



War, Memory, and Identity in Kevin Powers's *The Yellow Birds*: A Study of Trauma and Symbolism

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ABSTRACT: This paper analyzes *The Yellow Birds* (2012) by Kevin Powers as a paradigmatic novel of an Iraq war, which negotiates the relationship between war, memory and identity in terms of trauma and symbolism. It is based on a qualitative interpretive approach which uses close reading and thematic analysis that is based on trauma theory, memory studies and symbolic analysis. The findings are fourfold. To begin with, the novel portrays war as a pointless thing and does not represent it as heroic, which corresponds to post-heroic theories of defining the modern conflicts as disillusioning and meaningless. Second, memory appears as discontinuous, obtrusive and theatricalizing the imperative of trauma to repeat and act as counter-memory to the official discourses of patriotic duty. Third, there is identity fracture, which is a symptom of moral injury and dissonance between social concepts of heroism and real life. Fourth, symbolism is made the main vehicle of the trauma because repetitive images, yellow birds, rivers, and letters turn psychic traumas into aesthetic expression. These findings are placed in the context of the existing scholarship and form an integrative contribution of the given study: whereas before, the research treated trauma, memory, or symbolism as distinct concepts, this study proves that they depend on each other. But finally, *The Yellow Birds* is a personal testament and a cultural memory bank, a record of anti-histories of the Iraq War and the embodiment of the purpose of literature in making us speakable what the trauma makes.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Kevin Powers is a novelist and American poet. His first novel, *The Yellow Birds*, came out in 2012 and shortly after that, it became a landmark in the history of modern war fiction. Powers, an experienced machine gunner in the U.S. Army, took part in the Iraq War, and his first-person experience is the basis of his authenticity and urgency as a writer. The novel narrates the experiences of Private John Bartle, a soldier, and his friend Murph, focusing on their experiences during the deployment in Iraq, as well as the reflections on the war's impacts after they returned home. The prose of Powers is sometimes called lyrical and haunting, as it does not conform to the norms of the traditional narrative of war. Instead of glory and triumph, the novel introduces war as a form of confusion, pointlessness, and ethical confusion (Abdushukurova, 2024). Critics have credited the book with the ability to combine literature with documentary urgency and the fact that it can present not what happened, but how it felt to the people who lived it (Al-Janabi and Chen, 2019, p. 480). Accordingly, *The Yellow Birds* plays a significant role in post-9/11 war fiction, alongside *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien and *Redeployment* by Phil Klay, in shaping the literary memory of the new war (AI and Benny, 2025).

The Iraq War (2003–2011) left behind not only physical devastation but also deep psychological and cultural scars. Research conducted by the World Health Organization (2007) and the United Nations Development Programme (2010) indicates that the war destroyed most of the infrastructure in the nation, resulting in the breakdown of health services, education, and the provision of basic services. The war has caused long-lasting psychological distress to both the civilians and the combatants, besides material destruction. According to Lim and Ho (2022) and Alkaisy and Ahmed (2021), millions of Iraqis were affected by war-related anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Even to the veterans, the war turned out to cause moral injury, as the soldiers were unable to align their experiences and the accounts of purpose and liberation provided by political leaders (Shay, 2014). The war also interfered with the cultural life of Iraq: libraries, museums, and heritage places were lost or destroyed,

washing away the stains of the historical memory of the country (Bouakkaz and Boutora, 2025; McCafferty, 2023). Scholars like Ulack (2015) suggest that the war left a long-lasting feeling of dispossession whereby foreign interference destabilized the political autonomy of Iraq and its cultural background. It is against this background that literary works such as *The Yellow Birds* by Powers come out as more than just the tale of an individual, but one that is an expression of a larger trauma that extends to both sides in the case of the invaded and the invaders, both the locals and the soldiers who are caught in the war machine.

The novel is interlaced with several thematic issues that constitute the basis of this study. War, itself, is not shown as a victory but as a mess, bloodshed, and defeat, destabilizing the conventional concept of soldierly dignity. The memory turns out to be a fragmentary and involuntary process; Bartle is plagued with images and memories that invade his everyday life even after the war. The identity is in crisis because the main character is struggling to bring the sense of self as a soldier, survivor, and guilty witness to the demands of the society of heroism and sacrifice. These aspects are based on the trauma, which distorts the time order and sends the main character into a stream of repetitions and silence, followed by delayed memory. Lastly, symbolism provides the vehicle through which these abstract and even unspeakable experiences are articulated. The repetition of themes of the yellow bird, rivers, and the letter of the mother is employed as a vessel of the unsayable in which grief and violence are condensed into a shared visual. Together, these themes highlight the manner in which *The Yellow Birds* is exploited to dramatize the individual and social costs of modern-day warfare. Despite the numerous criticisms that *The Yellow Birds* has gone through, it has been noted that academic interpretations of the novel have opted to pay attention to specific aspects of the story as opposed to offering a complete reading of the book.

Several studies discuss the text mainly in terms of trauma and PTSD, which emphasizes the psychological disintegration of Bartle (Satriawan and Rahayu, 2020; Raihana and Alosman, 2022). Some focus on its symbolic aspects, including the symbol of the yellow ribbon or a bird as a metaphor of frailty and loss. Others underline the stylistic decisions by Powers and his poetic language (Al-janabi and Chen, 2019). However, the methods tend to ignore the unseen work done by trauma and symbolism as a joint representation of the overlapping themes of war, memory, and identity. It is such a fragmentation in the scholarship that marks a critical gap: it lacks an integrated account that would show how Powers combines traumatic representation with symbolic imagery to express fractured subjectivity. It is essential to fill this gap to fully value the contribution of the novel to the literature on war as well as to the general discussion on trauma and memory studies.

