



NORMAN MAILER'S TREATMENT OF THE THEME OF WAR IN THE POST-WAR LITERARY SCENE OF AMERICA

Dr. S. Chelliah

Professor, Head & Chairperson, Department of English & Comparative Literature, School of English & Foreign Languages, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai.

Abstract

This paper aims at projecting Norman Mailer as one of the few notable Postwar American writers who have responded to the largest problems of the American history in the Post-war literary scene of America and examines rather neatly how Mailer's concern is with the individual and the way of life using the shocks and tensions of war as a corrosive agent which bites through to the hard core of truth about men to bring home the point that death is the ultimate parameter of human existence and he portrays the deaths of soldiers like Hearn, Wilson, Roth and Hennessey as pointless and washed, a squandering of human life in the military wasteland of modern society.

Norman Mailer is one of the few notable postwar American writers who have responded to the largest problems of the period with directness and an assurance rather significantly projected in their writings. Being very much an American, he seems to be endowed with the capacity of seeing himself as a battle ground of history. Among the various groups of writers under different terms like regionalists, neo - naturalists and a few other titles who emerged with considerable success in the postwar literary scene of America, Mailer is the one literary historian whose **The Naked and The Dead** is the most powerful amongst his war novels. Writing a war novel requires on the part of a novelist strenuous efforts and enormous stylistic pressure at all costs. In the absence of such pressure, one is left "to contemplate only the failure of the efforts to exert it, to study the drama of confrontation between a doughty self and resistant historical forces" (Brandy 349).

War, for Mailer, is more than a subject for fiction in itself. It is a concrete representation of human weakness and of the society created by such weakness. He is the most stubbornly political of living American novelists explaining a certain element of tough strength in most of his work. And his **The Naked and the Dead** which places issues into a fictional content only slightly dissembled by the pacific location, generic features and historical details. Mailer's concern is with the individual and the way of life that formed him. He uses the shocks and tensions of war as a corrosive agent which bites through to the hard core of truth about men.

The Naked and the Dead is said to have brought unexpected and unnerving acclaim to Norman Mailer. It is not the war in the Pacific seen through the eyes of a 1930's proletarian novelist but the human condition in all its absurdity as viewed by a 1950's existentialist. Mailer has successfully created as a symbolic form to express the naturalistic theme of the hidden recesses of value in man's nature despite his tragic fate in a closely conditioned and controlled world. Other than this, he has to his credit publication of such works as,

1. **Barbary Shore**, a drama of ideas held together by a symbolic framework of complete human frustration,
2. **Why are We in Vietnam?** Focusing on the American misunderstanding of Vietnam- its politics, people and its history,
3. **Advertisements for myself**, a collection of pieces, advertisements stories, fragments of novels etc focusing on the day-to-day affairs of the American mechanical life spinning around American religion, monopoly, culture, civilization and society,
4. **An American Dream** a picture of the brutal realities of society and policy,
5. **Of a Fire on the Moon**, a devastating portrait of man's futile audacity to penetrate into the mysteries of the universe and his misdirected energy towards the conquest of nature,
6. **Tough Guys Don't Dance**, a painful awareness of the ultimate tendency of perverted sexual drives ending up in sanity.
7. **The Deer Park**, a picture of man's efforts to achieve a self fulfilling autonomy that takes into realistic account of the social and biological forces of life and guards against the delusive security of conventional moralities.
8. **Marilyn**, a rapidly paced book exhibiting a shrewd, cosmopolitan understanding of American life.

Norman Mailer's first-hand experience of the war has not only provided him with material and inspiration but it has also given him taste of life in the American society. The very first novel of his namely **The Naked and the Dead** is not just a good book, it is almost a great book that proved to be a tremendous popular and critical success placing the twenty – five years old author in the front rank of a new generation of writers. The novel is about the platoon fighting both the Japanese



and its own army on a Pacific island during World war II, showing “Considerable allegiance to the fiction of Hemingway and Dos Passos as well as deference to the ethnic mix discernible in Hollywood films made during the war” (Lennon 86).

The Naked and the Dead, which is a pessimistic realistic view of men at war, brings out the innermost thoughts of more than a dozen soldiers. It presents a terrifying view of man at war, specifically the invasion of the Japanese held island of Anopopei. The platoon is part of a six thousand men force charged with the task of seizing control of the island in order to clear the way for a larger American advance into the Philippines. The first part “Wave” deals with the landing; “Argil and Mold” contains the early success of the American forces as they advance within striking distance of the Toyaku line; “Plant and Phantom” is largely devoted to the platoon’s reconnaissance mission but also contains the collapse of the Toyaku line; “wake” is a sort of epilogue concerned with the mopping up of the Japanese resistance and the whole division’s prospects for the future. All of this suggests an inevitable biological movement with the soldieries reduced to aimless struggling organisms that ultimately have no moral control over their fates. This seems to be what Ihab Hassan implies when he writes of how the soldier’s will to victory flounders as they passionately rebel against Cummings’ proddings:

