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Echoes of Absence: Trauma, Familial Disconnection, and Narrative Fragmentation in Klay's Redeployment and Ackerman's Waiting for Eden

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Abstract: ***War literature has always been haunted by silence, absence, and the impossibility of returning unchanged. In the post-9/11 context, contemporary American writers like Phil Klay and Elliot Ackerman have brought renewed urgency to the representation of war veterans, exploring not just combat, but also the estrangement of returning home. Klay's Redeployment (2014) captures the fragmented voices of veterans grappling with memory, alienation, and moral injury, while Ackerman's Waiting for Eden (2018) intensifies the theme of absence through its narrator—a dead soldier recounting the story of his wounded comrade. Both texts foreground the afterwar as a space where trauma lingers, disrupting familial bonds and dismantling the idea of a seamless homecoming.***

This paper examines how Klay and Ackerman use narrative fragmentation, silence, and disconnection to articulate trauma. Reading their works through the lens of trauma studies (Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra) and memory studies (Marianne Hirsch), I argue that their narratives destabilise conventional notions of heroism and instead reveal the haunting persistence of war in domestic and familial spaces.

I. INTRODUCTION: THE SILENT WOUNDS OF WAR

"We were all strangers, even to ourselves, after what we'd seen." —Phil Klay, Redeployment. War leaves its mark not only on the battlefield but in the quiet spaces of home, where veterans and their families grapple with the invisible scars of trauma and the ache of disconnection. In the wake of post-9/11 conflicts, contemporary American literature has become a vital medium for exploring the psychological and relational toll of military service. Phil Klay's Redeployment (2014) and Elliot Ackerman's Waiting for Eden (2018), both penned by veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan, offer profound narratives that illuminate the fractured reintegration of soldiers into family life. Through fragmented storytelling and symbolic absences, these texts capture the dissonance of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and the emotional chasms it creates. According to a meta-analysis, approximately 23% of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans experience PTSD, underscoring the urgency of literary representations that humanize this statistic. This paper argues that Klay and Ackerman employ narrative fragmentation—non-linear structures, shifting perspectives, and silences—to mirror the disjointed experiences of veterans and their families, ultimately advocating for empathy as a bridge to reconnection. By analyzing key stories from Redeployment and the narrative arc of Waiting for Eden, this study explores how trauma disrupts familial bonds and how literature reclaims these absences as spaces for understanding.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly engagement with war narratives has shifted from battlefield heroics to the interior wounds of trauma and memory. Cathy Caruth (1996) highlights how trauma resists full representation, manifesting in gaps, silences, and repetitions. LaCapra (2001) similarly emphasizes the difficulty of "working through" traumatic histories, suggesting that literature often captures this irresolution. In American war literature, authors such as Tim O'Brien (The Things They Carried) established the fragmented, metafictional mode of narrating trauma. Building on this tradition, Klay and Ackerman expand the thematic field by foregrounding family estrangement and the dislocation of veterans from civilian life. Recent critics have noted how Redeployment portrays "fractured masculinities" (Rowland, 2016) and how Waiting for Eden pushes the boundaries of voice and narration in depicting absence and waiting (Brannigan, 2020). Yet, comparative scholarship on Klay and Ackerman remains underdeveloped, particularly in terms of their shared concern with familial disconnection as a manifestation of trauma.

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III. THE LENS OF TRAUMA THEORY

To understand the literary portrayal of veterans' experiences, trauma theory provides a critical framework. Cathy Caruth's seminal work, Unclaimed Experience (1996), posits that trauma resists linear narration, manifesting in fragmented memories and silences that defy closure. This is particularly relevant for post-9/11 war literature, where authors like Klay and Ackerman reject heroic archetypes to focus on psychological fragmentation. Caruth's concept of trauma as an "unclaimed" event informs how veterans' stories—often untold or misunderstood—disrupt familial communication. Similarly, Ann Kaplan's Trauma Culture (2005) emphasizes the ripple effects of trauma on communities, including families, which aligns with Ackerman's focus on the spouse's perspective in Waiting for Eden.

