



# From Home to Warfront: Women in World War II Narratives

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**Abstract**— *The narratives of war often overvalue masculine power over female capacity. Women's contribution goes unacknowledged, unnoticed and unnamed. Wars valorize men's valiance as soldiers and decision makers while women take the backseat as mere survivors amidst chaos. This paper focuses on the gendered narratives around war and throws light on what it is to be a woman in the times of war. It brings women on the frontline and rethinks War narratives including the experiences and contributions of a number of women who came out of their cocoon and took the challenges head on. The issues like Anti-Semitism, rape, mother-child relationship, and trauma that the war results in forms the base of the study. It showcases women as rebellious and passionate, having a steel exterior, and protecting a candyfloss heart. They are a testament of hope and resilience. The present paper underscores the narratives' depiction of women strength amidst three kinds of violence- psychological, physical and sexual and their complex societal re-entry. It is a voice against hyper masculinity and celebrates the 'invisible women' in war.*



**Keywords**— *Anti- Semitism, Hyper masculinity, Rape, Trauma, Violence, War*

## I. INTRODUCTION

"To you who'd read my songs of War  
And only hear of blood and fame,  
I'll say (you've heard it said before)  
'War's Hell!' and if you doubt the same"  
(“A Dead Boche” Lines 1-4)

-War narratives are full of man's valor, their physical and mental strength, their bravery and sacrifices. Women's role is either sidelined or restricted to one who cares and one who needs to be protected. They remain invisible, incessantly waiting for the men folks to return and provide. History doesn't see them as heroes or survivors; they are merely dependents and caregivers. This paper is an attempt to radically and fundamentally question and revise the way we view women's role in war. It reiterates the fact that it is not bullets alone that win the battle. The paper takes a more feminist and humanitarian

approach to war narratives and disentangle the stories of women war heroes who left no stone unturned.

The stories of war often project men as decision makers while women take the backseat. The distrust on a woman's physical strength is to the extent that in Afghanistan, when women decided to confront the Taliban and took up arms in combat, the reports were not believed. In this regard, Zabinullah Mujadih made the statement, "Women will never pick up guns against us. They are helpless and forced by the defeated enemy. They can't fight." (qtd. in "The Faces of War: Reintroducing Women's Narratives in War" 7-8) Hence, violence is not something that is believable when it comes to women. Peterson in "The Faces in War: Reintroducing Women's Role in War" presents Sjoberg's and Gentry's views that describe violent women as "mothers, monsters, or whores. The mother narrative describes women's violence as a way of taking care of men and a form of nurturing. The monster narrative eliminates blame from women by casting them as

insane and denying them as ‘real’ women or even human. Finally, the whole narrative describes women’s violence as driven by a sexual dependence on men and an erotic dysfunction... By portraying violent women as a flaw in humanity, it protects the peaceful woman image and prevents accountability for violent actions.” (24)

The traditional narratives of war coincide with this notion of woman being a meek receiver to a great extent. But the modern narratives have drastically changed the power dynamics and woman no longer fall on the weaker side of spectrum. While writers like Khaled Hosseini and Toni Morrison present a nuanced feminist approach to the war, Charlotte Perkin Gilman and Anne Frank present the psychological repercussions of the same. Hence the narrative has seen a paradigm shift and war literature has expanded in horizon.

## II. WOMEN AS MOTHERS

“And from my mother’s writings, I was understanding for the first time what ultimate sacrifices women made for the war. While women were not usually the ones killed in combat, they were the ones who bravely had to endure the news, and keep going after husbands, sons, and brothers were killed.” (Yellin 12)

Femininity is often associated with the emotions of love, care, sacrifice and selflessness. But being a mother or sister is in no way synonymous with being weak. If we look back in history, mothers often sent their sons to fight in the war which is an ultimate example of a woman’s strength. Those who remained at home did everything they could to support the national cause- some helped raise funds, while others took drastic steps to take care of their children back home in dearth of food and compromised security. Joy Damousi in *History and Theory* writes, “A focus on mothers and maternity redirects our analysis to gendered aspects of a history of violence and war that do not concentrate solely on bodily violent acts of physical inflictions upon women—crucial as these remain to histories of violence—but shifts the attention to examining women and violence within another aspect: as active agents negotiating violent contexts.” (qtd. in Godvin, “Mothers and War”) Kristin Hannah in her famous novel *The Nightingale* beautifully showcases the strength of a mother during the times of war through her character Vianne who being caught up in Nazi occupied France first submits to the atrocities and finally realizes the need to speak up. The reason she gives for this transformation is quite appealing as she says, “I want to protect Sophie [her daughter]... but what good is safety if she has to grow up in a world where people disappear without a trace because they pray to a different God?” (Hannah 262) Her patience is tested when

