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**Women's/War Stories**  
The Female Gothic and Women's War Trauma  
in Helen Benedict's *Sand Queen*

**T**he American war novel has traditionally registered issues of masculinity, individuality, brotherhood, trauma, and memory. As more American women serve on the front lines, the conventions of the American war novel may reconfigure to represent the issues that women's soldiering raises. In *Sand Queen*, Helen Benedict narrates the connected stories of a female soldier during the Iraq war and a female Iraqi citizen made a refugee by the conflict; using this novel as a central text, I investigate how the genre of the American war novel can accommodate female experiences, both those of soldier and civilian. Benedict adopts strategies from female Gothic fiction to tell her story, with the result that *Sand Queen* merges conventions from two traditions and in so doing critiques the ideologies that devalue and demean women despite advances in women's rights and roles. As is often the case in the female Gothic, terror and trauma in the novel emerge from psychological experiences as much as from external ones.

The American war novel often traces the journey of a young, inexperienced man through a trial-by-combat to maturity; Crane's *Red Badge of Courage* serves as the prototype for this tradition. Twentieth-century novelists, horrified by the massive destruction of the First World War juxtaposed with its lofty rhetoric, often incorporated a layer of irony that conveyed the author's and frequently the character's disillusionment with the ideals of courage and honor and the society that professed them. While Hemingway's *Farewell to Arms* is perhaps the best known of these novels, many others follow a similar pattern, including Thomas Boyd's *Through the Wheat*, Edith Wharton's *A Son at the Front*, and Willa

Cather's *One of Ours*, although the latter two novels have suffered critically from readers' inability to recognize that women too could write with irony. William March's *Company K* conveys the modern despair and disillusionment of war while representing not one soldier but rather a whole company, a strategy that James Jones develops more fully in his novel of fighting on the Pacific front in World War II, *The Thin Red Line*. Literature of World War II and after tends to emphasize the absurdity of war, from Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* to Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Vietnam literature often relies on postmodern story-telling strategies that fragment the soldier's experience. Recent fictions of the Iraq War, including Kevin Powers' *Yellow Birds*, also use strategies of fragmentation; Powers' novel traces John Bartle's experience through different timelines, deferring the central trauma until it seems to be missing altogether. While popular movies about late twentieth- and early twenty-first century wars, such as *Black Hawk Down*, tend to emphasize the "band of brothers" motif, much canonical war literature focuses on individuals who remain profoundly isolated from their comrades.

Although the above is, obviously, a highly abbreviated history of the American war novel, male experiences remain central. The transformation of youth to adulthood is that of boy to man through the experience of violence; novels that deny the possibility of such transformation in light of the hollowness of social ideals investigate the failure of masculinity and its effects on the individual. In contrast, coming-of-age stories about women tend to center on heterosexual romance, marriage, and home life. Louisa May Alcott's Jo March, for example, learns to accept her mother's domesticity even as she deploys it in the service of boys. Zora Neale Hurston's Janie Crawford becomes a woman when her dream of love shatters. How, then, can the American tradition of the war story accommodate a female soldier as its central figure?

In *Sand Queen*, Benedict imagines the trauma experienced by women who participate in the Iraq war, both that of female U.S. soldiers and of Iraqi citizens. *Sand Queen* follows three narrative threads: the war experiences of Kate Brady, an American soldier serving as an M.P. in Iraq; the disrupted life of Naema Jassim, an Iraqi medical student made a refugee by the American invasion; and the postwar psychiatric treatment of a female soldier, who is initially unnamed but soon revealed to be Kate. Kate and Naema meet briefly in the novel as Naema searches for her missing father and brother, who are being held at the prison that Kate guards, and this encounter binds their narratives. While Kate's story is the imagining of a woman undergoing a soldier's transformation, Naema's story parallels Kate's as that of the civilian who must accommodate the violence of war.

Benedict represents not only two sides of a war but also the clash of two cultures, yet her novel insists on the similarities between Kate's and Naema's experiences as women in cultures that practice compulsory heterosexuality, insist on distinct gendered identities and roles, and rely on violence to enforce those roles.

