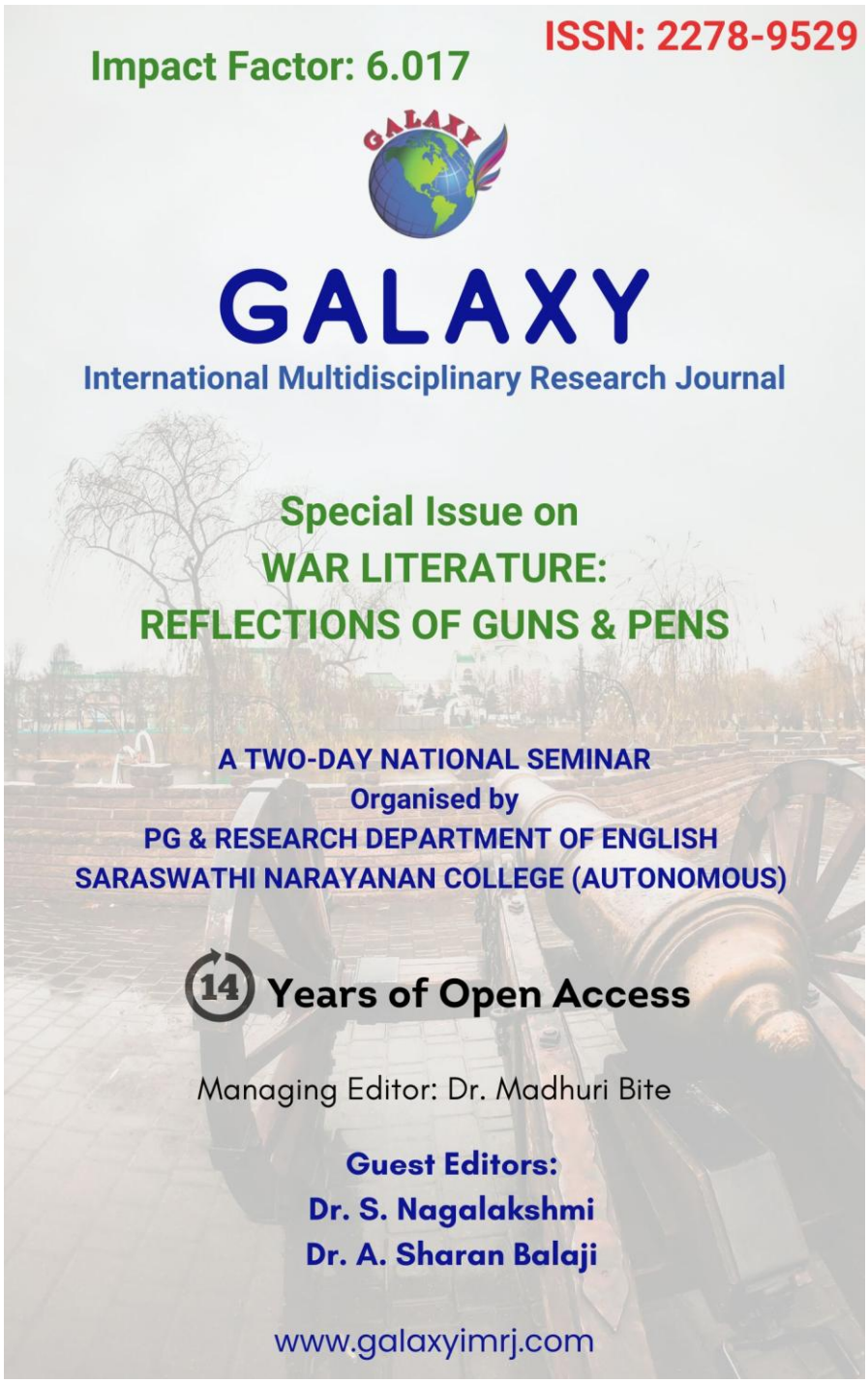


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Feministic Approach to Gender Identity in War: A Study Based on Helen Benedict's *Sand Queen*

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Abstract:

Helen Benedict, one of the most popular female writers in the US, wrote the first novel about the Iraq war entitled *Sand Queen,* which was published in 2011. The novel is in the form of a documentary, as the narrative happened because the writer conducted a lot of research and interviews with excellent warriors, particularly women. *Sand Queen* takes a feministic approach to gender identity models and uses a unique narrative style to address certain themes, such as war, relocation, trauma, and cross-cultural identity. Authorities in the US claim that they have saved the lives of numerous Iraqi women from patriarchal domination. Benedict delineates the gender-based violence in her book by demonstrating the life of an American woman soldier. This paper analyses the writer's gender conscious perspective of war through the various characters in the novel. The narrators in the novel are two major characters: a US military woman, Kate Brady, and an Iraqi medical scholar, Naema Jassim. The study examines various concepts of gender identity by incorporating the third-wave feminist approaches to gender. This paper reveals how the endorsement of gender philosophies subjugated the male-dominated systems of the military community by exploring the gender identity models that are intermingled in the narrative.

