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The Indelible Mark That War Leaves on Human Life and Relationships: A Study of Vikas Sharma's *Love and Ego*

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Abstract

Aims: *This research paper aims to explore the novel Love and War by Vikas Sharma in the context of the psychological impact that war and military violence causes. It delves into concepts such as PTSD and its manifestation in people who are living through active warfare; by analyzing the two pivotal characters in the novel. The paper aims to understand how war impacts the normal day to day living of the civilians and how they cope with the terror and violence surrounding them.*

Methodology and Approaches: *In this research paper, an attempt has been made to do a character study of the two protagonists; predominantly through the lens of trauma theory. Concepts such as 'Trauma' and 'PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) have been defined and employed. A thorough Textual analysis has been made to bring out the points of concern.*

Outcome: *Through this paper, the researcher has come to expound the pernicious effects of war and military violence on people's psyche. The researcher has come to find out about how prolonged war and violence leads to isolation and trauma in the innocent civilians and military alike. It also shows how normal day to day life is suspended during the crisis of a war.*

Conclusion and Suggestions: *Through the research paper, we can draw the conclusion that war is disruptive and destructive to every aspect of normal human life and relationships causing immeasurable pain, isolation and trauma in the people. It is one of the foremost evils and a threat to the modern society which leaves an indelible mark on the human psyche.*

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War has long been one of the most devastating forces shaping human lives, leaving profound psychological, emotional, and social consequences. Literature has frequently explored the experiences of individuals caught in the turmoil of armed conflict, highlighting the trauma, displacement, loss, and resilience that emerge in such circumstances. Vikas Sharma's *Love and Ego: A Russo-Ukrainian War Saga* presents a poignant portrayal of human relationships forged amid violence and uncertainty. Set against the backdrop of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, the novel examines how love, companionship, and shared suffering transcend political boundaries and national identities. Through the experiences of its protagonists, the narrative offers valuable insights into the psychological impact of war and the enduring human quest for connection, hope, and survival.

The protagonists of the novel meet amidst active warfare between the two countries. Both of them are situated in a unique socio-cultural setup which makes them foster a strong patriotic temper. The male protagonist Rada Lee is a young soldier in the Ukrainian army fighting in the war against Russia. The female protagonist Nathleen is the daughter of a former Colonel in the Russian military who is now living alone after her husband committed suicide; and she is financially supported by the State. Both of them are therefore hardwired to harbor nationalistic feelings and do so in their own ways, until they come across each other by the workings of Fate. They fall in love which makes them go beyond their patriotic sentiments to find a deeper understanding in each other. The unwillingness in both of them to justify the moral grounds of the war make them more empathetic towards each other's position as victims of the devastation perpetrated by active warfare. Lee suffers displacement and an acute economic crisis because of the war while Nathleen struggles with isolation and resource scarcity.

The relationship between the protagonists develop through a constant negotiation between their patriotic identities and their basic human selves desiring comfort and love in one another. Their initial anxiety towards the other as someone with allegiances to the enemy country, soon resolves into a mutual understanding and affection for each other. They find a steady support and love in each other that surpasses their opposing patriotic identities. This is aided by the

fact that they share common roots in terms of their linguistic, culinary and cultural sensibilities as Ukraine was a part of Russia for a considerable amount of time, leading to the seepage of culture and tradition of one region into the other. This shared tradition and values foster a sense of unity and belongingness between the two protagonists.

Even though Lee is forced to fight in the Ukrainian Army in the war, he reveals to Nathleen that his great grandfather had fought in the Russian Army in the Second World War and had given up his life fighting the Germans in the Siberian region. Lee therefore has a similar familial history as Nathleen whose father also had served in the Russian army. Moreover, both the protagonists have a strong humanitarian value system which makes them see beyond each other's differences; embracing the bond that binds them together with the unified human experience of grief and loss during the crisis of the Russo-Ukrainian war.