“Entrenched in their Foxholes and duck – walked
Bivouacs, they refuse to respond to his will it is no
Wonder that the main section of the novel is entitled “Argil and
Mold” The image of the invasion army like a nest of ants wrestling and
tugging at a handful bread crumbs in a field of grass describes it all” (Robert 13)

The soldiers particularly those of the platoon, are stirred to action in the third part and are either killed to become phantoms or survive but become further dehumanized (plants). Even though the Platoon’s mission is in moral terms dreamlike and unreal, it is still filled with the biological reality of a plant. Finally in “wake”, the platoon fades back into the anonymity with which the novel begins; the soldiers of the division have been reduced to no more than depersonalized killing machines and they end the book waiting for the tide of war to sweep them kelp-like to the Philippines. The platoon as a group in **The Naked and the Dead** appears to reflect a number of clichéd themes in the depiction of lower class secondary characters in the naturalistic novel. They have all been shaped by their peacetime world into patterns of frustration, bitterness and meanness which are expressed in shallowness of spirit and insight. The platoon is a class as well as an animal construct Mailer gives each of its members a distinctive local background, but in fact it is the class which is the determining factor in each character’s make-up and condition. Martinez is a Mexican American. Polack, Minetta and Gallegher are shrewd slum-bred Americans and Wilson and Ridges are ‘poor whites’. Brown and Stanley are lower middle class people. The major themes of **The Naked and the Dead** are therefore the nature of power and the nature of self in relation to power, the first theme dominating ‘Argil’ and ‘Mold’ and the second ‘Plant and Phantom’. **The Naked and the Dead** drawing its subject matter directly from that war, proceeds on the two levels of concern suggested as follows:

“The sickness of society and the flawed nature of the individual which engenders and perpetuates that sickness” (Barry 9)

War is his external subject matter in **The Naked and the Dead** but his internal theme is nothing but the ‘crisis in human values’ - identity, humanity, men and the nature of their enemies in our time. Mailer’s primary concern is confrontation within the division and a platoon as men struggle for mastery over one another and for control over their own lives. General Cummings is the most powerful man in the novel. He is the leader of the powerful men in the novel. He is the leader of the American Army division invading Anopopei. Sergeant Croft is the platoon leader. The other principal characters are Red Valsen, Goldstein and Wilson. General Cummings and Sergeant Croft do not have much respect for the individuality of the soldiers they command. Indeed they hardly see human beings as individuals and are angered when they are opposed by personalities. Croft drives the platoon members pitilessly but they exhaust themselves in a meaningless struggle without ever achieving their goal, defeated by circumstances outside their control.

The army is a microcosm of the class struggle within the American society as a whole. Each of the soldiers in the army is fighting his private battle. The destruction and depravity piled on the enlisted men by the commanding officers causes havoc. The army forces the men to avoid any expression of individual identity. General Cummings worries about the soldier’s emphasis on personal rights. Cummings believes in creating a fear ladder in the platoon.

“Army functions best when you’re frightened of the man above you and contemptuous of your subordinates”. (ND 176)



In the Army, some of the men try to acclaim selfhood. Hearn and Valsen identify themselves with the poor and the exploited, while Cummings and Croft generally identify themselves with the rich and the powerful. In Mailer's army, all are victims. In 'The Time Meacilme' sections, we are faced with the grim natures of American lives in distorted development. Croft always screams: "I hate everything which is not in myself. This is the inner voice screaming from Croft's being.

This novel **The Naked and the Dead** is an attempt to present a dilemma of power from a variety of perspectives. Men need to control their lives and environment but attempts to exert control lead to totalitarian attitudes. All the characters in the novel are affected by the tensions that arise when some men seek to control others while at the same time, each of the characters is engaged in a struggle to master himself. The actions of the individuals (soldiers) are controlled by individuals (authorities) and so the characters are in continual struggle to define their needs, to determine how and when they will satisfy themselves. War has aspects other than the search for power and mastery and Mailer deals with them as well, particularly the brutalization of men in the recon platoon. The extreme situations, into which they are pushed, deaden their feelings. At one point, they come across a ghastly and right marsh landscape strewn with limbs and burnt corpses and purifying Japanese bodies infested with maggots and over everything hangs the stench of death. Amid extremities of war, brutalization is the price the psyche pays for the continued existence of the individual. It is possible for some men to triumph over emotions that threaten to overwhelm the psyche and thus war may result in either disintegration or a strengthening of character. Ridges, the poor southern farmer is stronger at the end of the novel than before; Roth, the middle class jew is stronger in his pitiful way just before he dies. On the other hand, Minetta, a Platoon malingere disintegrates as do corporal Brown and even Red Valsen, Sergeant Croft's primary antagonist. Other effects of war that are equally powerful are anxiety, boredom, physical and emotional exhaustion visible in the whole platoon as well as disorientation. Most recognizable is Gallagher's progressive inability, to deal with a succession of crises, culminating in the death of his wife.