This study is significant for three reasons. To begin with, it adds to the ever-expanding literary trauma studies by examining how traumatic experience influences the narrative structure, breaking the chronological line, and destabilizing identity. Second, it places *The Yellow Birds* in the cultural memory, demonstrating that the novel is the counter-memory resisting the official discourse of heroism and national pride (Simko, 2020). Third, it evidences the impossibility of depicting the experiences that cannot be directly narrated without the help of symbolism, which stretches the debates regarding the aesthetic strategies through which literature captures psychological traumas in the form of wounds. The combination of these views makes the study focus on the duality of the novel as a testament and art, and addresses the personal and the collective culture critique.

The study pursues two primary objectives: First, To analyze how *The Yellow Birds* represents war, memory, and identity through the interrelated frameworks of trauma and symbolism. Second, to examine how symbolic imagery functions as a narrative device for articulating trauma and reframing identity. The central research question guiding this study is:

How does Kevin Powers's The Yellow Birds represent war, memory, and identity through the interwoven dynamics of trauma and symbolism?

To respond to this question, the study uses three theoretical perspectives, which are interrelated, namely, the trauma theory, memory studies, and symbolism. Both of them offer a distinct perspective on approaching the novel, but they create a combined structure. The trauma theory is used to explain the disruptive character of the experiences a man, Bartle, went through and the fragmented form of the novel. His qualities of memory as an individual burden and a cultural intervention by memory studies put the contextualization of his memories in perspective of the interaction between the individual memory and the collective forgetting. Symbolism assists in understanding how Powers can turn the formless deprivation of the unspeakable into images so that the trauma can be reached via the aesthetic form.

The theory of trauma was developed in the 1990s, when Caruth (2016) described trauma as something that is not known at the moment it happens but recurrently manifests itself in haunting and intrusive forms. Trauma abrades the continuity in time, resulting in belateness, fragmentation, and silence. LaCapra (2014) goes further to explain that this is done by recognizing the difference between acting out, in which the trauma is compulsively relived, and working through, where the survivors seek to process and to integrate the experience. Trauma is frequently manifested in literature through fragmented chronology, image repetitions, and fragmented voices that present the challenge of saying the unsayable.

These issues are applied to the cultural and social spheres through memory studies. According to Halbwachs (2024), memory is never neutral and is mediated in groups, in rituals, and in narratives. Until recently, the idea of postmemory emerged with the work of Hirsch (2012), who described the process of generational communication of trauma in terms of narratives and cultural representation. Simko (2020) pointed out that cultural memory is discriminatory and disputed, and it is normally power and ideology-dependent. Literature is an important means of keeping counter-memories, opposing erasures, and other archives of

experience. War accounts have been applied through memory studies to demonstrate the interaction of personal memory and collective memory with each other, and that personal testimony cuts across history. It offers aestheticity to this structure through symbolism. Frye (2020) has conceptualized the concept of symbols as the secret behind summarizing the strength of literature and its ability to shorten the distance between individual experience and overall tendencies. Symbols are fundamental in war literature because they make visible what cannot be said. Symbols reduce trauma to images that evoke suffering and do not describe it. The recent scholarship (Alosman and Raihanah, 2020) demonstrates that the symbols of *The Yellow Birds* are not ornamental. Still, they are built in such a way that they define the ability of the narrative to express grief, mortality, and alienation.

Combined, the three frameworks make it possible to read *The Yellow Birds* comprehensively. The trauma theory explains why Bartle narrates the story in fragments, has flashbacks, and cannot integrate the death of Murph into his memory. Memory examinations put such remembrances into place as counter-memory, opposing national discourses that idealize war and deny its psychological burden. Symbolism shows how Powers turns trauma into images: the yellow bird as the sign of weakness, the river as the sign of cleansing and burial, the letter of the mother as the sign of failed communication, and the unspeakable is made legible. Combining these viewpoints, the research shows how Powers weaves trauma with symbolism to project the mire of the war, memory, and identity.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The criticism of *The Yellow Birds* and the modern war fiction in general has taken the text in various ways, such as trauma studies, memory studies, symbolic analysis, and post-heroic readings of contemporary war. The way the novel breaks with the conventional war narratives, the way the novel dramatizes the psychological consequences of war, and the way the imagery of the novel renders the ineffable aspects of loss and grief have been examined by critics. However, in most cases, these studies are very fragmented, either taking a particular direction on trauma, symbolism, or style alone. The section provides an overview of the significant threads of scholarship pertinent to the current study, which can be classified into four interconnected themes: the image of war and the loss of heroism, the work of memory and trauma, the crisis of identity, and the work of symbolism. Through the survey of these critical contributions, the review will not only point out what has been ascertained of the work of Powers but also point out the gaps that justify the current research.

2.1 War and Post-Heroism

Contemporary war fiction, especially fiction that has been developed as a result of the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, has continued to undermine historic norms that glorified war and heroic masculinity. Luttwak (1995) explains this change as the concept of post-heroism, wherein late-modern wars, in many cases fought without clear-cut victory or sense of righteousness, yield soldiers who are characterized more by alienation and trauma than victory. Alosman and Raihanah (2022) observe that these stories reinvent the image of the soldier, with the emphasis on the psychological expenses of survival and the loss of the traditional concepts of honour.