The gradual strengthening of their relationship offer the readers a glimpse into a unique phenomenon, where the trauma and violence of the war make people forge an irrevocable connection that binds them forever. The protagonists meet at a time of unprecedented crisis of the war between Russia and Ukraine; and forge an immediate attachment, which might seem peculiar to the readers when we consider the fact that both of them belong to enemy sides. Yet the protagonists fall in love almost immediately. It is because a war leads to a suspension of day to day human life and functioning leading to a paradigmatic shift in human conduct and relationships. The violence and trauma of war forces men and women to return to a primal survival mode where there is an everyday struggle to stay alive. The protagonist of the novel Rada Lee exemplifies the struggle for survival during the crisis of war. He is a young professor in a medical school who is forced to join the military to fend for himself and his family. When he meets Nathleen, he is in enemy territory in Russia fleeing from the Russian army amidst heavy warfare. He comes to Nathleen's doorstep to seek refuge. He is provided refuge by Nathleen and he feels secure in her home. The security that Nathleen's home provides him, makes him attached to her immediately, despite her allegiances to the enemy country. Nathleen almost immediately welcomes Lee into her home despite her initial misgivings about sheltering an enemy soldier.

For Natheen, Lee isn't just a soldier from the enemy side but is foremost a human being seeking refuge at her doorsteps. Nathleen therefore, is a symbol of nurturing feminine energy who is not fettered by the narrow divisions of sex, race, geography, polity. She delves into her fundamental humanitarian values to Lee at a time of grave crisis. Even though Nathleen herself suffers through immense adversity due to the war, she keeps her compassion and benevolence intact. Recounting her immense misfortunes to Lee, Nathleen says: "Fate has been brutal to me in the last five years. My first husband left home when he lost all our money at a casino and my second husband committed suicide.... Then, heavy taxes have been imposed upon us in the last five years and now Ukrainians are planning to take revenge. With all the mayhem around, I am not scared of death but I refuse to let go of my humanity, I will help you." (Sharma 34)

Lee for the first time in months, has a peaceful meal and a night of rest at Nathleen's home, after a harrowing experience in the army; which makes him subconsciously tie himself to her in an irrevocable bond of gratitude and indebtedness. He unwittingly falls in love with her soon enough; being attracted to her physical beauty. He himself confesses to her his masculine weaknesses which fails to resist her physical beauty and sensuality. This is another of the reasons which make the two protagonists attached to each other despite all their differences. It is the primal physiological desire of sexuality in human beings that further draws them to each other. Lee once confesses to Nathleen about his intense sexual attraction towards her: "Man is man; animal instinct dominates him even during terrible times." (Sharma 41)

Over time their sexual relationship turns to that of cohabitation, leading to marriage like most man woman relationships. We see here therefore, that the primal physiological needs like food, water, shelter and sex are not curbed even amidst the devastation and destruction of war. Even though the human physiological desires and functioning remain intact during the crisis of war, it is the human psychological system that bears the brunt of the violence perpetrated by a War. A War brings in its wake such unprecedented devastation - where human lives end in thousands every day, with unaccounted destruction of public and private property- that the human psyche deviates from its normal mode of

functioning and enters into a perpetual survival mode where it is threatened with complete annihilation, every second of every day. According to HelpGuide.org (a recognized nonprofit organization providing health information) “military service is the most common cause of PTSD in men”. Studies of Afghanistan and Iraq War veterans have shown that as many as 30 percent have developed PTSD. For veterans who saw combat, the risk of developing PTSD is even higher.” National Institute of Medical Health (NIMH) defines Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as “a disorder that develops in some people who have experienced a shocking, scary, or dangerous event.” In the novel Rada Lee, who is a captain in the Ukrainian army, suffers from trauma from his active service in the war. Lee is sent to Russia for a mission on behalf of the Ukrainian army along with his fellow soldiers. But his troop gets ambushed after an unsuccessful mission in the Kremlin. He is separated from his fellow officers and somehow flees the Russian army. He relates to Kathleen the traumatic experiences that he lived through during his active service in the war. All the destruction and death that he had to witness left an indelible mark on him. Moreover, the abject living conditions in which he had to survive during the war further leads to a degradation in his physical and psychological health. He recounts to Nathleen about the extreme rationing of food and other amenities for the soldiers: “I’m so hungry, I haven’t had any food since yesterday. Before that I had to survive with just two apples that I received in ration, I tried to look for some food but you can’t leave the group without the permission of the group Commissioner. Orders are to be obeyed in all situations.” (Sharma 34).

