

# Unspoken Scars: A Systemic Functional Linguistic Analysis of War Trauma and Its Ideological Representations in Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds*

Hisssah Mohammed Alruwaili

Department of English, College of Arts, Jouf University, Saudi Arabia

Mohamed Elarabawy Hashem

Department of Islamic Studies in Foreign Languages, Faculty of Languages and Translation, Al-Azhar University, Egypt

Abdulfattah Omar

Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Port Said University, Egypt;  
Canberra Institute of Technology, Bruce, ACT, 2617, Australia

Waheed M. A. Altohami\*

Department of English Language and Literature, College of Science & Humanities, Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University, Alkharj 11942, Saudi Arabia;  
Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Education, Mansoura University, Egypt

**Abstract**—This study followed a systemic functional linguistics approach to demonstrate how war trauma is ideologically represented in Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds* (2012). It aimed at exploring how Powers' lexicogrammatical choices reveal the psychological, emotional, and social consequences of war as experienced by American soldiers in Iraq in 2003. Drawing upon Halliday's ideational (transitivity), interpersonal (modality and power dynamics), and textual (thematic structure) metafunctions, the analysis focused on the exploration of transitivity processes, thematic structure, and experiential meaning to show how trauma is linguistically encoded in the interactions among characters, mainly soldiers and sergeants. Based on a qualitative, exploratory methodology, the study analyzed material, mental, and relational processes to reveal the characters' inner tensions, power dynamics, and identity struggles. Findings showed that Powers employs fragmented syntax and vivid imagery to reflect the disorientation and dissociation commonly associated with traumatic experiences. Such linguistic choices highlighted three major themes: the psychological impact of war, the loss of innocence, and the complexities of human relationships during wartime. Furthermore, the novel's use of discourse markers and modality reveals deep moral ambiguity and misuse of authority in wartime. Further research may address trauma discourse in other post-9/11 war fiction across different cultural contexts.

**Index Terms**—metafunctions, SFL, *The Yellow Birds*, transitivity, war trauma discourse

## I. INTRODUCTION

There have been an increasing number of novels written about the war on terror in Iraq. After the end of the Cold War, the US was a target for a number of terrorist attacks that included bombing the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 and the 9/11 attacks. In the face of this, the US attacked Afghanistan to overthrow the Taliban regime, which declared its responsibility for the 9/11 attacks. After the 9/11 events, post-9/11 fiction was brought to the fore to record the traumas of the terror acts. According to Maitland (2021), such fiction emerged as a distinct literary genre as they represented wars and other related internal and external crises in an unprecedented manner. In 2003, the US invaded Iraq to remove Saddam Hussein, who was claimed to be a threat to world security. Though the war in Iraq ended in 2007 with the withdrawal of US troops, Bassil (2012) mentions that Iraq is now torn apart by crime as well as regional and religious divisions. Although numerous formal news reports and historic reviews addressed the American invasion of Iraq and the atrocities experienced by Iraqi people, little has been written on the impact of war on American soldiers.

In his interview with the Guardian, the American novelist Kevin Powers explained that although there were so many

---

\* Corresponding Author. Email: [w.m.altoami@gmail.com](mailto:w.m.altoami@gmail.com)

reports coming from Iraq, people did not know what it was like during the war. He attributed the increasing number of novels written about the Iraq War to the fact that these novels tended to give readers a detailed portrait of what was going on there and how people felt physically, emotionally, and psychologically (Holstun, 2019). In general, the Iraq War novels dwell on the emotions and responses of all the people involved, whether American soldiers and veterans on one side or the Iraqi people on the other side. Despite the large number of academic studies that addressed war novels (e.g., Smithpeters, 2005; Masmoudi, 2015; Musiał, 2020; among others), few studies have been concerned with exploring the ideological representation of war trauma in such works from a systemic functional linguistic (SFL) perspective, which is an approach to discourse analysis that views language as a social semiotic system that shapes and is shaped by its use in social contexts. It analyzes the relationship between language and social issues. It explores how language is used to construct meaning on different social, temporal, and spatial scales. More specifically, it examines the metafunctions of language (ideational, interpersonal, and textual) to understand how meaning is created and communicated through language (cf. Halliday & Webster, 2009; Martin et al., 2019).

Towards achieving this objective, the novel titled *The Yellow Birds* (Powers, 2012) is selected as the data source. It was written by Kevin Powers, a novelist and a former soldier in the US Army. It explores the devastating impact of war on young soldiers, represented in the novel by the two friends John Bartle and Daniel Murphy, during their deployment in Iraq. Powers draws from his own first-hand experiences in the military to provide readers with an unflinching portrayal of the physical and psychological toll that war takes on individuals. With its haunting prose and powerful storytelling, *The Yellow Birds* has garnered widespread praise and numerous literary awards, solidifying Powers' reputation as a talented and insightful writer. The novel delves deep into the minds of its characters, capturing their fears, guilt, and struggles to reconcile their actions with their sense of morality (Sagar & Shehadah, 2021).