Recent scholarship highlights a shift in war literature from glorification to introspection. As Rikke Schubart notes in War Isn't Hell, It's Entertainment (2009), post-9/11 narratives prioritize domestic fallout over battlefield heroics, reflecting societal awareness of PTSD's prevalence. Critics like Stacey Peebles (Welcome to the Suck, 2011) argue that contemporary authors use fragmented forms to mirror veterans' alienation, a technique evident in Klay's episodic stories. However, less attention has been paid to how families—spouses, children—navigate this trauma, a gap this paper addresses by juxtaposing Klay's veteran-centric narratives with Ackerman's family-focused lens.

For Ackerman, reviews and analyses emphasize the novel's exploration of grief and betrayal. In a New York Times review, the text is praised for weaving "traumas, betrayals and ecstasies" through a comatose veteran's story, highlighting familial waiting as a form of secondary trauma.

A. Fractured Narratives: Disconnection in Klay's Redeployment: The Weight of Unspoken Stories

Phil Klay's Redeployment, a collection of short stories, captures the disjointed reintegration of Marines through varied voices and perspectives. The title story, "Redeployment," sets the tone with its unnamed narrator, a veteran returning from Iraq, who struggles to reconcile his combat experiences with civilian normalcy. Klay employs a fragmented narrative—shifting between visceral war memories and mundane home life—to reflect the veteran's internal chaos. For instance, the narrator's observation, "We shot dogs. Not by accident… You come back, you're in a nice, quiet suburb, you tell yourself" (Klay 1), juxtaposes battlefield brutality with domestic tranquillity, highlighting the impossibility of seamless reconnection. This fragmentation mirrors Caruth's trauma theory, where the past intrudes on the present, alienating the veteran from his family.

Scholarly work, such as Mehmet Ali Çelikel's examination of Redeployment as portraying "tarnished heroes," reinforces how Klay's narratives expose the erosion of familial ideals through moral injury.

Klay's collection thrives on multiplicity and narrative breaks. Stories such as *Redeployment* and *After Action Report* portray soldiers who return physically but remain mentally embedded in war. The fractured narratives mirror the impossibility of linear storytelling — memory erupts in fragments, jokes, or violent eruptions. Familial disconnection surfaces in the inability of veterans to reintegrate into marriages or parenthood, revealing how war destabilises intimacy and domestic belonging. Ackerman radicalises narrative perspective by having a dead soldier narrate the story of Eden, a comrade surviving in a vegetative state. Here, absence is twofold: the narrator is absent from life, while Eden is absent from full consciousness. The story becomes one of waiting — his wife, his comrades, and his body suspended between life and death. Familial disconnection is most visible in Eden's wife, who occupies the ambiguous role of caregiver, widow, and mother. The novel foregrounds *liminality* — Eden is neither fully alive nor dead, his family neither fully bereaved nor reunited. Both texts emphasise that trauma does not remain confined to the battlefield; it infiltrates family spaces. Klay's veterans often fail to reconnect with spouses or parents, experiencing a gulf between wartime self and domestic identity. Ackerman dramatises this disconnection by staging the family in perpetual suspension, showing how war renders intimacy impossible. Both authors deploy narrative fragmentation and silence as literary strategies. Klay's polyphonic short stories present broken voices, unreliable memories, and dark humour to convey the ineffability of trauma. Ackerman employs an absent narrator, withholding Eden's voice until the final moment, where silence becomes the ultimate marker of trauma. Together, they reimagine the war narrative not as testimony to heroism, but as a record of absence.

IV. CONCLUSION

Phil Klay and Elliot Ackerman expose the enduring costs of war not only on soldiers' psyches but on the fragile fabric of family life. By emphasizing absence, silence, and disconnection, their works dismantle traditional war narratives of triumph and return, instead confronting readers with the fractured realities of trauma. In *Redeployment*, trauma speaks in fragmented veteran voices, while in *Waiting for Eden*, trauma resonates in silence and waiting. Both texts demonstrate that the most persistent battlefield is the space between war and home, where veterans and families grapple with irreparable absence.

