

WAR IMAGERY AND MORAL COGNITION IN WORLD LITERATURE

Isaeva Gulnora Abdukadirovna

Senior Lecturer at the Department of Russian Language and
Literature, Bukhara State University

ABSTRACT

This article examines how world literature constructs the image of war as a multi-layered cultural form that mediates violence, restructures perception, and recalibrates moral language. A comparative reading is conducted across epic, realist, modernist, testimonial, and postmemory texts, with special attention to recurrent narrative devices that convert battlefield experience into communicable meaning. The analysis demonstrates that war imagery stabilizes around a small set of representational regimes, yet each regime remains historically elastic and medium-sensitive, shifting with photography, archival thinking, and documentary prose. A typology is proposed that links formal choices to ethical effects, including irony, dehumanization, intimate grief, and the rhetoric of necessity. The findings clarify how literary traditions forecast future conflicts by rehearsing interpretive templates, so that reading becomes a training of moral attention rather than a passive consumption of plots. The article concludes by outlining how this typology can guide future corpus based studies of war narratives across languages and media.

Keywords: War, representation, trauma, memory, testimony, ethics, modernism, postmemory.

INTRODUCTION

Across centuries, writers have returned to war not because it is narratively convenient, but because organized killing forces language into an exposed condition where metaphor, naming, and silence compete. What interests literary studies, therefore, is less the “event” of combat than the forms that make violence readable, shareable, and arguable in public culture. A special pressure emerges here. It is ethical.

From antiquity onward, martial scenes have served as laboratories of value, staging what a community praises, fears, excuses, or mourns, while also testing how much suffering can be shaped into style without becoming aestheticized cruelty. In Homeric epic the wound is both spectacle and index of honor, and in Aeschylus the collective voice of the defeated politicizes grief; later, the realist novel converts campaigns into social diagnostics, while modernism fractures continuity to mimic shock. Another shift is decisive. When testimony and photography enter the cultural economy, narration must negotiate the claim that “to show” already implies a stance, even when the speaker insists on neutrality, a problem articulated with particular acuity in Russian editions of Susan Sontag’s work on the image of others’ pain. War literature, accordingly, becomes a forward oriented archive of interpretive habits, preparing readers for the next crisis by naturalizing, or resisting, certain ways of seeing.

METHODS AND SOURCE ANALYSIS

The study combines comparative poetics with narrative ethics and cultural memory theory, moving between close reading and historically contextualized pattern description, while keeping genre as an operative variable rather than a mere label. The reading set spans epic

and tragedy through the realist and modernist novel, trench poetry, satire, documentary prose, and postmemory fiction, and it is triangulated through scholarship associated with Auerbach, Frye, Ricoeur, Genette, White, Bakhtin, Lotman, LaCapra, Caruth, Scarry, Butler, Girard, Hobsbawm, Keegan, Hynes, and Fussell, among others. Particular weight is given to studies that track how war reorganizes figurative language, time, and focalization, since these dimensions most directly govern what readers are invited to feel and judge. The analytical stance treats “war image” as a compound object: sensory detail plus narrative framing plus implied norm.

Source analysis is conducted through intertextual mapping and motif tracing, supplemented by attention to mediation, including battlefield rumor, official rhetoric, the archive, and the photograph, because war is rarely encountered “directly” even by participants. For World War I modernity, the argument draws on Paul Fussell’s account of the trench imagination as a generator of ironic templates that later wars inherit, using the Russian edition as a stable point of scholarly reference. For late twentieth century and contemporary representations, testimonial forms are considered alongside the ethics of spectatorship and the politics of compassion, where Sontag’s Russian language publication history is relevant not as a bibliographic detail but as a sign of how these debates travel across cultures.

RESULTS

A first result concerns the persistence of an epic regime in which violence is narratively elevated, even when the text appears to lament it, because the plot architecture rewards martial legibility. In the *Iliad*, the catalogue of wounds works as a taxonomy of bodies under pressure, and the repeated naming of fighters turns death into a memory technique; a minimal fragment such as “swift-footed Achilles” signals how identity survives through formula. In the *Aeneid*, the founding narrative binds future empire to justified blood, so that the war image becomes teleological rather than accidental, and the reader is trained to accept sacrifice as historical necessity. Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, staging speech as a weapon, demonstrates how rhetoric converts fear into collective choreography, while Cervantes, through parody and dissonant perspective, already exposes how martial scripts can colonize the imagination of the noncombatant. Even in texts that appear to praise glory, a second voice often trembles. It is the cost.

