

Trauma in *The Lonely Soldier*

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Benedict is an award-winning novelist and non-fiction writer specializing in social injustice. Her non-fiction book *The Lonely Soldier* reflects the impact of war on violence against women. Female soldiers are always the victims of violence, before, during, and after serving in the Iraq War. This thesis aims to explore their trauma and illuminate the book's meaning.

Keywords: Helen Benedict, *The Lonely Soldier*, female soldiers, victims of violence, meaning of writing

Introduction

Helen Benedict, a professor of journalism at Columbia University, is an award-winning novelist and non-fiction writer specializing in social injustice, refugees, the impact of war on civilians and soldiers, and on violence against women. Her books on violence against women have won awards from Ms. Magazine and elsewhere, and she has published widely and spoken at Harvard University, TED Talks, West Point, the U.S. Air Force Academy, and the United Nations, among other campuses and organizations. And her non-fiction book, *The Lonely Soldier: The Private War of Women Serving in Iraq*, inspired the 2012 Oscar-nominated documentary about sexual assault in the military, *The Invisible War*.

Benedict interviewed some forty soldiers and veterans for *The Lonely Soldier*, and “chose feature five whose stories best reflected the various experiences of female soldiers in Iraq” (Benedict, 2009, p. 3)—Mickiela, a Mexican American who grew up with a family involved in L.A. gangs; Jennifer, white and from a working-class in the heartland, who still shakes from her wartime traumas; Abbie, who rebelled against a household of liberal Democrats by enlisting in the National Guard; Terris, an African American mother from D.C. whose childhood war torn by violence; and Eli, who joined the military to follow Native American tradition and to escape a life of Faulknerian hardship. Between these stories, Benedict weaves those of the forty other Iraq War veterans she interviewed and chronicles the difficulties that female soldiers faced, and continue to face, before, during, and after serving in the Iraq War.

Based on the real experience of female soldiers in *The Lonely Soldier*, this thesis aims to explore the conflicts they encounter, analyse the trauma they suffer and illuminate the author's intention and the book's meaning.

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Victims of Violence

Female soldiers are always the victims of violence, before, during, and after serving in the Iraq War. Most of them are victims of domestic violence, so one of their motives for joining the army is to escape abuse. However, in the military, they suffer from severe violence, such as gender discrimination from the military system, hostility and aggression by male soldiers, and so on. Ironically, they regard themselves as the saviour of Iraqi people, but insulted by the Iraqi male prisoners, even attacked by the Iraqi people during serving in Iraq. After returning to America, most of them experience post-traumatic stress disorder and struggle to reacclimatize to civilian life. “In denying their status as a soldier, the patriarchal ideology also denies their suffering and robs them of healing they might receive through the public recognition of their service” (Wright, 2018, p. 666).

“Among army soldiers and marine recruits, half of women were physically and psychologically abused” (Benedict, 2009, p. 24) in the family. Among family members, father and mother are mainly mentioned during the interview. All of the five female soldiers live in a patriarchal family and most of their father are alcoholic and abusive. For example, Eli’s entire family is alcoholic, and with “the stigma and frustrations of the illiterate, her father is prone to explode into violence” (Benedict, 2009, p. 20). When Eli was sexually assaulted by the worker her father hired at thirteen, her father cared about his fame instead of her feelings, and “saw the rape as entirely his daughter’s fault” (Benedict, 2009, p. 22). Although Jennifer wasn’t physically abused, her father disrespected her and “persuaded her to sign up with the military police instead of a construction unit, as she’d planned” (Benedict, 2009, p. 28). Most of their mother care nothing about them and can’t protect them, for their mother are also the victims of domestic abuse. Mickiela is “the product of generations of teenage mother” (Benedict, 2009, p. 14) and her mother was a drug addict. Eli’s mother committed suicide when she was two months pregnant with her fourth child. Terris’s mother was badly hit by Terris’s stepfather, but insisted that love is powerful. In a patriarchal family, family dominates everything and is neglectful of daughters. Females are imposed on their father’s will, are demeaned, even abused.