When a woman enters the U.S. military, she joins a historically male and masculine institution that often builds its practices and codes through gendered behaviors and ideologies. Discussing the practices and ideologies of gender and sexuality in the U.S. military during the Iraq war, political theorists Lindsey Feitz and Joane Nagel describe a "military-sexual complex that provides a critical libidinal structure for war" (217); they argue that the increasing number of women in the military has not altered the dependence of military culture on masculinity but rather heightened it as women have been deployed as sexualized weapons of war and propaganda. They insist that despite the greater presence of women, the realm of the military and combat are "arenas of male sexual aggression, theatres of hypermasculine, heteronormative performance, stages where gender and sexual scripts are enacted and reinforced" (217). Sharon Friedman, a scholar of recent theater of war by women, points out that "both men and women enter into masculinized subject positions within a hierarchal institution that employs gendered norms and rituals to discipline soldiers," including hazing and gendered insults that connect failed soldiering to femininity (597). In her recent study of Iraq war fiction and memoir, Stacey Peebles notes that while the performativity of gender might seem to allow for a wider range of masculine expression, including gestures by women, much writing about the Iraq war suggests the opposite: Peebles argues that "Creating order out of the chaos of war often necessitates many forms of binary thinking," including us against them, masculine against feminine (50). The hyper-gendered world of the military does not appear out of thin air: as Benedict shows, it exaggerates values present in the civilian world.

The highly gendered world of the military suits the conventions of the female Gothic as a hostile world in which women must make their way. In the past thirty or so years, the female Gothic has been defined as specific mode and genre in which women's lives are rendered as horror tales, the familiar and domestic shown as threatening, especially in their normlacy. As Eugenia C. DeLamotte explains in her study of nineteenth-century fiction, "women's Gothic shows women suffering from institutions they feel to be profoundly alien to them and their concerns" (152). To be "alien" is not simply to be different or unknown; it is to be so profoundly different as to be incomprehensible, incompatible, and irreconcilable. In traditional female Gothic tales, institutions such as marriage and motherhood dictate women's

lives, often at the cost of their true desires and inflicting severe psychic damage. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," one of the best-known female Gothic tales, portrays a woman's psychological breakdown under the pressures of middle-class wife- and motherhood. In Margaret Atwood's "Bluebeard's Egg," the Bluebeard figure—a cheating, much-married and divorced doctor—drives his wife into psychological contortions of accommodation and guesswork at his motives and intentions. Both of these female Gothic stories critique the social construction of marriage and wifehood as part of "normal" white middle-class American life. As a mode and convention of writing, the female Gothic has proven to be usefully flexible as a tool for, in Kate Ellis's terms, "speak[ing] of what in the polite world of middle-class culture cannot be spoken" (7).

Despite the frequent use of supernatural and fantastic elements, the female Gothic addresses real-world conditions. As Michelle Massé puts it,

the Gothic plot is thus not an "escape" from the real world but a repetition and exploration of the traumatic denial of identity found there. Both the nightmare stasis of the protagonists and the all-enveloping power of the antagonists are extensions of social ideology and real-world experience. The silence, immobility, and enclosure of the heroines mark their internalization of repression as well as the power of the repressing force. Indeed, their frequently commented-on passivity, lack of differentiation, and lack of development through experience only emphasize this point. . . . Each attempt at escape only brings her again to something that cannot be evaded or exorcized by her efforts. (18-19)

Massé's description of the female Gothic, with her emphasis on trauma and its effects on identity, links the tradition to the war novel, in which soldiers often find their previous beliefs and thus sense of identity destroyed by violent experiences.

By the twenty-first century, when U.S. female soldiers began experiencing combat situations if not official assignment to combat roles, the female Gothic has been deployed to critique a variety of social institutions. At the same time, feminist movements have sought to redress many injustices against women: since the mid-nineteenth century, feminist causes have ranged from demanding divorce rights and equality in the workplace to fighting rape culture. Recently Hillary Clinton spoke to *People* magazine about breaking the "highest, hardest glass ceiling in American politics" as she presumably prepares to launch her second presidential campaign. A woman entering the U.S. military can make assumptions about her

world and her place in it that would be unthinkable a hundred or even fifty years ago. Yet, with *Sand Queen*, Benedict suggests how fragile and privileged such assumptions are: Kate Brady experiences trauma not only from the violence of war but also from the shattering of her illusions about her identity and efficacy as a soldier while Naema Jassim finds her world and her possibilities reduced to the struggle to survive amid violence and an abrupt change in attitudes toward women.