Keywords: Gender-identity, gender models, third-wave feminism, patriarchy, Iraq war, military.

Introduction

The genre of war has attained a prominent place in world literature through a few works of renowned writers such as *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* by Ben Fountain, *Fobbit* by David Abram, *The Yellow Birds* by Kevin Powers, and *The Watch* by Roy Bhattacharya. Among these writers who deal with war in their writings, Helen Benedict has gained readers across the world because of her unique style of narration and the precise portrayal of women at war in *Sand Queen*. All the above-mentioned novels of war literature were published in the year 2012, whereas *Sand Queen* was published in the year 2011. Benedict captured attention through her novel as the narrators of her novel are women warriors in the Iraq war that happened during the period of 2003-2011. The US military authorities included more women soldiers for the first time during the Iraq war, according to the study of Molin in 2014. According to Cahill,

> "The novel *Sand Queen* is an intimate, personal experience of war conveyed through the silent feelings of the characters, their laughter, …, but that is exactly where the novel can be so powerful" (Cahill 2011).

As a war fiction, Helen Benedict's *Sand Queen* would be more transgressive than if it were a memoir or documentary since it is a work on Foucault's theory of "reverse discourse". According to Baroffio-Bota's study,

> "People like female soldiers whose identities are marginalized can turn around against the discourses that oppress them in order to appropriate them as a way of declaring their transgression" (Baroffio-Bota 2006).

The *Sand Queen* is considered a novel that expresses a feminist challenge to embedded patriarchal frameworks in military organizations, not least in terms of third-wave feminism. The narrator-characters of this novel negotiate and struggle with the social constructions underpinning their dual lives as feminine warriors and homemakers, both inhabiting and

challenging conventional conceptions of femininity. Benedict reverses war story conventions by presenting her narrative through her female characters' perspectives, diverging from the traditional alignment of war stories with certain gender identities. The structure of *Sand Queen* reveals itself with close reading, specifically in its narration of one of the female characters' ease of gaining access to the army and the other's dominance of the global language. Naema's superiority over Kate is also emphasized in the novel. Naema is comfortable with Kate's native language, whereas Kate is not familiar with the Iraqi language, except that she can imitate some Arabic terms. In *Sand Queen*, Benedict tries to show the negative impacts of the Iraq War from different perspectives. *Sand Queen* employs numerous focalizations in order to depict richer pictures of the central characters and, therefore, allow the reader to gain access to the character-narrators' thoughts and feelings. By engaging with two core character narrators, Benedict is capable of producing a more dialogic narrative effect. Alternating between Kate's perspective, the third-person narrator, and Naema's, Benedict builds a series of glances along an East or West axis. Through her novel, Benedict brings to light the challenges of US women soldiers and Iraqi women refugees so that they stay in the spotlight in her novel. A female soldier can reverse the conventional assumptions of gender and militarism by reversing the notion that women inherently relate to private life and men relate to public life. One of the methods through which *Sand Queen* can engage discussions of gender role and space is through its focus on female soldiers in the novel. According to Baroffio-Bota,

> “The female warrior might resist prescriptive discourses of militarism and masculinity by declining naturalization of public vs. private or masculine vs. feminine" (Baroffio-Bota 2006).

Through her characters Kate and Naema, Benedict has passed on a deeper, mature knowledge and understanding of women's narration, so to speak, trying to affirm or overturn classical portrayals of women throughout patriarchal society. Some studies have been done

comparing *Sand Queen* with war trauma and displacement literature, the role played by US women soldiers in the Iraq War (Wright 2018), and the multiple traumatic experiences as detailed (Al Doory and Al-Shetawi 2018). The present study analyzes different models of gender identity as expressions of the philosophical foundations of military organizations from a unique theoretical perspective and point of view. In balancing the absence of focus on gendered differences between narrative forms, the research integrates feminist narratological theories. The passage seeks to reveal the operations of gender in textual forms. This present study provides fresh insights into Benedict's literary feminism via analysis of narrative strategies through a cultural constructionist view of gender, which is the specific research focus of feminist narratology. This article reviews different models of gender identity, giving an analysis and hypothesis about their implication, to show how feminine identity is represented concerning larger gendered norms of the society at war. We analyse how gender ideologies operate in the novel by the examination of a representative set of texts in the novel that most notably present different gender-identity models.