her best friend is taken to a Jewish concentration camp leaving her in charge of Ari, a Jewish child. This incident in the novel is the height of maternal strength as Vianne starts forging identity papers for thousands of Jewish children, without thinking twice of her own well being. And this is just an example. History is full of examples of women who have taken huge risks at the cost of their life and safety of their children trying to save both.

However, a woman’s war story doesn’t end with the end of war. No matter how hard the situation is, she cannot get weak. After the war is over, she has to wait for the men folks to return from the warfront as behave as if nothing has happened, nothing has changed. It becomes her responsibility to return to her husband and brothers the home they left behind. While men have the liberty to tell stories and showcase strength, women’s contributions often go unnoticed. Their invisibility in the war is so much so that when Vianne’s grown up son (in *The Nightingale*) sees an invitation in his house addressed to a war veteran; he automatically believes it to be for his father. When he realizes it was actually for his mother he looks amazed and asks, “What did you do in the war, Mom?” (Hannah 436) to which Vianne simply replies, “I survived.” (Hannah 436).

Apart from mothers supporting war, there have been cases where women have run anti-war campaigns as they did not want their future generations to suffer what they went through. This activism dwindled the support for the war and makes us question the gender biasness that has engulfed war narratives since times immemorial. Such examples make the gendered narratives of war fall flat.

## III. RAPE DURING WAR

Sexual violence has been used as a weapon of war throughout history in order to showcase dominance, military indiscipline, hatred, or gender superiority. Being deliberate, it terrorizes individuals, alarms the opposite party and destroys families and communities. It brings shame, social stigma and sexually transmitted diseases. During World War II, millions of women were sexually abused while the actual numbers remain unrecorded. It was rampant in concentration camps especially while one cannot ignore the cases in areas under German occupation. Even after 79 years of World War II, we do not have true reports of sexualized violence that occurred. The violence continues to impact the survivors and generations resulting into transgenerational trauma. Jennifer Turpin in “Many Faces, Women Confronting War” talks about how the torture of political prisoners was gendered. (5) Mass rape was used as genocide for ethnic cleansing where women belonging to the so called racially inferior ethnic group

were systematically raped by the enemy soldiers to wipe off the inferior race. According to the records, at least 34,140 European women were forced to prostitution during the German occupation of their countries, along with concentration camp female prisoners.” (*The Blessed Abyss* 33-34)

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defines sexual violence as “any sexual act that is perpetrated against someone’s will. Sexual violence encompasses a range of offenses, including a complete nonconsensual sexual act, an attempted nonconsensual sexual act, abusive sexual contact, and non-contact sexual abuse.” (“Sexual Violence” np) Webster’s Dictionary also defines sexual assault as being “illegal sexual contact that usually involves force upon a person without consent or is inflicted upon a person who is incapable of giving consent or who places the assailant in a position of trust or authority.” (“Sexual Assault” np). There have been multiple personal accounts of these ‘lived realities’ that failed to procure justice but has managed to find a vent in literature. The diary *A Woman in Berlin: 8 Weeks in the Conquered City* by Anonymous is a moving account of repeated sexual violation and forced prostitution in order to procure food. J. Robert Lilly in *Taken by Force: Rape and American GIs in Europe in World War II* “examines the social ramifications for these sexual crimes. It focuses on the rape and similar sexual violence forced on European women between 1942 and 1945. Lilly focuses on the U.S army’s rape of British, French, and German women estimating that 14,000 civilian women were victims.” There was another concept of ‘comfort women’ prevalent where the Japanese army forced thousands of women into forced prostitution. (Soh 12.) The women never received full compensation for what they suffered and many cases went unreported due to shame associated with physical violation. This brings to light a very important aspect of rape culture- the social stigma associated with it and the blame always falling on the victim for not opposing enough. In this regard, Vianne in Kristin Hannah’s *The Nightingale* says after she suffers the same fate: “it wasn’t her fault, what had happened to her. She believed that but she didn’t think fault mattered in a thing like this.” (Hannah 394) Hence as invisible as women’s contribution in war were, the violence against their body went unnoticed, almost invisible.