### **Gothic Spaces and Fairy Tale Plots in the War Zone**

To represent trauma, Benedict draws on the female Gothic tradition, highlighting commonalities between the war novel and the female Gothic such as the presence of situations involving unexplained, even unexplainable, terror; the questioning of social structures that bring characters into these situations; sexual and psychological nightmares; and the transformation of identity that characters undergo. *Sand Queen* invokes traditional sources of terror from the beginning, with its opening description of “the biggest frigging spider” Kate has ever encountered (5), with all the skin-crawling ickiness that spiders often evoke. But Kate is not afraid of the spider; she has already killed it, and she hangs it over her bed in warning to the male soldier who bunks next to her and who does fear spiders. This opening scene establishes Kate as not stereotypically feminine and apparently capable of fending off unwanted attention, from both beasts and men. The next paragraph, however, does evoke Gothic terror, as Kate describes the desert wind as “a creepy, skin-pricking sound I can never get used to. . . . The moaning whistle of it winnowing through the razor wire. . . . And then it hits me again, that deepdown ache that makes me want to curl up and die” (5). Walking to another tent, Kate notes: “It’s a spooky walk this time of the evening, all shadowy and gray, the tents snapping in the wind, the dust blurring in the twilight till you can’t tell whether the figures you’re seeing are soldiers, hajjis or hallucinations” (147). The wind and shadows establish the place as haunted and alien, ripe for the evocation of deeply rooted desires and fears, where enemy Iraqis, comrades, and ghosts equally bring terror.

Kate, a twenty-first century character living in the Iraq war zone, does not navigate castles, abbeys, or ancestral mansions; still, Benedict renders her domestic space as central to Kate’s psychic struggles. Rather than a castle or mansion, Kate’s home during the novel is a hastily built military barracks that evokes its own physical and psychological effects: “The sand-covered plywood floor that bends like a trampoline when you walk on it and shoots splinters into your feet. The sagging walls and ceiling, snapping in the wind and grating on your nerves” (176). She and two other women bunk with thirty-nine men: “The tent reeks of them.

Sweat and farts, beard and balls” (53). These comrades regularly sexually harass her, and the one next to her insists on literally creeping into her space (59). While the female Gothic often investigates privacy in the form of domestic spaces far from prying eyes where marital and family violence may go unpunished by external forces, Benedict inverts this structure in *Sand Queen*: all of Kate’s world is public, the lack of privacy a source of anxiety and threat. The military command has ordered that women cannot walk alone at night; women have “battle buddies,” Kate says, “so we can protect each other from getting raped by one of our own fine comrades” (55). While all the soldiers, male and female, in Kate’s unit have a “battle buddy” for support during their daily work, the doubling of “battle buddies” for women on base shows the doubling of threats against them. Further, this regulation proves futile as two male soldiers attempt to sexually assault Kate during the day at her guard post, exposing the sexual power structures of Kate’s world and her powerlessness within them.

Naema’s story, like Kate’s, evokes Gothic horror. Her narrative starts a week after her family flees Baghdad to her grandmother’s house in the remote countryside, only to have American soldiers—“Hideous in their bulky uniforms, their faces obscured by goggles and helmets, their huge guns thrusting, voices roaring fury and insults” (15-16)—invade their home and take away Naema’s father and brother. Believing herself to have power through her ability to speak English, Naema begs the soldiers to leave her young brother alone, “but they did not hear me. I had no voice to them, no existence” (16). Like the Gothic heroine, Naema is silenced and invisible to the male powers that do not respect domestic space. Naema, her mother, and her grandmother thus form a precarious female-only household that, except for Naema’s daily visits to the prison for news of her family, enters into a period of passive waiting.

As part of her strategy of rendering female trauma, Benedict constructs Kate’s plot as an inversion of several Disney fairy tales; like Atwood with “Bluebeard’s Egg,” Benedict draws on established forms for telling her female character’s story precisely because of the continued relevance of these forms. While the rise of physically and psychologically strong women in American popular culture, from Xena the Warrior Princess to Buffy the Vampire Slayer, suggests a desire and place for such women, their counter-mythic narratives have not replaced those of Disney’s Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, and Rapuzel—although, dangerously, Kate Brady seems to believe they have. When the novel opens, Kate, though in threatening circumstances, has ably displayed a dead spider as a warning to the soldier bunking next to her; though harassed, she manages to perform as an independent female

agent. Yet when her fellow soldiers attack her and attempt to sexually assault her, she can't fend them off herself, and she must depend on other male soldiers to come to her rescue. After the attack, Kate is moved from her comparatively active assignment at the checkpoint to the passive position of prison guard, literally stuck in a tower all day long. Her rescuer, Jimmy Donnell, comes daily to visit her—to climb up into her tower—bringing her snacks and company as a modern prince visiting Rapunzel. Kate acquires, briefly, an “evil stepmother” in the female officer who initially promises to act on Kate's report of sexual assault but then betrays her to further her own career. Kate's situation deteriorates until she literally faints and falls out of the tower, becoming a kind of Sleeping Beauty in the military hospital who does not respond even to her name. At this point, Kate's story seems to turn, as she resumes control of her actions long enough to leave the hospital and take a bus to Jimmy's. His house serves as a metaphoric castle, guarded by a dog and an unknown woman, trials that Kate, as knight errant, must conquer. Although she succeeds in entering the house and finding her prize, the narrative trajectory shifts again: rather than riding off with Jimmy, she finds him dating someone else and preparing to ship back to Iraq, and while he offers her sanctuary, he leads her to a “yellow” room that recalls Gilman's story.