The Yellow Birds by Kevin Powers is an example of this post-heroic move. In the novel, Private John Bartle is not a variant of a decorated hero but an example of a young soldier who is full of guilt, futility, and disorientation. AI and Benney (2025) note that the text plays with the official version of the patriotic obligation, anticipating devastation instead of heroism. This goes in line with the wider scope of the war in Iraq, as Tripp (2010) notes that the invasion has led to nothing fruitful other than destruction and unrest. In such a manner, Powers defies the jubilating rhetoric of war, portraying war as a place that disrupts identity and undermines moral confidence.

There is also a longer anti-war tradition in which the novel places itself. Similar to *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) by Remarque and *The Things They Carried* (1990) by O'Brien, *The Yellow Birds* uses fragmentation and lyrical imagery to dramatise the futility of war. However, as Singh (2024) notes, its post-Iraq setting is a bit different: in the twentieth century, war fiction is more about a shared cause, whereas in the twenty-first century, it is rather about the individual dialect of trauma and recollection (p. 212). This focus is indicative of post-heroism, in which modern soldiers can no longer play consistent heroic roles in the wars characterized by moral ambiguity.

Summing up, *The Yellow Birds* is described as a paradigmatic post-heroic text by scholarship. It's war as something not to be won but to be futile appeals to the broader critical view of the Iraq War, as well as to theoretical debate over post-heroism. However, this involvement in the war cannot be divorced from the way the novel handles the concept of memory and trauma, which contribute not only to the narrative in the form of the novel but also to the expression of broken identity.

2.2 Memory and Trauma

The interconnection between memory and trauma is the key to the critical interpretation of *The Yellow Birds*. Caruth (2016) defines trauma as an experience that is not fully understood when it happens, but the experience comes back later in repetitive and uncontrollable forms. This lateness makes temporality unstable and includes the fragmentation of memory instead of its continuity. Dominick LaCapra (2014) goes on to explain how survivors often have a pendulum between the act-out phase, in which trauma is compulsively re-experienced, and the working through phase, in which they are trying to process the past. These

types of frameworks have been utilized in numerous cases in war narratives where memory is not a coherent archive but a series of intrusions and silences.

Scholars have remarked that the novel by Powers is representative of this broken temporality. As Satriawan and Rahayu (2020) note, this fractured chronology is indicative of the fact that Bartle could not take the war and turn it into a linear tale of survival. In the same spirit, Raihanah and Alosman (2022) observe that the recurring memories of the death of Murph by Bartle depict the trauma that does not fade away, and the past continually encroaches on the present. This is in line with Hirsch's (2012) concept of postmemory, which emphasizes the fact that trauma persists through narration and memory even in cases when the memories are intolerable. Bartle's admission that his postwar life has been "a digression from those days" (Powers, 2012, p. 3) shows how trauma is overtaking his memory and blocking closure.

Simultaneously, memory in *The Yellow Birds* serves as a bearer of culture. Patrick Hutton (2016) emphasizes that cultural memory is discriminating, which is formed by what people prefer to remember or forget. In this respect, the narrative by Powers opposes national narratives of soldiers as heroes and traces disorientation, guilt, and futility. Similar is the argument presented by AI and Benney (2025), who state that the novel weakens the memory of patriotic duty, which is made unproblematic (p. 59) through prefiguring mental ruin. The novel as such thus presents memory as a personal burden and counter-memory, which confronts the group amnesia of the Iraq War.

Summatively, memory and trauma are placed within scholarship as central to the interpretation of the novel by Powers. Fragmented narration, repetition of images, and insistent guilt are all examples of how trauma interferes with remembrance, and Bartle's recollections are a witness to cultural forgetting. Such duality of memory as a personal victimization and cultural opposition preconditions the investigation of how these disturbances translate into an identity crisis, which is the subject matter of the next part of this review.

2.3 Identity Crisis

The identity crisis of modern war fiction has been frequently associated with the disconnection between individual experience and the culture-induced notion of soldier heroism. In his arguments concerning the concept of double consciousness, Gilroy (1993) points out that identity can be discontinuous as the self-perception conflicts with the gaze that others cast. This has been transferred to the realms of contemporary warfare; there is a fracture being magnified as the soldiers are both positioned as national heroes and, at the same time, they are internally positioned as guilty, complicit, or fractured. This change can be highlighted by the idea of post-heroism as introduced by Luttwak (1995), according to which contemporary military personnel are not described by stable heroic images anymore but are characterized by alienation and moral ambiguity.

The Yellow Birds by Kevin Powers is a work where this identity crisis encompasses the mental path of the main character, Bartle. As Faulkner (2017) points out, Bartle is torn between two opposing discourses: on the one hand, the American cultural script of soldiers as the guardians of democracy; on the other, his own recognitions of being a collaborator in the murder of Murph, as well as the impracticality of the war. This paradox creates a so-called haunted subjectivity where Bartle cannot accept his lived life and the identity that society has assigned to him (Singh, 2024). This might be summed up as his declaration, I did not know, to be a soldier, to be a man (Powers, 2012), being a man.

Critics have traced this identity crisis to the broader cultural post-war in Iraq. According to Shay (2014), some of the veterans endured moral injury, which is not the same as PTSD, but rather a situation in which the soldiers feel that they betrayed their own ethical principles. Bartle exemplifies this type of injury, having lost the ability to communicate with others, be with them, or adapt to different settings. He remains silent, isolated, and alienated from civil life, rather than being unable to survive physically. Besides, his transgressive identity indicates a failure of the collective. According to Alosman and Raihanah (2022) and Farhan (2025), post-heroic stories not only reveal the flaws of an individual soldier but also demonstrate the impossibility of modern societies to hold on to coherent images of military heroism.