Gender and Feminist Narratology

Modern feminist narratology has added the understanding that gender is being constructed through narrative and is not predetermined. It uses unconventional pronouns to talk about war in an attempt to do so. This condition makes one more likely to be faced with uncertain gender information. The uncertainty over the gender of each narrator in *Sand Queen* is a valid interpretation as first-person pronouns are not gendered, either singular or plural. Therefore, they can be employed to describe either male or female characters as narrators. In some gender-inflecting languages, the gender of the narrator is already known, not progressively revealed throughout the story. Clarifying these moments of doubt is the focus of feminist narratology, which provides valuable insight into gender issues through close textual analysis. The argument of the researcher named Mezei is that feminist narratology recognises

and traces spots of ambiguity, indefinity, and behaviour of storyline and the genders of authors, narrators, protagonists, and audiences (Mezei 1996).

The narrator of *Sand Queen* does not reveal her full name until chapter two. When the reader meets her opposite character, Naema Jassim, he/she may be eager to know the narrator's full name. Katharine is a nickname of the Greek name Kate. The name originates from katharos, which means "pure" (Norman 2003). In Shakespeare's own quite famous play *The Taming of the Shrew*, the hot-tempered woman has been defined (ibid.). The variant spelling of Catherine/Katherine may remind us of the name "*Sand Queen*" because it is connected to queens, saints, and many powerful women in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The qualities of Kate's independence, energy, and intelligence recall great namesakes, for instance, Katharine (Kate), the heroine of the 1953 MGM movie version of the Broadway musical, which originally opened in 1948 as a stage musical, and was also based upon Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew,* a play that includes a character known as "Kate". Naema's story begins with a gender-undefined role. The second narrator, referred to as 'I', starts the story in the first-person plural. It is through Mamma that the gender of the narrator is revealed:

> “Naema is ready to instruct you,' Mamma said …. She can keep you up on your English and science” (SQ 15).

Naema's ability is also revealed at this stage in the story: she possesses a high level of English-speaking skill, an ability that will feature prominently in the story.

Gender Identity Models

This research points out specific linguistic markers to possess gendered meaning and categorizes them under various paradigms of gender identity, illustrated through many examples in various contexts. According to the principles of third-wave feminism, gender identities are assumed to be socially constructed, not biologically linked with birth. In spite of

this, there are some conventional expectations about expected gender identities and conduct. In *Sand Queen*, Benedict's character-narrators build themselves through one of a number of processes: conforming to, negotiating with, interrogating, or rejecting traditional gender stereotypes.

Sand Queen has an abundance of men as natural warrior examples. Kate's narration, for instance, puts in the mind of the reader that man is a warrior by nature and will defend his country at all cost whenever he is asked to fight because she envisions Henley, her platoon sergeant, who has been trained since his childhood.

> “I just understand him now as a chubby little brat crying for his toy soldier army as mommy gives him cookies" (230).

The military is often viewed to consider men soldiers superior to women soldiers throughout the novel, using male pronominal characters such as Henley, who honours Private Sanchez's sacrifice as if she were a male soldier.

> "She is not the only fine soldier to lose the life yesterday.…Her life, Sergeant…. She lost her life. Not his" (271).

Naema, a literate Arab female, also thinks war is for men, as understood by her use of masculine pronouns when she guesses in the beginning that the soldier at the checkpoint (Kate) is a male. The reader can conclude from her assertion that women cannot fight, participate in wars, and do dangerous things like taking other’s lives.

> "He looks like a child in his father's uniform.… He is no child. He is a killer and an occupier" (18).

There was a belief that war was meant only for men, a place where no women are invited. *Sand Queen* reveals very explicitly that women cannot enter into war fields. Kate

explains how she feels when most of the time, she is treated by their male counterparts as if women are not created for any war or such hard things.

> "The men in the war … I don't know, but for the most part they act like I'm not here" (35).