Gender discrimination, hostility, and aggression in the military against female soldiers became the focus of Benedict’s *The Lonely Soldier*. Contempt for women and homosexuals is the prevailing attitude in the military. “Military language reveals this contempt all the time. Some instructors still denigrate recruits with insulting words” (Benedict, 2009, p. 50). When training, the military uses non-white and women soldiers as role players, but never uses white soldiers to do it even if it could. And the military assumed female soldiers became pregnant on purpose to stay away from going to war. “In the army, any sign that you are a woman means you are automatically ridiculed and treated as inferior” (Benedict, 2009, p. 5). Many female soldiers are sexually assaulted by male soldiers, who are supposed to be comrades. One interviewee recalls that “the mortar rounds that came in daily did less damage to me than the men with whom I shared my food” (Benedict, 2009, p. 4). Abbie was assaulted by her superior officer and was afraid of reporting it, because he could reject her advances and the military would protect him.

Female soldiers were told that “they were going to Iraq to give the people freedom and help them recover from Saddam Hussein’s brutal rule” (Benedict, 2009, p. 53); however, while serving in Iraq, they were insulted by Iraqi male prisoners and attacked by the local people. “There were no smiles and waves” (Benedict, 2009, p. 99) and American troops weren’t regarded as heroes. Also, they were frustrated by the fact there was nothing they

can do to save the Iraqi people. The local infrastructure was severely damaged, and many children were born sick because of the depleted uranium weapons. For lack of medical resources, those children couldn't be treated, and some mothers asked American soldiers for help. But the living environment of soldiers was no better than that of the Iraqi people. And many people went to the prison to find their relatives; however, the soldiers didn't have the list of prisoners at all.

Meaning of Writing

From *The Lonely Soldier*, the experiences, the trauma, and the contributions of female soldiers can be known. When Benedict first saw Mickiela in 2006, Mickiela was standing silently in the back of a Manhattan classroom, listening to the male veteran's speech. And she told Benedict that nobody believes she was a veteran because she is a female, which "reflects that female soldiers are at a disadvantage in the both military and war literature" (Liu, 2022, p. 38). Social justice is what Benedict is eager to write about, and she combines the trauma female soldiers suffered with the oppression of marginalized group. Her traumatic narration "that includes the themes of identity, political reflection and human nature strengthen the depth of her work" (Liu & Yang, 2022, p. 164).

Benedict's non-fiction is a means of healing the spiritual wounds. When doing interviews, Benedict was "incredibly moved by the resilience of these women, the way so many of them had turned their trauma into helping others as counsellors at rape crisis centers" (Smith, 2017, p. 45). She was amazed by the generosity and beauty of the human spirit in the middle of the terribly dark subject of rape. "Redemption is the final goal of Benedict's traumatic narration" (Liu, 2022, p. 88). Benedict ends by showing how these women came to face the truth of war and by offering suggestions on how to improve conditions for women in the military and listing resources for women in need of support. And her non-fiction book *The Lonely Soldier* also instigated a landmark lawsuit against on Pentagon on behalf of victims who were sexually assaulted in the military. Humanizing, urgent, and powerful, *The Lonely Soldier* is a clarion call for change.

Conclusion

Benedict is credited with breaking the story about the epidemic of sexual assault of military women serving in the Iraq war. The accounts in *The Lonely Soldier* "shed light on the male-dominated military culture and the unfortunate toll the culture takes on its female constituents, both physically and psychologically" ("Recent Publications," p. 503). Most female soldiers enlisted in the army to escape domestic violence, for they grew up in a patriarchal family. However, in the military, they were regarded as weak "women" and were sexually assaulted by male soldiers. When serving in Iraq, guarding the prison was their main task, while prisoners disrespected and insulted them. After returning to America, their experience was not known and recognized. Benedict wrote not only to show their trauma and contributions, but also to support and heal them.

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