In this manner, scholarship emphasizes that identity in *The Yellow Birds* is never fixed but rather broken down into pieces, created under tension between the heroism of society and the guilt of the individual. This crisis brings out the mental weight of contemporary war and is linked directly to the symbolic economy of the novel, where words are the means to say what identity could not put into place. Next, the focus will be on the symbolism as the narrative technique with the help of which the trauma and broken identity are expressed.

2.4 Symbolism

Symbolism plays a central role in Kevin Powers's *The Yellow Birds*, providing a language through which experiences of war and trauma are rendered communicable. The symbols in the literary work play the role of mediating machines that reduce the abstract or ineffable meaning by bringing it into tangible images (Frye 2020). Symbolism is of special significance in the narration of war events, as an anguish of mind and soul is sometimes too overwhelming to be described directly. The issue of trauma that Caruth (1996) reminds us of is that it does not lend itself to straightforward narration. Therefore, the symbolic imagery provides a means of approaching the unspeakable indirectly. The modern-day criticism confirms this fact: The symbolic economy of *The Yellow*

Birds is not decorative, but structural. According to Alosman and Raihanah (2020), the novel brings fragility, guilt, and loss to the reader.

Some of the critics have discussed how Powers uses repetitive images to communicate trauma. The bird itself, which is yellow, has been interpreted as a weak symbol of death, reminding us of how life is so short when war clouds it (Al-janabi and Chen, 2019). Its temporality is indicative of the frailty of Murph as well as the failure of Bartle to shield him. Another symbol of repetition is rivers, which have ambivalent functions: they imply cleansing and rebirth, and at the same time, they are a place of burying and obliteration. Al and Benny (2025) view the river scenes as the dramatization of the tension between survival and destruction, placing the identity of Bartle in the natural cycles of loss. The letter written by the mother, which has frequently been used in literature, turns into a mourning representation of the ineffectiveness of communication: it is a manifestation of the gap that cannot be bridged between the experience of the battlefield and the demands of civilian life (Singh, 2024).

These symbols help Powers to transform the trauma into visuals that can be felt by a reader both emotionally and culturally. According to Raihanah and Alosman (2022), these symbols form collective recognition, which enables the suffering at the individual level to participate in the group discourse. In this regard, symbolism links how the novel treats trauma and memory to larger cultural structures, which helps Powers to imprint psychological wounds into a narrative that goes beyond personal testimony. The symbolic mode, in this way, is not merely a method of literary style. Still, a moral one as well, as it does not annul what would otherwise be unsayable, a witness that unites the pain of the personal and the memory of the culture.

Overall, the critical consensus confirms that symbolism in *The Yellow Birds* cannot be discussed outside of the context of the novel about trauma and identity. The yellow bird, rivers, and letters are recurring images that serve as narrative devices to render the unspeakable and to make the psychological devastation of the war a form of aesthetic expression. Such a symbol economy supports the claim that the novel is a testament as well as a work of art, which the present study builds upon. Examining trauma and symbolism in tandem, it offers insight into the interrelations between war, memory, and identity.

2.5 Research Gap and Synthesis

The analyzed scholarship proves that *The Yellow Birds* has been viewed through various critical prisms: as a post-heroic war novel that shatters the traditional concept of heroism (Luttwak, 1995; Al and Benney, 2025), as an expression of fragmented memory and trauma that cannot be repaired (Caruth, 2016; Satriawan and Rahayu, 2020; Raihanah and Alosman, 2020), as an inquiry into fractured identity that is influenced by guilt and moral injury (Gilroy, 1993). All these methods have added to our comprehension of power in this novel. Still, they have been addressed mainly in isolation, either with respect to the issue of trauma, symbolism, or cultural critique as a narrow issue. What is not so deeply examined is the combination of trauma and symbolism that is used to show how these themes of war, memory and identity are interrelated.

This study fills that gap by interpreting *The Yellow Birds* in an interdisciplinary context that integrates the theory of trauma, the theory of memory, and symbolic analysis. This attitude can be seen as showing how trauma, as well as fracturing the story, is also expressed through symbolism; how memory is simultaneously a personal liability and cultural counter-memory; and how identity breaks down under the strain between the social heroism and the individual sense of guilt. Making these strands of scholarship meet, the study under analysis makes *The Yellow Birds* a paradigmatic text, dramatizing the fractured subjectivity of contemporary war and the necessity of symbolic language to render the unspeakable what the trauma makes unspeakable.

3. METHODOLOGY

The methodology is the engine of any scholarly work, and it entails the principles, tools, and procedures according to which the research question is answered. The methods in literary studies are not tied to experiments or numerical data, but to the strategies of interpretation that permit a critical and systematic approach to texts. The current study, which explores the representations of war, memory, and identity in Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds*, necessitates a qualitative and problem-oriented perspective to examine the issues of trauma and symbolism in the novel. The section thus describes the research design, data collection, analytical framework, and justification of the methods used, and how these methods will be put into practice.

3.1 Research Design

The study employs a qualitative, interpretive design, which is best suited for analyzing a literary text that explores the abstract and subjective experiences of war, trauma, and memory. A qualitative design, unlike quantitative methods, utilizes close reading and contextual interpretation because it attends to form, imagery, and symbolism, which are not captured by numerical data. The given study is also a problem-driven one, because the study aims to fill a research gap that appears in the literature: the low inclusion of the trauma theory and symbolism in the interpretations of *The Yellow Birds*.

3.2 Data and Sources

The main text that is going to be analyzed is *The Yellow Birds* by Kevin Powers (2012). The peer-reviewed journal articles and monographs, as well as book chapters on the theory of trauma, the research of memory, symbolism, and the literature about modern war, are the sources of secondary information. Theoretical background is offered by works by Caruth (2016), LaCapra (2041), Hirsch (2012), and Frye (2020), whereas the contextual and analytical frame is provided by the contemporary critical

studies (e.g., Satriawan and Rahayu, 2020; AI and Benney, 2025; Alosman and Raihanah, 2020). These sources contribute to the analysis based on primary textual sources and the type of scholarship.