Nathleen, on her part, has also gone through traumatic experiences that reshapes her psyche. She has survived extreme losses. Firstly, she suffers debilitating financial losses when her first husband loses all of their money in gambling. Next, she suffers immense personal losses when her second husband commits suicide while battling cancer and then her father also passes. She becomes a widow and an orphan at a very young age, forced to live alone and make ends meet only with the help of her father's pension. When Rada Lee first encounters Nathleen she is living a life of self-imposed isolation. She has almost given up on life, out rightly rejecting any form of human connection, be it

relationships or friendships “She thought of her sleepless nights and dreams. She recollected the past when she used to be alone in the apartment. No one bothered about her...She cared very little for fancy clothes or the latest trends.” (Sharma 40)

She isn't even scared of letting an armed Ukrainian soldier into her home knowing that she was harboring a soldier from the enemy side which could potentially be extremely dangerous to her. When Rada Lee points his gun towards her she remains unperturbed: “No need for the gun. There are no more sufferings left for me to suffer, death might come as a relief” (Sharma 33). Nathleen and Rada Lee therefore bond over their shared experiences of trauma and find immediate connection with each other.

Even though both Nathleen and Rada Lee are patriotic, they are detractors of the ongoing war, both of them realizing the devastating consequences of it. Both of them already have been directly affected by the war; Lee having to unwillingly leave his home and his profession in order to fight in the army and Nathleen facing all the brunt of the war as a civilian with food and water shortages and having to survive in a general climate of fear and crisis. Lee deeply sympathizes with the other Ukrainian soldiers who had been separated from their homes and families because of the war and the rigid yet weak political and economic organization of the country. The general critique of the war by the Ukrainian soldiers is clearly expressed by Lee “There were mixed feelings among the Ukrainian soldiers. Most of them hated the war and regarded it as unrewarding. Some of them wanted to resign from the defense services but they had no other source of income. In Ukraine and Russia, there were no opposition political parties, and hence no second-party leaders to support people like Rada Lee.” (Sharma 78). Nathleen has become deeply jaded with her way of life in Russia as a young widowed woman. Even though she craves for the freedom that she had earlier enjoyed as a student in America, she still decides to stay in Russia because the State gives her financial security; her being the orphaned daughter of a retired military man. She longs for the flamboyance of her university days as a young girl who had the liberty to live life on her own terms whereas now she is forced to live n orthodox life of a widow. Nathleen therefore shares a dualistic

relationship with regard to her homeland. She is both critical of the traditional nature of Russian society and yet she is grateful for the sustenance that she receives from her country. Similarly, Lee's relationship with his home country Ukraine is dualistic in Nature. He is a young patriot who is proud of his country's developments and achievements in the recent past. On the other hand, he resents having had to serve in the military to fend for his family because of the war leading to a breakdown of the financial system of Ukraine; it being a relatively small and developing country. Lee's position is further problematized because his family history is intertwined with that of Russia; his own grandfather having served in the Russian army. This paper therefore gives us a comprehensive glimpse into the nature of human relationships and how war impacts the azure of such relationships. We see how factors like a shared past, humanitarian values, trauma, survival instincts and sexuality all play a role in bringing together the protagonists of the novel even though they belong to enemy sides.

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