A second result identifies a realist regime that relocates war from heroic arenas to material infrastructures, where the image of violence is built from logistics, fatigue, mud, hunger, and bureaucratic speech. Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* displaces the myth of commanding genius by fragmenting causality, so that the battle becomes a swarm of partial knowledges and mistaken interpretations, and phrases like “I cannot understand” function as epistemic markers rather than personal weakness. Zola’s *La Débâcle* treats defeat as a social symptom, linking military collapse to institutional rot, and Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage* turns the battlefield into an interior weather system, where perception swells and contracts around shame. In *Remarque*, the trench is not merely a setting. It is an apparatus. A small line such as “we are not youth” captures the accelerated aging that realist war narratives repeatedly encode, while Hemingway’s clipped cadence in *A Farewell to Arms* makes the war image feel like an everyday bruise, not a singular catastrophe.

A third result concerns modernist and satirical regimes that do not “describe” violence so much as sabotage its narratability, using irony, montage, and temporal distortion to deny the reader a stable moral posture. Trench poetry by Owen and Sassoon compresses atrocity into bitter liturgical inversions, with fragments such as “old lie” functioning as ethical detonators, and Apollinaire’s calligrammatic experiments display the war image as a spatial object rather than a linear scene. Hašek’s *The Good Soldier Švejk* converts imperial warfare into absurd administrative theatre, while Heller’s *Catch 22* formalizes circular logic as a weapon of institutions, turning contradiction into plot engine. Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five* pushes further by making time itself untrustworthy, so that a minimal refrain like “so it goes” performs an anesthetic that is simultaneously critique, and the bombing of Dresden becomes a memory scar rather than a resolved episode. In Isaac Babel’s *Red Cavalry*, the sentence oscillates between lyrical intensity and blunt cruelty, and Grossman’s *Life and Fate* builds a moral topology where camps and frontlines mirror each other, replacing patriotic clarity with systemic horror.

Regime	Dominant device	Time model	Ethical effect	Typical scene anchor	Representative texts
Epic heroic	formula and catalogue	teleological	legitimization of sacrifice	duel and naming	Homer <i>Iliad</i> ; Virgil <i>Aeneid</i>
Realist infrastructural	detail and logistics	sequential	demythologization	mud, hunger, orders	Tolstoy <i>War and Peace</i> ; Remarque <i>All Quiet on the Western Front</i>
Modernist ironic	fragmentation and irony	broken	skepticism toward rhetoric	trench routine, rupture	Owen; Sassoon; Apollinaire
Satirical bureaucratic	paradox and repetition	circular	exposure of institutional violence	paperwork, regulation	Hašek <i>Švejk</i> ; Heller <i>Catch-22</i>
Testimonial documentary	voice and archive	episodic	demand for witness	confession, interview	Alexievich <i>Unwomanly Face of War</i>
Postmemory ruin	montage and absence	belated	responsibility of the after	ruins, photo, trace	Sebald <i>Austerlitz</i> ; Barker <i>Regeneration</i>

A fourth result isolates a testimonial regime in which the war image is produced by voice under constraint, and the central narrative act is not invention but the struggle to keep experience communicable without turning it into spectacle. In Svetlana Alexievich’s *Unwomanly Face of War*, the polyphony of women’s recollections breaks the heroic monopoly, replacing the “frontline” with domestic objects transformed by violence, and short fragments such as “I was afraid of silence” show how fear migrates from explosions to memory itself. Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*, although stylistically different, operates similarly by treating the carried object as a moral index, where a boot, a letter, or a photograph becomes a condensed ethics of responsibility. Pat Barker’s *Regeneration*, by staging therapy and shell shock, reframes combat as a crisis of narration, and the war image becomes a problem of language repair rather than a tableau of action.