#### IV. WOMEN AS WARRIORS

Thousands of women joined war in various capacities, challenging the traditional gender roles imposed on them by the society. They worked as tank drivers, spies, pilots, snipers, radio operators, etc. In 1941, the 588<sup>th</sup> Night

Bomber regiment that consisted of female pilots and were known as ‘Night Witches’ hit a number of targets, “flew more than 30,000 missions and dropped more than 23,000 tons of bombs on the Nazis; 30 of them were killed and 24 received the Hero of the Soviet Union medal, the nation’s highest award for valor.” (Pruitt np) By the end of 1945, almost 74,000 British women were engaged in anti-aircraft units. Pile commented, “These girls lived like men, fought their lights like men and, alas, some of them died like men.” (Pruitt np)

Keeping in mind the challenges involved in the battlefield, direct combat remained inaccessible to women for a long time. If we look at the current military numbers in U.S, we find it a lot more integrated. But back then (during World Wars), women participated in different forms. There are many novels that talk about women working as women operators some of them are worth mention. Erika Robuck’s *An Invisible Woman* beautifully captures Virginia Hall, an American woman, working as a wireless operator in Nazi occupied France coordinating supply drops to help arm and organize the Resistance forces, the ‘Maquis’. She showcases undeterred spirit and resilience and Steve Berry called her “an alpha female heroine” (Robuck i), the description being absolutely apt. *All the Lights We Cannot See* by Anthony Doerr is another narrative of a woman taking up the matter in her own hands instead of waiting to be saved. Here a blind woman sends top secret messages through radio signals and thus participates in French Resistance. If we move to history, there have been many hidden warriors who went unnoticed as history did not acknowledge them. There have been memoirs and interviews available which validate their contribution though.

#### V. ANTI SEMITISM IN WAR

“For seven weeks I’ve lived in here,

Penned up inside this ghetto

But I have found my people here.

The dandelions call to me

And the white chestnut candles in the court.

Only I never saw another butterfly.

That butterfly was the last one.

Butterflies don’t live in here,

In the ghetto.”

(“The Butterfly” lines 9-17)

Anti- Semitism is defined as prejudice or hatred or unfair discrimination towards the Jews. It can be

broadly divided into racial anti-Semitism and religious anti-Semitism. The prejudice towards Jews has existed throughout history and it gained murderous momentum during Hitler's rule. He did not only consider them as subhuman, rather they were presumed to be cancerous and detrimental for the society, hence Hitler wanted to wipe out their very existence from the face of earth. "In Nazi ideology that perceived Jewishness to be biological, the elimination of the Jews was essential to the purification and even the salvation of the German people." ("Nazi anti-Semitism and the Holocaust" 2.) Between 1939 to 1945, about 5.7 million Jews were exterminated in Nazi concentration camps through overwork or prolonged starvation. They were forcibly expelled from jobs, not allowed to on bicycles, banned from all public places, children could not attend schools, and the list is endless. Writers like Kristin Hannah, Erika Robuck, and Markus Zusak touch upon this subject and poignantly describe their predicament in Nazi occupied France. Anne Frank's diary is a moving account of what Jews had to go through and is not for the soft hearted.

After the Nazi defeat, Anti-Semitism dwindled and gradually the acceptance increased. The obstacles were fewer, opportunities were greater and America became more integrated. However in Soviet Union the war went longer and Poland saw Anti-Jewish purges in 1956-57. However, gradually the hate has dwindled and society on the whole has become more integrated.

## VI. CONCLUSION

War narratives throughout history have magnified man's role but the role women played during World War II cannot be ignored. They are present everywhere- from homes to hospitals to battle fields. They fought not only political battle but social and emotional battle too. Hence they deserve a place in war narratives not just as mere dependents but as warriors and survivors. They proved themselves at every step, uncaring of their own predicament. They very subtly challenged the existing dominating powers, raising voice as and when required. They were perfect mothers, daughters, lovers, sisters, warriors and winners. Hence the stories of war are incomplete without acknowledging their contribution.

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