3.3 Analytical Framework

The method of analysis is the close reading, which is mixed with thematic and symbolic interpretation. Literary studies are partly close reading, as it allows concentrating on language, narrative structure, and images of the novel. The repetitive patterns, which can be described as war as futility, memory as intrusion, and identity as fracture, are identified with the help of thematic analysis, and these themes are presented in accordance with the goals of the research.. Symbolic analysis focuses on the presence of repetitive images, such as the *yellow bird*, rivers, and letters, and explains them in relation to trauma theory and memory research. Combined, these methods indicate how Powers translates the psychological wounds into a form of story.

3.4 Justification of Approach

The selection of trauma theory, memory research, and symbolism as the novel's subject matter justifies informative approaches. The text of Powers is characterized by fragmented narration, flashback memories, and symbolic images, necessitating theoretical instruments that can address the disjunction, lateness, and uninspired representation. The obsessive recurrence of the past, as well as the nonlinear time of the novel, can be treated using the theory of trauma (Caruth, 2016; LaCapra, 2041). The analysis of memory puts Bartle in the context of the greater culture and history (Halbwachs, 2024; Hirsch, 2012; Simko, 2020). The symbolism (Frye, 1957; Alosman and Raihanah, 2020) helps to shed light on the fact that imagery is full of meanings that cannot be expressed in words. Such a combination approach will make the analysis both textually and theoretically sound.

3.5 Application to the Study

The methodology is a systematic procedure in the practical sense. At the beginning, the novel is read carefully to locate the passages where war, memory, and identity intersect with symbolic imagery. Second, the trauma theory is applied to the analysis of these passages to interpret their discontinuous temporality and repetitive haunting. Third, the research on memory is used to put the memories of Bartle into perspective as counter-memory, which is opposed to the official versions of heroism. Lastly, symbolic analysis explains the repetitive images used to express how trauma is converted into aesthetic expression. This combination enables the research to answer its focus question: in what ways does *The Yellow Birds* present war, memory, and identity in terms of trauma and symbolism.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the thematic analysis of *The Yellow Birds* by Kevin Powers is discussed in terms of the reflection of the war, memory, and identity within the dynamic aspects of trauma and symbolism. This analysis is divided into four subsections, including war as futility, memory as intrusion, identity as fracture, and symbolism as language of trauma. All themes are discussed using close readings of the novel, including the direct textual quotes, and then a discussion that places the findings in the context of available scholarship.

4.1 War as Futility

New war fiction has tended to shun romantic treatment of warfare, giving way to images of futility and confusion, instead of heroism. According to Luttwak (1995), this situation is termed by him as post-heroism, where no decisive wins are witnessed, and soldiers are not brought out as heroes but rather as broken men. In this respect, the Iraq War can be seen as the quintessence of the post-heroic moment: an ideologically unjustified war that destroyed Iraq and among returning soldiers. In this argument, Alosman and Raihanah (2020) claim that the post-heroic war narratives rearrange the role of the soldier, whereby the victory on the battlefield is no longer central, but rather the psychological consequences of survival. *The Yellow Birds* by Powers is an excellent example of this shift in the sense that it does not depict its main character as a hero but as the observer of pointless devastation.

The futility of the war is apparent already with the first line: "*The war tried to kill us in the spring*" (Powers, 2012, p. 3). The quote portrays war as a one-dimensional force that aims at destruction, rather than a mission, thus ruling out any chances of glory. The narrator does not talk of battle in heroic terms but presents war as an effort at extermination. Bartle later reflects, "*It made me feel strange, like the war was a disease, and I had been inoculated*" (p. 47). In this case, war is not idealized but instigated and crossed over into a disease that dehumanizes the people who go through it. This imagery suggests that war is not noble, as it pollutes. The opposition to time, rather than against a high-born opponent, is the daily fight of the protagonist: "*All the ways Murph and I killed time instead of being killed by it*" (p. 65). The futility and stagnation of combat are dramatized by the inversion of killing the enemy into killing time. Finally, Bartle admits, "*I was afraid to tell anyone how little it meant*" (p. 89), in which the emptiness of his experience and his lack of connection with the demands of the culture about what a hero is reflected.

Scholars reinforce this reading. As AI and Benney (2025) note, Powers subverts "the official narrative of patriotic duty" (p. 56), foreshadowing destruction in the name of honor. Ulack (2015) contextualizes this in the broader context of the history of the Iraq war, in which he says foreign intervention could only bring destruction without significant renewal. According to Singh (2024),

the war fiction of the 21st century highlights the language of trauma and memory, which is personal (p. 212), not collective and dedicated to a purpose. Collectively, these works establish that the novel by Powers is an example of the post-heroic state where soldiers do not come back as heroes but ghosts.

In this way, *The Yellow Birds* participates in a longer anti-war tradition, echoing Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) and O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990). But its post-Iraq setting is unique in that it carves the psychological rupture caused by a morally ambiguous war into the story of futility. The anti-heroic stance of the novel and its portrayal of war as something absurd and corrosive are compatible with the theoretical discourses of post-heroism, but also set the stage for its more intensive use in the novel, both in its form and its subjective sense of fracture, to which the protagonist and her identity can be exposed.

