (Hannah 218). It is a novel of being and believing, of broken dreams and rising hopes, of lost lives and won battles, of light at the end of the tunnel. It is story of family

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and friends, of mothers and children, of individual and society, of religion and race. The novel is beautiful, strong, touching. Hannah has dealt with the characters with courage and grace, with passion and resilience and it enthralls in every read. She brings to the centre the women's forgotten stories of war, and the difficult choice they make. She teaches the lesson of remembering and forgetting, holding on and letting go.

"Men who went out to battle, grim and glad;
Children, with eyes that hate you, broken and mad."

["Survivors" lines 9-10]

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