Fairy tales and narratives of traditional female experience replicate themselves within the novel. In a conversation with her younger sister, Kate guesses that April's Halloween costume will be a “princess,” only to recoil in horror when she hears that April plans to dress as “a soldier like you” (213). Kate assumes her sister will seek the fairy-tale female identity, while April instead looks to her sister as a role model and for the empowerment she thinks “a soldier” has. That her mother “found the costume in CVS” suggests the proliferation and commercialization of the female warrior ideal.

While Kate rejects the passivity she sees expected of American women, Benedict suggests that in Kate's worldview women's stories always end in appropriate marriages. She has brought *Pride and Prejudice* to Iraq with her “to keep [herself] from going brain-dead” (176). In popular parlance, “Austen” has become a shorthand for heterosexual marriage plots and the ending of narrative at the altar. Kate reads, or attempts to read, the novel surrounded by “guys sprawled on their cots in their underwear, reading porn or playing video games, scratching their balls and belching. The usual group of gambling addicts in the corner, playing cards and dice” (176). While Kate's imagination returns her over and over to heterosexual romance plots, Benedict repeatedly undermines the possibility of a positive outcome of this trajectory.

Kate also views her situation through another literary ancestor, Hester Prynne. After she is assaulted and assigned to prison guard duty, Kate begins to experience a state of near-constant rage, possibly a sign of PTSD from the attack and a side-effect of her enforced passivity on the tower. Between the prisoners who throw feces at her and “comrades” who gossip about her supposed promiscuity, “I feel like Hester Prynne in that book we read in high school, the girl who had to stand up on a pillory so the whole town could jeer and throw things at her ‘cause she slept with a priest or something. Only I’m not noble and long-suffering, like her. I’m mad as a pit bull” (173). Benedict draws attention to her character’s place in literature, testing various plots that could help Kate understand her experiences and work through them. Kate joins the army in order to “do something impressive”—to earn respect (40); she likes basic training because “I liked feeling strong and capable. I liked proving myself” (43). Hester Prynne’s narrative requires too much self-abnegation for Kate, for whom respect comes from outward action that translates into inner worth that still depends on external validation. By structuring her plot around fairy tales and canonical stories about women, Benedict suggests the unyielding power of these narratives to dictate the meaning of women’s lives and the control they hold over the female imagination.

### **Identity, Agency, and Trauma**

Traditionally, Gothic fiction centers on a virginal heroine, who may be targeted by villainous forces precisely for that quality. *Sand Queen*’s Kate, although not a virgin, enters the American military with an innocence about her role in it. Coming from a small town in New York state, with a religious family dominated by a police officer father, Kate Brady sees the military as her only road to both independence and familial approval. She hopes to claim the identity of “soldier” as a way to earn the respect she lacks as a civilian woman. When her boyfriend Tyler learns that she’s enlisted, he “said that the military would take away the sweetness he loved in me, the part of me that was still tender as a kid. He never understood that’s exactly what I wanted. I was sick of being the kind of girl people patted on the head, ..., the girl everybody smiled at but nobody listened to” (40). Joining the military is also Kate’s attempt to please her father, who likes when she does “boy stuff” (40). In other words, Kate sees being a soldier as an escape from a civilian American society that devalues women’s contributions; her enlistment has little to do with an interest in combat and warfare and much more with a rejection of her other possibilities.

Further, Kate has a national innocence about what Americans are doing in the war, the destruction of which has a devastating effect on her. Her mother, a pious woman proud of her daughter's patriotism, tells Kate to "pray to the Lord Jesus" when she's having a hard time (105). Once at the war, however, and having met Naema, Kate suffers a "crack," a doubt in her "sureness that I'm doing the right thing" (71). She loses her faith in God as well as in her parents and her nation: she "can't tell Mom or Dad about guarding prisoners who jerk off and throw dead spiders at me; that's not their idea of what a soldier does at war" (122-23). Like the Gothic heroine, whose lack of mother leaves her vulnerable to male exploitation, Kate no longer has, and perhaps never did have, the protection a powerful mother. By extension, through the novel's linking of mothering, Christianity, and patriotism, she loses the ordering of her world.