4.2 Memory and Trauma

Central to Kevin Powers's *The Yellow Birds* is the way memory becomes both the burden of the individual and the vehicle through which trauma is expressed. According to the theory of trauma as presented by Caruth (2016), it is necessary to point out that the experiences of trauma are not entirely absorbed at the time of the event but reappear later in an intrusive, repetitive, and uncontrollable manner. LaCapra (2041) builds on this by distinguishing acting out, in which the trauma is repetitively enacted compulsively, and working through, in which survivors are seeking to assimilate the past. These theoretical clues are vital to the explanation of the narrative form of the novel: fragmentation, repetition, and temporal disjunction are dramatized through a memory that has survived due to the trauma.

The idea of recollection haunts Bartle even during the very first page: "*The war tried to kill us in the spring*" (Powers, 2012, p. 3). The first line is not positioned in the present but as a memory that comes up as a retrospective one, which still plays over his life. Bartle later admits that he cannot get out of these pictures: "*I had survived, but that was not the same as being alive*" (p. 142). In this context, survival goes hand in hand with intrusive memories that deny him a chance to rejoin the everyday life of a civilian. His memories are not cathartic but paralysing, and this resonates with what Caruth (2016) writes about the delayed trauma. The other episode of unintentional memory can be observed when Bartle tells him that he thought about what he could have done differently every day, and every day it was the same. The monotonous language makes the obsessive coming back of memory dramatic. He cannot find words, even trying to speak of the past: he could never tell it, however he explained it. The memory here is disjointed and not a narrative, and it is a way of measuring the resilience of trauma to assimilation.

Through this interaction of trauma and memory, scholars have found this to be the structure of the novel. According to Satriawan and Rahayu (2020), such fragmentation of chronology reflects the failure of the protagonist to build a chronological narrative about his experience. The same authors, Raihanah and Alosman (2020), argue that the memories of Bartle represent acting out where the past is constantly encroaching on the present. The same can be said about the concept of postmemory described by Hirsch (2012): Since Bartle experiences overwhelming flashbacks as memories, they are so overwhelming that they seem to belong to another person but reside in him. At a cultural level, Simko (2020) reminds us that memory is selective and socially framed. In this respect, the testimony of Bartle can be seen as a counter-memory that opposes the sterilized national histories that render the Iraq War as meaningful and heroic.

The combination of the textual evidence and the critical scholarship supports the idea that the issue of memory in *The Yellow Birds* cannot be regarded outside the context of trauma. The novel portrays the war memories encroaching on the present, disturbing identity, and failing to be told in a precise sequence. Memories are at once a personal curse and a cultural protest, a witness that reveals the psychological ruin of war in the context of state denial. It is this two-fold role of memory as personal burden and counter-history that preconditions the exploration of how trauma and recollection splinter even the sense of self, prompting the identity crisis that forms the subject of the next section.

4.3 Identity as Fracture

One of the concerns of *The Yellow Birds* is the upheaval of identity following war. The post-heroic condition, as described by Luttwak (1995), is created by modern conflicts, particularly those fought without decisive victories, which prevent soldiers from assuming a stable heroic identity. Instead, they return disintegrated, uncertain about their role in society. The concept of double consciousness, introduced by Gilroy (1993) in the context of diasporic identity, is also instructive here: the self is divided into the ways one views oneself and the ways others view them. The gulf between the futility and the guilt he experienced and the expectation of returning as a soldier as a hero fractures the identity of Bartle in the novel by Powers. This identity crisis restates the term used by Shay (2014) to describe the breakdown of the self: moral injury, the inability to act according to personal moral principles when the actions in war culminate in a betrayal of the ethical principle.

This split is dramatized in this novel based on the thoughts of Bartle. At one point, he confesses, "*I didn't know what it meant, to be a soldier, to be a man*" (Powers, 2012, p. 65). This is a one-line summary of the loss of fixed types of identity; soldiering no longer gives meaning and is nothing but bewilderment. Later, Bartle reflects on his complicity in Murph's death: "*I had promised his mother he would come home, and I lied*" (p. 112). The shattered promise is an ontological laceration, which is rotting his self-identity. The alienation comes to his life in the civilian world: "*I did not fit anywhere anymore*" (p. 150). In this case, the split

identity of Bartle is manifested through not only alienation from other people but also from himself. Finally, he admits, "*I had become a ghost of the man I once thought I was*" (p. 178),

Critics point out the way in which Powers can relate this divided identity to cultural systems at large. Faulkner (2017) states that the novel is an opposition to the myths created by Americans about soldiers as heroes and is filled with men destroyed by the pointlessness and conscience. According to Singh (2024), the condition of Bartle has been referred to as "haunted subjectivity" (p. 213), which is the continuity of the trauma in the construction of identity. Alosman and Raihanah (2022) emphasize that post-heroic narratives destabilize the character of the soldier and that they also critique the failure of modern societies to maintain the coherent concept of military honor. In this regard, the idea of a fragmented identity of Bartle is not a unique psychological crisis but a cultural symptom of war that was fought without moral sense.

The novel and the scholarship, combined, indicate that it is not the case that identity in *The Yellow Birds* is stable and coherent. Instead, it is broken by the pressure of the war, guilt, and cultural contradiction. The protagonist is the voice of the moral harm of a generation that could not manage to make personal experience correspond with the mass discourse. This divided identity sets up the background to understand how symbolism can be used as the preferred medium of expression in the novel, which identity and language cannot put into a fixed position, an issue explored in the next section.