The armed forces organizations have always privileged only manliness. The male soldiers always value their male friends more than their wives or girlfriends. After Kate witnesses Jimmy's autograph under graffiti calling her a ‘Cock-Sucking Sand Queen’ (104), she understands that he is not higher than other males in her old patriarchal army unit:

> "Whatever made me think … different than the other military men in this … as they would like to mention” (106).

Moreover, the men are at the wheel within the armed environment, always looking out for their brothers-in-arms first and foremost. Kate and the other female soldiers are always walking on eggshells. Subsequently, when Kate has had faced an attempt rape by a staff sergeant and isn't being heard,

> "At first we should listen to the man who wants to say from his side. … Go, call him in" (151).

This statement continues,

> “Due to the equality of rank of the men, they can corroborate their lies so that they will be able to maintain their kind and own aspirations” (154).

Every attempt is made by the patriarchal military institutions to discredit and shut down any patriotic work done by women. At this point, Kate faces a hard time adjusting to the military that no longer needs her service after she loses her power. Her words reveal this scenario,

"Then they ship me home in late August … sleep pills to dope myself into a robot, numb enough to redeploy when they need me" (299).

Kate, at first, seems to transgress the gendered binarism in war narratives historically by joining the army. But as Benedict reveals in the course of the book, this double gendering goes on in the Iraq War. Kate is shown by the author to be aware that her "verb" will not turn her into a soldier. Assuming it's not a soldier, Kate would rather be anything,

"I don't know what I want to be—perhaps a teacher, perhaps a television reporter, perhaps … by themselves listening to birdcalls. Anything, indeed, as long as it's not a soldier" (129).

Kate even stresses her dislike of war in her account and states, painting the battlefield as dirty and unbecoming.

"I used to really like the summertime … which is unbelievable in this hellhole" (75).

The belief that men are strong and women are emotionally and physically weak is a perfect example of classical gender discourse. One can reason that only the strong and the brave are able to wage war if one were to consider this notion. Following Baroffio-Bota (2006), the military is also conventionally perceived as representing the characteristics of men, such as being powerful, physically strong, the prime member in a family, and a responsible person. Kate and Naema, the two protagonists of the novel, are excited at being perceived as strong, a study by *Sand Queen* attests with numerous examples. The novel portrays just how difficult it is to break free from social expectations as well as expectations by her own family. She can't fit into the societal norms of how a woman ought to be. She often reverses, taking male gender roles such as racing hurdles or being on the track team. When she enlists in the army, she shows still more of this masculine assertiveness:

> "I was not able to wait to tell Dad the day I made up my mind. When I did boy stuff like running hurdles or being on the track team, he was always proud" (40)

She instinctively goes to her father's gun, the ultimate male power, because she practices and enacts elements of masculinity. As the character-narrator, Kate also makes her hesitation over where she stands in the power relationship one of hesitation over the meaning of her words. Her wording evinces the sense that she is at all times in terror of speaking out of turn on a topic of which she thinks she has no place. Her paralyzing feeling of helplessness in the military chain of command can be accounted for by how she defines herself as a simple "junior enlisted." In addition, her discovery as a junior in the patriarchal decision-making context in the military is seized with the use of perceptual and epistemic operators. Her statements show that soldiers are merely provided with little information to make responsible comments on anything. Kate has no actual knowledge or insight; she possesses only opinions. The novel continues to employ man/woman (and maybe knowledge/ignorance) binaries. Perrenot opines,

> "The protagonist of *Sand Queen* is just an expert, one of the four lower ranks under sergeant first class and the same pay grade as corporal in the US military, which has thirteen enlisted grades". (Perrenot 2011, 8).

Conclusion

Women of the imagined world are imagined as accepting, resisting, or opposing the premise that domestic womanhood is a world of peace and that battlefield manliness is the only space for male combatants. This is what occurs in war narratives by women writers who possess women's perspectives such as that of Benedict in *Sand Queen*. These gendered peace-making woman and warrior man tropes are employed repeatedly in the book consistently, but also reversed in various ways. The ending of the novel can validate the argument that women are

still vulnerable in the military. Kate occupies herself inside a vulnerable status in the Panopticon and returns home, psychologically traumatized and frustrated. Naema, meanwhile, is left by herself in a dramatic irony since she does not have certain information on the destiny of her father and brother who were imprisoned. Hence, *Sand Queen* is found rebellious as a war story on women, it doesn't carry frequent representation of gender identity that points out gender in an unconventional manner.

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