In *Sand Queen*, Benedict illustrates ways in which the U.S. military appropriates women as sexual objects deployed for its own strategies. Feitz and Nagel explore three such purposes: the appropriation of "sexual purity and female innocence" of Jessica Lynch and others to create homefront sympathy for the war (204); the use of female soldiers such as Lynndie England and Sabrina Harman as "disciplining dominatrixes" in interrogations at Abu Ghraib (209-13); and as willing or unwilling sexual partners for American servicemen. As one of three women in her unit, Kate receives an assignment to work a checkpoint as a friendly face to the enemy. Her later assignment on the guard tower seems designed to evoke Lynndie England, particularly when male soldiers invite her to beat a male prisoner. Throughout the novel, sexuality remains a weapon to control female soldiers. Kate explains that the label "sand queen" means "a pathetic slut too desperate and dumb to know she's nothing but a mattress" (105). Used against Kate, the term is meant to keep her in line and separate her from female soldiers who believe the accusation. Thus promiscuity, or the accusation of it, disempowers female soldiers, humiliating and isolating them. Kate's hopes of transforming into someone with authority in the military become darkly twisted, as she is forced into increasingly passive and defensive positions. By the end of the novel, the sexualized power dynamics of the military have literally rewritten her body: "She knows her walk looks weird—half a swagger like a man, half a hobble like an old lady. She forgot how to walk normally in the Army because if you look at all feminine when you walk, the guys won't leave you alone. That, and the injuries" (260).

To her comrades, who should be her equals—her "band of brothers"—she becomes an object of domination to facilitate their identity and relationship with each other rather than a fellow soldier. Her immediate superior attempts to rape

her during their daily shift, the sergeant asserting his authority over her and a male soldier whom he orders to participate (78-80). The attempted sexual assault reveals Kate's fundamental vulnerability, psychological as well as physical. She's not only terrified by the attack; she's humiliated by being rescued by other soldiers because, as she thinks, "I want to look after myself. I am a soldier, after all" (85). Even after the attack, she persists in wanting to be a soldier, and the incredible psychological pressure this identity puts on her becomes more apparent. Others around her use that desire as a way to strip her individuality, including her femininity. When Kate attempts to report the attempted sexual assault and her superior officer insists on questioning the assailant with Kate present, he quashes her resistance by calling her "soldier" and invoking "the cohesion of our unit" (151). Kate's friend Yvette, trying to buck her up when they encounter her attempted rapists, tells her to "Be a soldier, baby. Don't let 'em worry you" (222). Kate internalizes the expectation that soldiers are independent and tough; they handle their problems themselves. Yet in the climate of sexual threat, this belief proves self-damaging. Even as she reports the attack, Kate thinks, "*You could've fought back harder. You could've been tougher. You gave the wrong signals, admit it. What kind of a soldier are you, anyway?*" (226).

As in much female Gothic fiction, such as Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," Kate suffers from psychological fragmentation. During the sexual assault, she transforms: "And then I'm not me anymore. I'm a wing. One ragged blue wing, zigzagging torn and crooked across the long, black sky" (80). Her two narrative threads, one as "I" and the other as "the soldier" in the psychiatric hospital, register how her desire to be a "soldier" in the hypergendered military ultimately breaks her in two. During the last days of Kate's deployment, after the death of her friend Yvette, her rage boils over: she shoots a donkey during the ride back to her base (265); she hears sounds that others don't (273); she begins to regard herself and other soldiers as "robots" (274-75); and she shoots a prisoner in the groin (289).

If the terror of the female Gothic centers on the loss of the maternal, as one school of critics argue (Showalter 128), for Kate this fear manifests not only in the increasing irrelevance of her biological mother but also in the discovery that feminism has not opened the doors to equality. She joined the military because of its offer of independence and opportunities to make a positive change in the world, only to discover that the institution itself depends on the forcible subordination of women and femininity. After her failed effort to report the attempted sexual assault to her male superior, her friend Yvette encourages her to go to the EOO officer, and Lieutenant Sara Hopkins offers immediate support, only to betray Kate in an apparent attempt to advance her own career. Kate believes the rhetoric

that women are equal, yet in *Sand Queen*, female characters end up dead by enemy combat or suicide or, like Kate, psychologically destroyed.