A fifth result concerns postmemory and ruin, where later generations inherit war not as lived time but as mediated residue, and the war image emerges from gaps, archives, and unstable compassion. W G Sebald's prose, moving through photographs, hesitation, and digression, designs a readerly tempo that approximates ethical caution, while Kenzaburō Ōe and Ibuse Masuji treat nuclear aftermath as a contamination of ordinary perception, turning rain, skin, and shadows into mnemonic agents. In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, civil war is framed through private aspiration repeatedly interrupted by hunger and propaganda, and the war image becomes the collapse of everyday future plans, not only the spectacle of battles. Similar structures appear in testimonies and novels of Bosnia, Vietnam, Iraq, and Syria, where the archive is no longer stable and the witness is often displaced across platforms. Literature, under these conditions, functions as a calibration device for attention.

DISCUSSION

The typology clarifies why "war literature" should not be treated as a thematic shelf but as a set of formal solutions to recurring ethical dilemmas, including how to represent suffering without exploiting it, and how to speak of necessity without laundering responsibility. Fussell's thesis about the trench as a generator of modern irony aligns with the finding that ironic regimes travel well across later conflicts, yet the present corpus suggests an added nuance: irony often becomes an inherited reflex that can block mourning as effectively as it blocks propaganda. When a refrain like Vonnegut's "so it goes" is read globally, it can perform both critique and sedation, and the difference depends on paratext, translation norms, and readerly habit. Formal devices, in other words, do not carry stable ethics. Context governs uptake.

Sontag's arguments about spectatorship sharpen the present results on mediation, since the war image increasingly arrives as a circulated object rather than a narrated event, and the literary text must either compete with or reframe the photograph. Yet the analysis indicates that literature's distinctive contribution lies in temporality, because it can slow the viewer into a reader, force hesitation, and embed judgment in syntax rather than in shock. In testimonial writing, this temporal labor becomes visible: the voice reorders what could not be ordered while it was happening. A future facing implication follows. As conflicts become informationally saturated, literary forms that engineer slowness may become more, not less, necessary.

From a comparative perspective, the regimes map unevenly onto national canons, but their internal logic remains portable, which suggests a methodological advantage for corpus based work that codes devices instead of genres or periods. A next stage could build multilingual aligned datasets that tag focalization shifts, dehumanizing metaphors, bureaucratic paradox, and sensory motifs, allowing researchers to measure how ethical effects correlate with formal cues across traditions. Another trajectory concerns pedagogy: teaching war literature through regime contrasts trains interpretive literacy for future media environments, where violence is both ubiquitous and rhetorically weaponized. The war image will continue to mutate. Reading practices must evolve with it.

CONCLUSION

World literature constructs the image of war through a limited but flexible set of representational regimes, each defined by formal devices that organize perception and distribute moral responsibility. Across epic, realist, modernist, satirical, testimonial, and postmemory texts, the decisive variable is not “how much violence” is shown, but how narrative time and voice force the reader to inhabit, resist, or normalize that violence. Future research can operationalize this typology for crosslingual digital studies, linking close reading sensitivity to scalable annotation without surrendering ethical nuance.

REFERENCES

1. Фассел П. Великая война и современная память Перевод А В Глебовской Санкт Петербург Издательство Европейского университета в Санкт Петербурге 2015
2. Сонтаг С. Смотрим на чужие страдания Перевод В П Голышева Москва Ad Marginem 2013
3. Алексиевич С. У войны не женское лицо Москва Время 2013
- Бахтин М. Проблемы поэтики Достоевского Москва Советская Россия 1972
4. Лотман Ю. Структура художественного текста Москва Искусство 1970
5. Ремарк Э М На Западном фронте без перемен Перевод с немецкого Москва Художественная литература 1989
6. Хемингуэй Э Прощай оружие Перевод с английского Москва АСТ 2018
7. Avezov S.S. An Online Platform for Uzbek-Russian and Russian-Uzbek Parallel Corpora:: Linguistic Challenges and Prospects Exemplified by A. Kadyri's Novel “Bygone Days” //2024 9th International Conference on Computer Science and Engineering (UBMK). – IEEE, 2024. – С. 11-16.