Throughout his work, Mailer considers all human endeavours as a martial struggle in a divided universe. He traces one man's gradual recognition of mortality through Red Valsen's increasing horror as he begins to face the thought of his own eventual death. Hennessey's death, which occurs in the opening pages of the novel, gives rise to a disquieting comfortable insight for Red. Death may not be large and devastating and meaningless but personal and of ultimate significance. His reaction is to find himself, at the edge of a bottomless dread, an experience that is repeated when he watches croft preparing to kill a captured prisoner:

"And yet all of this was mixed with dread and the certainty that none of it was real. He could not believe that in a few seconds the soldier with the broad pleasant face was going to die" (ND 189)

In this novel, a character of liberal sympathies fights for his integrity against a Fascistic superior; in each case, the good character fails in his most ambitious undertaking. Cummings and Croft seem prototype fascists, the villains of the novel. Croft's tactics against Valsen are openly sadistic whereas Cummings exercises an intellectual tyranny over Hearn. As we become more familiar with the platoon members it is found that what they most despise and fear is rooted in their prior experience of life in America. In 'The Time machine', Mailer cuts a cross section of American Dream of success and fulfillment. All the characters in the novel are affected by the tensions that arise when some men seek to control others. at the same time, each of the characters is engaged in a struggle to master himself. The actions of the soldiers are controlled by the officers and so the characters are in continual struggle to define their needs, to determine how and when they will satisfy themselves.

The theme of man's obsession with power in the novel centers on Cummings and Croft. Both are driven to the pursuit of power by personal and sexual failures early in their life and both later compensate for these failures by achieving sexual gratification in the exercise of control over men and matters. Both view men as objects, as machines and animals, for the maintenance of power and both realize their "manipulation or control requires the cultivation in men of fear and hate for those in power" (Philip 95). Both the military hierarchy and experience of war satisfy deep urges in Croft's character. The way in which he moves with other men is very cold. Mailer says, "He hated weakness and loved practically nothing". He is directly and indirectly responsible for the deaths of a number of men – Hearn, Roth and Wilson. The lives of others have little value for him. In the novel, the American soldiers on the pacific island often experience, the feeling that "it's a plot or it's a trap". On one level, this is an obvious reaction to being caught up in the exacting discipline of their own arm, as well as being constantly vulnerable to sudden attacks by the Japanese. But the emotion is a response to something more than the force of contending, armies. The sense of powerlessness is echoed in the 'Chorus' section of the novel, being random statements by the soldiers about food, women, job rotation and other preoccupations. Both devices reflect Mailer's early Marxist view that



life in the United States, particularly in the army is the microcosm, is burhalizing because of the authoritarianism and exploitation that grow out of the nature of material conditions, especially economic reality.

Mailer here portrays men as victims who have little control over themselves and events. In order to emphasize their helplessness, he uses a great deal of animal imagery to describe the men as ants, pigs, salmon, insects and sardines. The phrase “the naked and the dead” constitutes the novel’s basic thematic statement. ‘Naked’ means covering in the face of fate; he is without dependable support in a universe that reveals to him only one certainty – his destiny, which is ‘death’. Throughout **The Naked and the Dead**, the collective attitudes of the soldiers, their stock responses of cynicism, misogyny, bigotry and obscenity – almost conceal those more soulful and redeeming qualities innate to men everywhere. Mailer’s soldiers display inner resources of strength and determination not to yield to the non-human values. Brown, Stanley and Ridges and Goldstein are selected as the permanent litter – bearers. Their bodies ache and their minds turn detrious. But soon their acquired hatred towards the thankless task imposed by the army is replaced by guilt and empathy and the torments of his wound seemed to pass through the handles of the stretcher up to their army” (ND 624).

In the concluding part of the novel, Cummings has not yet achieved the power which he seeks. Instead, Major Dalleson wins the victory by defeating the Japanese on Anopopei. The men in the platoon express varying degrees of hatred towards their officers. Red states, “there aint any good officers in the world”. They’re just a bunch of aristocrats, they think (ND, 128). Minetta dislikes them as “Godam Fuggin Officers” (ND, 367). Roth dislikes the officers in the army who “slept in staterooms when we were jammed in the hold like pigs” (ND 51-52). Even Hearn echoes the sentiments of Roth and hates the six field officers because “they had wrapped the finest minds” of this generation” (ND 72)

To conclude, the book **The Naked and the Dead** reveals that “man is corrupted, confused to the point of helplessness, but it also points out that there are limits beyond which he cannot be pushed; it finds that even in his corruption and sickness, there are yearnings for the better world” (p.80). Though Mailer believes that death is the ultimate parameter of human existence and therefore essential to any process of human self-definition, he portrays the deaths of soldiers – Hearn, Wilson, Roth and Hennessey as pointless and washed a squandering of human life in the military wasteland of modern society.

Works Cited

1. Barry H. Leeds, *The Structural Vision of Norman Mailer*, New York: New York University Press, 1969. Print.
2. Brandy, Leo, and Norman Mailer: *A Collection of Critical Essays*, New Jersey: Princeton Hall, 1972. Print.
3. Donald, L. Kanfann, *Norman Mailer: The Countdown*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965. Print.
4. Leonon, J. Michael, *Contemporary Novelists*, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1988. Print.
5. Philip, Bufithis, *Norman Mailer*, and New York: Ungar, 1978. Print.
6. Soltaroff, Robert, *Dawn Mailer’s Way*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974. Print.