Kate's experiences in the U.S. military cause her to endure PTSD and other forms of trauma. That is, Kate faces what psychologists have recently termed "moral injury," defined by Brett Litz and his colleagues as "the lasting psychological, biological, spiritual, behavioral, and social impact of perpetrating, failing to prevent, or bearing witness to acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations" (697). Having not reported the sexual assault on herself, Kate suffers when she discovers that the same soldiers have since raped another woman in her company; she calls herself a "friggin' coward" (145). She carries guilt and loses her self-esteem, the self-label of "coward" particularly damaging in light of her deep desire to be a "soldier." When Kate does attempt to file a complaint, she takes Yvette with her for support, and both of them end up on a highly dangerous mission as punishment for speaking out, a mission during which her friend is killed, leaving Kate with an even greater burden of guilt. She turns on herself, regarding herself as "sick" (174-75), feeling "dirty" for "doing [her] job" (184), and believing herself unworthy of love (210).

Military culture also contributes to Kate's suffering of moral injury as she behaves in ways contrary to her upbringing. As a woman guarding male Iraqi prisoners, Kate finds herself subject to sexual harassment and intimidation from the very men over whom she's supposed to have power. The prisoners daily taunt her with insults, masturbate in front of her, and throw excrement at her, causing her rage at them and at her own impotence to build until she's offered an opportunity to beat one of the prisoners. She hits him brutally until she suddenly recognizes him from Naema's photo: the prisoner is not only *not* the one who threw excrement at her, he's Naema's father, for whom she promised she would look, the one good deed she thinks she can do in the war. Horrified at herself, Kate's psychological state continues to deteriorate, ultimately landing her in the psychiatric hospital where she, as "the soldier," finds no help.

Her only escape from anger and self-hatred is a romantic relationship with a fellow soldier. Even as Kate suffers under the twisted heterosexual dynamics of military "comradeship," she seeks out another form of heterosexual companionship. She doesn't have other options for personal relationships: of the two other female soldiers in her barracks, one barely speaks to her, judging her to be a "sand queen;" the other, her friend, is often away and is eventually killed; and the female superior officer to whom Kate reported the sexual assault apparently betrays her. In Kate's military world, women cannot unite. Jimmy Donnell, who rescues her from

their fellow soldiers and later from the prisoners during an uprising, appeals to Kate, although she recognizes and resents the clichéd roles they play as rescuer and rescued. She resists her attraction to him at first because she knows that a relationship will cause cruel gossip about her. As the narrative progresses and Kate suffers increasing harassment, humiliation, and isolation, she gives in to her attraction to Jimmy. Although Benedict portrays him as kind and thoughtful, the pattern of the romance suggests that Kate can't imagine any future or identity for herself except in a heterosexual relationship. In her second plot, which starts with Kate in a psychiatric hospital, she ultimately checks herself out to be with Jimmy, hoping for some kind of relief and salvation with him. Yet Jimmy now has a girlfriend and orders to ship back to Iraq, and despite his kindness, he does not seem to have much to offer Kate. That Kate's only solution to her psychological struggles is a heterosexual romance suggests the failure of U.S. society to provide emotional resources for its female soldiers.

The epigram to Part One encapsulates Kate's psychological journey: "Perhaps if she curls up very small, she won't hurt anyone ever again." This line links women's inculcated fear of taking up space, whether physical, emotional, or intellectual, to the brutality of war. The last line of Kate's narrative expresses her guilt: "I've killed so many of them. Oh God, when will it stop?" (305). In the tradition of the war novel, she may be considered as suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder or moral injury. The tradition of the female Gothic explores, in Carol Davison's words, "the fear that ... heretofore repressed, possibly dangerous aspects of the self and others may be allowed expression" (54). When Kate and Jimmy kiss for the first time, Kate "awakens" not to joy and love but rather to her own guilt, "feel[ing] my foot stamping down on Mr. al-Jubur's head, see[ing] the blood and sand clogging his mouth, feel[ing] myself enjoying every second of the man's pain" (204-05). Having suffered an attempted sexual assault, not reported it, and beaten an old man she promised she would help, Kate feels she is no longer worthy of love (210). While Kate faces many external threats, at the end she most fears herself and what she might be capable of. Thus she is trapped in an unresolvable plot: if women's stories continue to center on heterosexual love and marriage, as Kate's narrative structurally does, then, if she is unlovable, she has no way of resolving her storyline.