4.4 Symbolism as the Language of Trauma

When trauma cannot be directly articulated, it becomes through symbolism that the unspeakable is articulated. Frye (2020) pointed out that symbols abridge abstract meanings into specific images, and this makes literature express emotions and experiences that are beyond ordinary language. Caruth (2016) also found that the trauma does tend to come back in secondary forms, images that represent the inassimilable nature of memory. Kevin Powers, in *The Yellow Birds*, deploys repetitive symbols, such as the yellow bird and rivers, as well as letters, as tools of narrative that make psychological wounds visible. These signs are not ornamental but functional, as they form the way the novel is going to depict the mire of war, memory, and identity.

The most resonant image is the yellow bird itself. Reflectively, Bartle reflects, "*The war was inside of us, like a bird beating against the cage of our ribs*" (Powers, 2012, p. 71). In this case, the bird serves as a symbol of fragility and entrapment, mirroring the protagonist's feelings of being trapped in life by trauma. Its repetition reflects the aspect of death, the temporality of innocence, and the inability to escape. The other vivid picture is the river: "*The river carried everything away, but it left its stains*" (p. 94). The river serves as a purifying agent as well as an erasing agent, bringing to the fore the duality of survival and loss. Later, Bartle encounters the impossibility of communication when he recalls "*I thought about the letter I owed his mother, and how words would fail me*" (p. 118). The letter of the mother turns out to be a representation of unkept promises and irreparable distances between the front and civil life. Lastly, the lyrical narration encompasses the trauma of Powers, which sums up the trauma in terms of landscape: Finally, Powers's lyrical narration crystallizes trauma into landscape: "*The world itself seemed to thin, to become something else*" (p. 91), suggesting that trauma alters perception and transforms reality into a spectral terrain.

Such symbolism is central in the opinion of critics. Hicks (2014) understands the repetitive use of images by Powers as a poetic way of understanding the ineffable. In contrast, AI and Benney (2025) emphasize that symbols such as rivers dramatize the conflict between existence and disappearance. Alosman and Raihanah (2020) assert that the symbolic economy of *The Yellow Birds* is structural and not decorative, which allows the novel to project trauma into the images. These critical reflections support the notion that symbols are sources of meaning that convey personal trauma into communal cultural cyphers.

To conclude, symbolism in *The Yellow Birds* sums up trauma in poetic images that enable readers to appreciate experiences that cannot be spoken. The letters, *the yellow bird*, and the rivers depict the words of fragility, ambivalence, and failure, and put the trauma into the aesthetic structure of the novel. Such a symbolic mode is a narrative mode and an ethical mode, which protects testimony that declines into silence. Combining with the previous discussion of the war and memory and identity, this symbolic aspect makes up the image of the text by Powers as a paradigmatic piece of post-heroic war fiction.

4.5 Discussion

The analysis of *The Yellow Birds* has shown that Kevin Powers reconfigures the Iraq War not as a theatre of heroism but as an arena of futility, trauma, and fractured subjectivity. The four thematic axes include war, memory, identity, and symbolism that show how the novel converts lived experience into an aesthetic testament that undermines prevailing accounts of military heroism. This part summarizes these results and puts them in perspective with the current literature, with continuities and contributions.

4.5.1 War as Futility.

The portrayal of war in the novel corroborates the theorization of post-heroism as put forward by Luttwak (1995), which suggestss that contemporary warfare results in disappointed survivors rather than victorious heroes. AI and Benney (2025) and Ulack (2015) critics point out that the Iraq War did not bring any moral or political victory and left nothing but devastation. Powers' narrative affirms these criticisms, but goes beyond them by dramatizing futility on the level of everyday soldiering: the war is turned into a fight with time, disease, and meaninglessness, not with an identifiable enemy. In this regard, it locates itself in the anti-war tradition of Remarque and O'Brien, but provides a decidedly post-Iraq version of post-heroism.

4.5.2 Memory as Intrusion.

The results also echo Caruth's (1996) and LaCapra's (2001) description of trauma as late and recurring. Bartle shows the compulsion to repeat in fragmented recollections, as Satriawan and Rahayu (2020) and Raihanah and Alosman (2020) note, in the traumatic event, which does not allow the incident to unfold linearly, hindering closure. However, this paper takes the discussion further by highlighting the role of memory in *The Yellow Birds* as both a personal burden and a counter-memory (Simko, 2020). The testimony of Bartle opposes national discourses that whitewash the war as a national obligation, making his memories cultural interventions that save what the official accounts tend to forget. Through this means, the novel has mediated the psychological and the artistic aspects of trauma.

4.5.3 Identity as Fracture.

The analysis proves the statement by Yousaf (2019), who argues that post-9/11 war fiction prefigures haunted subjectivity. Bartle represents this state, his personality being broken down by the sense of guilt, alienation, and moral trauma (Shay, 2014). AI and Benney (2025) quite rightly note that the novel does not lend itself to heroic images of soldiers. Yet, the given study takes it a step further and shows that splitting identity is inseparable from the symbolic economy of the novel. Bartle's confessions of estrangement, "*I did not belong anywhere anymore*" (Powers, 2012, p. 150), demonstrate the psychological breakdown as well as the cultural dislocation. The disjunction between lived experience and social expectations destabilizes the identity of the soldier. This crisis is symptomatic of the wider inabilities to maintain coherent ideals of military honor in post-heroic societies (Alosman and Raihanah, 2020).

4.5.4 Trauma as a Symbolic Language.

Powers has been recognized in the existing scholarship as poetically writing and using recurring imagery (Al-janabi and Chen, 2019; Alosman and Raihanah, 2020); however, the work presented in this study has demonstrated that symbolism is not just a style framing but a necessary tool to express trauma. *The yellow bird* symbolizes frailty and death, while the river represents both purification and interment. The letter from the mother signifies the unsuccessful communication between the battlefield and home. The symbols summarize trauma into communicable forms that allow Powers to make visible what could not be depicted in language. Trauma, as Caruth (2016) says, is commonly the unclaimed experience; it is symbolism that gives it a means of narration.