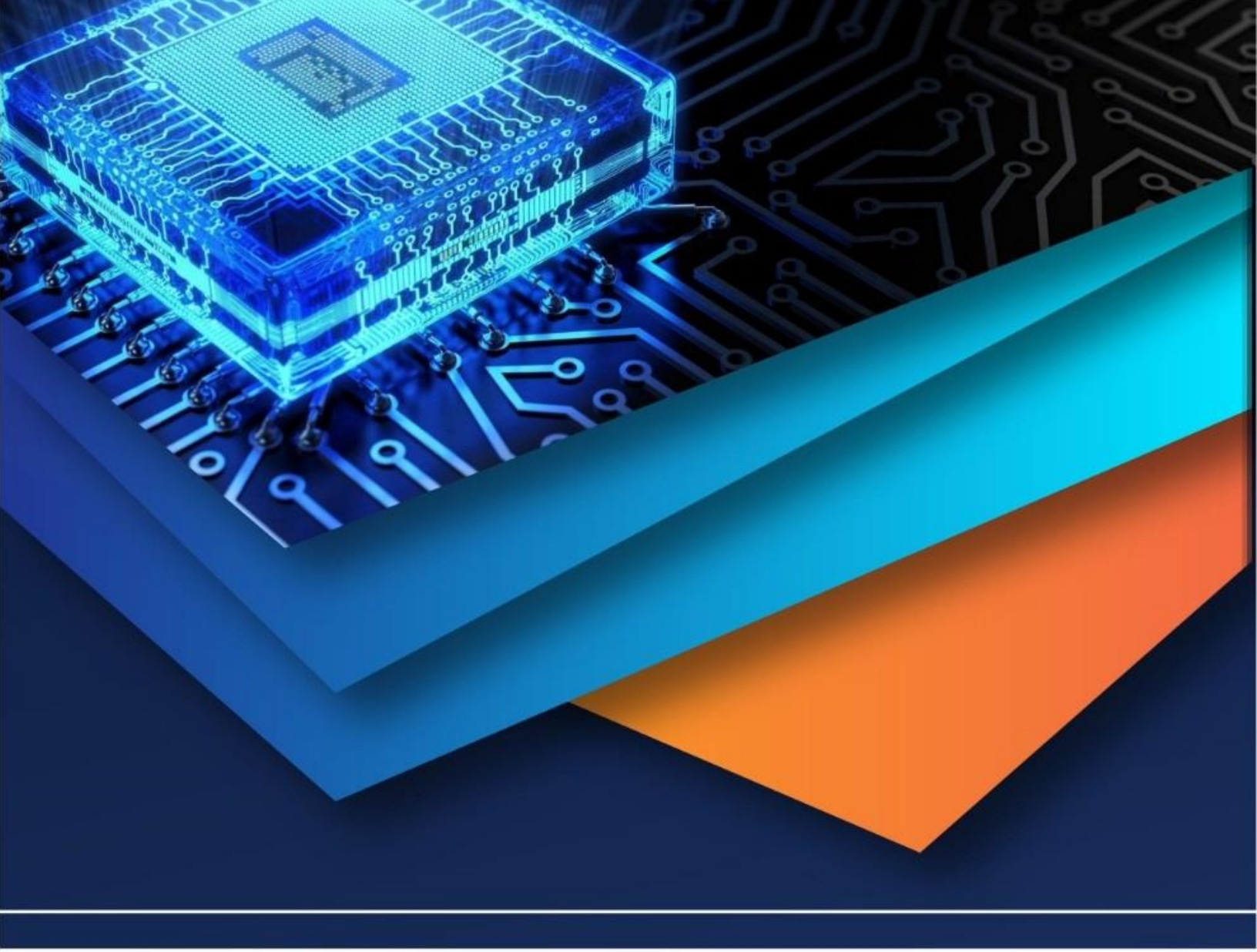
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Through their narrative experimentation, Klay and Ackerman remind us that the story of war is not only fought abroad but also lived in the quiet estrangements of family, memory, and identity.

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