By intertwining the stories of Kate Brady the soldier and Naema Jassim the civilian and refugee, Benedict pairs the two in narrative partnership and counterpoint. Rather than portraying a solely American experience, Benedict insists on bringing to light the often invisible experience of the "enemy." Some of the resonances between the narratives are symbolic: when Kate is attacked by her

peers, her pants are torn (84); in the next section, Naema's grandmother sews up a tear in blouse (88). In other moments, Benedict shows different perspectives of similar events: Naema's family drives through streets made chaotic by checkpoints and military vehicles, terrified and frustrated at the soldiers' inability to control the situation (33), then Kate describes her job stopping vehicles and searching Iraqis at a checkpoint, including her constant fear (36-37). By the end of the novel, the linked moments between the narratives signal the deteriorated relations between the Americans and Iraqis. Naema receives a letter from Third Eye that she's told comes from her brother, yet she so distrusts the Americans by this time that she doubts the letter is genuine. In the next section, however, Kate rejoices in this one success that she's brought about. These pairings offer two sides of the experience of the American invasion of Iraq. Structurally, they move the reader between "us" and "them," forcing the reader to identify with both and to consider the situation itself as the antagonist; in this way the novel challenges the traditional war novel that often fails to imagine the "enemy" and suggests that the main conflicts, at least for Kate and Naema, are internal, both individually and nationally.

Like Kate's story, Gothic terrors structure Naema's narrative, from the monstrous American soldiers who invade her home rendering her invisible and silent to the psychological experience of loss. Once her father and brother are taken prisoner by the Americans, she, her mother, and grandmother find themselves experiencing a trauma they've gone through before when Naema's father was imprisoned under the regime of Saddam Hussein. The repetition is political commentary as well as literary strategy. Naema's grandmother suffers nightmares, a "horror in her head" that increasingly weakens the eldest woman (112). Largely helpless apart from her daily walk to the prison camp in search of news, Naema finds her thoughts circling over imagined tortures of her father and brother: "The not knowing, this is what drives one mad" (113). Her challenge to soldiers at the American prison compound causes a fellow petitioner to worry that she's "going mad" (117). The language of "madness" recalls figures of "mad women" in literature, disempowered female characters relegated to attics and backrooms who embody the contradictions, inequalities, and injustices of their society.

Like Kate, Naema finds that the independent life she believed she had access to disappears. In Baghdad, Naema studied to be a doctor and chose her own fiancé. After the invasion, local militias begin to impose Sharia law, restricting Naema's opportunities and threatening her physical safety. The walk to the prison camp is fraught with physical dangers—landmines, cluster bombs, packs of wild dogs, hurtling convoys that do not stop—and the Iraqi militia groups create further

perils for women. On one of their daily trips to the prison, Naema and her elderly neighbor Fatima encounter men in black who challenge Naema and call her a “whore” (198); they retreat only when Fatima claims Naema as her granddaughter. Like Kate, who reconfigures her body’s expression of femininity as part of her war experience, Naema must learn to wear a hajib, forcing herself into strange body movements to prevent its falling off and producing an “unfamiliar face in the mirror” (114). Just as Kate learns to walk like a man to avoid attracting male sexual attention, Naema disciplines her body for largely the same reason. Naema thinks:

We are sliding backwards in my country. We are becoming narrower than we have been for decades. Soon we women will be forced to live the life Granny had to lead—married off as little girls, beaten by our husbands, shrouded, enslaved—our rights as human beings obliterated. I know that some fundamentalist clerics, who have taken advantage of the current chaos and fear to gain new power, are already trying to obliterate the rights that Iraqi women have had for fifty years. They want to put us under the Sharia laws that treat us as slaves. If this comes to be, how are we women—how is our culture—to survive? (169-70)

All Naema’s fears about her culture link to common issues and tropes in the female Gothic: institutional helplessness, women as objects, domestic violence, and metaphorical suffocation.

Instead of forging her own life, Naema’s existence becomes more deeply intertwined with her mother’s and grandmother’s, the three of them fending for themselves after Naema’s father and brother are taken away by the Americans. Naema’s mother ties Naema more tightly to her by requiring that her daughter read her husband’s love letters to her, written when Naema’s father was imprisoned under Saddam Hussein. Naema does not want to read them, for she can’t bear to read of her father’s suffering (166) and she feels she is intruding into the private life of her parents (193). But her mother insists until Naema realizes that “She needs to see me recognize Papa’s love for her so she can feel it again herself—so she can keep it near and alive” (168). Naema’s life is subsumed, at least temporarily, in her mother’s memories of her own life.