4.5.5 Synthesis and Contribution.

The combination of the findings proves that in *The Yellow Birds*, the themes of trauma and symbolism are inseparable. The narrative is fractured by trauma, and memory locates the protagonist's suffering in the context of cultural forgetting and identity disintegration. Guilt and alienation transform identity and symbolism, rendering these wounds into images that readers can understand. The elements were treated separately in previous scholarship, either trauma studies, symbolic readings, or post-heroism critique. The current research contributes by bringing together these strands to reveal how they merge, dramatizing the fractured subjectivity of modern war.

4.5.6 Responding to the Research Question.

The focal query that would interpret this study was as follows: How does *The Yellow Birds* by Kevin Powers portray the nature of war, memory, and identity based on the intricate interaction of trauma and symbolism in his work? This has been demonstrated through the analysis where Powers denies heroic narratives, exposes war as futility, depicts memory as intrusive and countercultural, dramatizes identity as fractured, and relies on symbolism as the aesthetic language of trauma. This way, the novel is not only a reflection of the lived experience of the Iraq War, but it also marks the continuation of the literary tradition of anti-war testimony, which allows expanding a range of discussions concerning trauma and memory studies.

5. CONCLUSION

This study reviews *The Yellow Birds* (2012) by Kevin Powers as a paradigmatic work of literature on post-Iraq war fiction, analyzing how it presents the war, recollection, and identity through the interplay of trauma and symbolism. The research, starting with the acknowledgement that the prevailing literature tended to study these aspects separately, followed a direction of an integrative framework based on the trauma theory, memory research, and the symbolic analysis. By close reading and thematic interpretation, the paper has shown how Powers has provided an account of not only the experience of war but the psychological, cultural, and ethical effects as well, which she etches into the symbolic economy that enables the unspeakable to be said.

5.1 Summary of Findings

Four insights were identified during the analysis. First, *The Yellow Birds* depicts war not as a place of heroism but as meaninglessness, which is a characteristic of post-heroism as described by Luttwak (1995) and reflects the idea presented by AI and Benney (2025) in which this novel discredits the official accounts of noble mission. Second, memory in the novel also appears fragmented and intrusive as Caruth (2016) describes trauma as belated and repetitive, and also serves as counter-memory, that of the resistant to cultural forgetting (Simko, 2020). Third, the struggle with guilt and alienation causes identity to shatter, and this scenario reminds Shay (2014) of the concept of moral injury and Singh (2024) of haunted subjectivity. Fourth, symbolism is the

primary trauma language of the novel "*The Yellow Bird*." Rivers, letters, and birds compress the psychological trauma into poetic forms that transcend the narration.

5.2 Contributions to Scholarship

The study contributes to the study of literary trauma and war literature by combining trauma theory and symbolic analysis. Although previous critics analyzed the novel through the lens of its psychological or stylistic nature separately, this study indicates that the concepts of trauma and symbolism cannot be used independently of each other. Trauma determines the fragmented temporality of the novel, and symbolism offers the means of making it readable. In addition, the destined location of *The Yellow Birds* in the anti-war genre of Remarque and O'Brien is, in fact, underscored by the fact that *The Yellow Birds* has a distinctly post-Iraqian setting: it addresses not only the malaise of the individual soul but the cultural failure to maintain heroic ideals in late-modern warfare.

5.3 Implications

The results have further implications in the field of both literary and cultural studies. At the literary level, they confirm the necessity of symbolism to convey trauma and assert that poetic imagery is an ethical technique of testifying. At the cultural level, they demonstrate that literature can be part of the counter-memory as it helps to keep the voices of marginalized or silenced in official histories alive. The novel by Powers is therefore both art and archive: it records the futility and the devastation of the Iraq War. It gives the suffering of the individual to be reflected worldwide. The presence of this dual role highlights the ability of literature to interact with historical trauma in a manner that is, at times, complementary and confrontational to political or historical narratives.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited, similar to any other research. It placed its emphasis on one novel and future studies may broaden the scope of the analysis to a comparative level, where different Iraq and Afghanistan War narratives, including *Redeployment* by Alosman (2021) or *Green on Blue* by Elliot Ackerman (2015), can also be discussed as the representation of trauma and symbolism. A second productive direction would be cross-cultural comparisons, exploring how Iraqi writers portray the same conflict through the perspectives of both the invaded and the invader. This kind of research might add to our knowledge about war literature as a worldwide and communicative process.

5.5 Recommendations

The findings give rise to two recommendations. To begin with, scholars are advised to continue using interdisciplinary models that integrate trauma studies, memory studies, and symbolism to make sense of war narratives. Such methods expose aspects of meaning that are not detected when studied alone. Second, texts such as *The Yellow Birds* are to be regarded by educators and cultural critics as artefacts and as artistic pieces that continue counter-histories. The inclusion of such literature in curricula and popular culture will allow people to reflect critically on the psychological and cultural costs involved in modern war.

To sum up, *The Yellow Birds* brings to life the experienced and recalled reality of war in ways that call into question conventional histories of heroism and national service. Through the interactions between trauma and symbolism, Powers turns disjointed memories and internal injuries into a symbolic economy that holds what is otherwise unsayable. As this paper has demonstrated, the novel is not a mere personal witness but a cultural document that itself is part of the overall record of memory, which provides a clue to the discontinuous subjectivity of the modern soldier and the lingering trauma of the Iraq War. By so doing, it validates the persistence of literature to continue to interact with history, memory, and identity at their most susceptible points of intersection.

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