Naema, like Kate, has agency stripped from her by the end of the novel. An educated woman who challenges Kate and other American soldiers, who speaks up and insists on being heard, Naema finds forces aligned against her, larger than she alone can handle. The remove to her grandmother’s house signals a shift to more

restrictive values that Naema regards as alien and regressive; she remembers how she and her brother listened to her grandmother's stories: "Her life was like a history book to us, for she had lived in the old ways, far from the modern life we knew" (67). Though in love with her fiancé, Naema hesitates to marry him even before the invasion, as she is "wary of the yoke of marriage and all the expectations that go with it" (91). After the invasion, she faces the loss of her future as a doctor and wife. She also sees herself becoming just one of many Iraqis suffering devastating circumstances. When her grandmother becomes ill, Naema and her mother try to get her to the hospital, only to find the roads packed with other desperate families seeking help and ultimately a hospital full of sick and wounded and lacking medical staff. Instead of helping her grandmother, Naema must leave her in a corner to die while she uses her meager medical training to help others, an experience that leaves her "beyond any feeling at all" (307). She and her mother are a family decimated by war, "our once boisterous family reduced to two saddened scarecrow women with no control over our fates and no knowledge of our future" (309). The closing words of the novel are the funeral chant for Naema's grandmother:

*I am the house of remoteness.  
I am the house of loneliness.  
I am the house of soil.  
I am the house of worms.*

## **Conclusion**

In many ways, the structure of Benedict's narrative about a female soldier is much like that of a male soldier: Kate Brady loses her innocence, experiences trauma, and comes home to a world in which she feels she no longer belongs. Yet while modern male characters undergo a disillusionment with an ideal masculinity, Kate's relation to gender is more ambiguous. She begins the novel frustrated with traditional American womanhood, yet her attempts to forge a different path for herself result in her being pushed even further into feminine passivity, compulsory heterosexuality, and limited options. By pairing the female soldier's narrative with that of a civilian refugee, Benedict insists in representing the soldier's experience in a broader context, yet Naema's story has its own power of Gothic resonances. Despite their ambitions and apparently modern societies with equal opportunities for women, Kate and Naema become two more female characters who, as DeLamotte puts it, "just can't seem to get out of the house" (10).

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rary war literature. Published in 2011, Helen Benedict's *Sand Queen* has enjoyed credibility among contemporary war novels, not only in terms of its literary merits but also because of its specific portrayal of women at war (Bonenberger, 2014). Unlike the war novels published in 2012, all of which are narrative accounts of male combatants written by male authors, *Sand Queen* is narrated by women, and portrays the early days of the Iraq War (2003-11). Benedict's achievement in the portrayal of female character-narrators is considerable in. "Benedict interviewed around 40 female veterans of the war in Iraq to tell this completely heartbreaking, vivid story of the particular difficulties of being not just a soldier, but a female soldier." - Bustle. "One of this year's best new novels about war." - *Sand Queen* is powerful precisely because Helen Benedict is so pissed off." - *New York Journal of Books*. "A convincing and affecting portrait of two resilient young women caught up in war." - *Shelf Awareness*. "In writing what might be the first major woman's war story and alternating points of view between opposing sides, Columbia professor Helen Benedict has created something enormously fresh and immediate on this sadly ancient topic." - *Chronogram.com*. Praise for the work of Helen Benedict. Helen Benedict's novel *Wolf Season* describes how old wounds from the Iraq War linger on in the lives of three women. *Wolf Season* By Helen Benedict Bellevue Literary Press. 320 pages. In her latest novel *Wolf Season*, Helen Benedict tells the stories of three women in a small town in upstate New York coping with the trauma of war - not just the direct experience of violence and death, but also the collateral damage it inflicts on loved ones. Rin is a rape-scarred Iraq War veteran who has returned to her hometown of Huntsville. Naema is an Iraqi refugee who lost her husband during the conflict and now works in the town as a doctor. Beth is a military wife dealing with an abusive husband and a troubled child. The book's eponymous wolves are Rin's. Women's/war stories: the female Gothic and women's war trauma in Helen Benedict's *Sand Queen*. Dullards Homer and Peter, for instance, figure in implied ickiness and unintentional sexual behavior involving fuel dispensers. When cartoon funnymen collide. As people live longer and garner more visibility for it, there's not as much ickiness surrounding the fact that they've survived. Tired old queen. Depicting a mail-order zombie's ordeals and retaliation, and mixing black humor as well as compassion, the low-budget film suggests a cross between Lucky McKee's "The Woman" and Jonathan Levine's "Warm Bodies," sans the farmer's misogyny or the latter's ickiness. Helen Benedict's *Sand Queen* is an important book for a couple of reasons. First, (and to the best of my knowledge) Benedict's topic - the treatment of female soldiers in the United States Army - is not sufficiently explored by very many contemporary fiction writers. Helen Benedict's book shows how sexual abuse wears female soldiers thin, makes them less alert and on the ball, emotionally-stretched. While this might be the case, there is arguable evidence here that women appear weaker as a result of their portrayal by journalists like Benedict. *Sand Queen* is the story of two young women whose lives are forever changed by the Iraq war: 19-year-old American soldier Kate and Iraqi medical student Naema.