Voice (2018) argues that by examining the linguistic choices and patterns used in narratives of war trauma, researchers can gain insights into the psychological and emotional impact of war on individuals and communities. Therefore, this study proposes that the application of SFL to the analysis of war trauma literary discourse would help a better understanding of the ways in which people express their experiences during and after war. It tends to answer one main question: *How does SFL uncover the aspects of war trauma and its related ideological representations in Kevin Powers' The Yellow Birds?* By answering this question, the study aims at exploring the ways in which trauma is portrayed in Powers' novel and how SFL can be used to identify and analyze the linguistic markers of trauma in narrative discourse. The findings of this study will contribute to the field of trauma literary discourse studies by showing how trauma is linguistically represented and structured, i.e., how lexicogrammatical choices (mainly transitivity and modality) encode psychological suffering and reveal trauma-related experiences such as fragmentation and dissociation. This would help to go beyond the subjective and purely thematic interpretation of trauma narratives, thereby reinforcing or challenging dominant ideologies about war.

The rest of the present paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews related literature on the application of SFL to the analysis of literary works and discusses the theoretical link between SFL and literary discourse studies, with a special focus on war trauma. Section 3 explains the study methodology in terms of the research design and procedure of analysis. Section 4 analyzes the novel's text. Section 5 discusses the major findings and relates them to the findings of previous studies. Section 6 is the conclusion, where key points are summarized and topics for future research are presented.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)

SFL is a theoretical framework in discourse analysis that provides a comprehensive understanding of language as a social semiotic system. Developed by Halliday (1978, 1994), SFL focuses on how language functions in various contexts and how it reflects and shapes social structures and relationships. At the core of SFL are three key concepts: metafunctions, thematic structure, and experiential meaning. These concepts offer insights into the different ways language is used to convey meaning and fulfil communicative purposes (Van, 2021). Metafunctions mark the different ways in which language serves different purposes and functions, including ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions. The ideational metafunction is concerned with how language represents and expresses people's experiences and knowledge of the world. The interpersonal metafunction focuses on how language is used to establish and negotiate social relationships and roles. The textual metafunction deals with how language is organized and structured to create coherent and cohesive texts. Metafunction analysis looks at how information is presented as retrievable from what has already been said or whether new information is being introduced. It helps to identify the theme and rheme in a text, which are important for understanding the point of departure and the exposition of that point (Yang, 2017). Together, these metafunctions provide a comprehensive understanding of how language works to convey meaning and enable communication.

Essential to understanding Halliday's ideational metafunction is the concept of 'transitivity', which is textually realized through lexicogrammatical patterns at the clause level. In the present study, Halliday's transitivity framework (Halliday, 1994) is used to analyze the interaction among the main characters in *The Yellow Birds*. This involves analyzing the types of processes (lexical verbs), participants (nouns) and circumstances (adverbs/adverbials/adjuncts)

used by Powers to explore the inner and outer conflicts in the novel's characters by encoding the representational/experiential meanings in their conversations. Halliday identified six processes as follows: three main processes (material, mental, and relational) and three minor processes (existential, verbal, and behavioural). Participants' roles rely on the main verb in the clause associated with a particular type of process. Firstly, material processes represent the actions and events that are taking place with one participant (Actor) causing or initiating the action and another (Goal) receiving the action. Secondly, mental processes represent how the participants feel and think (Senser) regarding different things or issues (Phenomena). Thirdly, relational processes represent the state of things and the relations among them, including the relation between the Carrier (reference) and Attribute (aspect). Fourthly, existential processes are located between material and relational processes by representing the participant who simply exists or happens in the world (Existent), and it is usually identified by the empty subject 'there'. Fifthly, verbal processes are located between relational and mental processes. They represent how people express their feelings, perceptions, and thoughts. They mark two types of participants: Sayer (who speaks) and Recipient (who receives the message). Sixthly and finally, behavioural processes are located between mental and material processes, as they mark how the participant's (Behaver's) inner workings of mind and physiological states are manifested.

The second key component of the SFL approach is that of thematic structure. It refers to the organization of information in a text or discourse. It involves the selection and arrangement of elements to create a coherent and cohesive message. As argued by Alaei and Ahangari (2016), examining the thematic structure of a text helps to understand how the information is presented and emphasized and how it contributes to the overall meaning and purpose of that text. Experiential meaning, the third key component of the SFL approach, focuses on how language represents and construes people's experiences and interactions with the world. It looks at how language is used to describe events, entities, and relationships, and how these descriptions shape people's understanding and interpretation of reality, social structures, and relationships (Bartlett & O'Grady, 2017). Taken together, the concepts of metafunctions, thematic structure, and experiential meaning offer valuable insights into the ways language is used to convey meaning and fulfil communicative purposes.

Having explained the core of the SFL approach and the way it addresses the social aspects of language, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. SFL primarily focuses on written texts and may not fully capture the nuances and complexities of spoken language. Additionally, some critics (e.g., François, 2018) argue that SFL's emphasis on social structures and relationships overlooks individual agency and the role of personal experiences in shaping language use. Despite these critiques, SFL remains a valuable tool for analyzing and understanding language in a social context.

The following section explains the significance of trauma narratives and their contribution to war discourse dynamics that could be fully interpreted from an SFL perspective.

### B. Trauma and War Fictional Discourse

Trauma is one of the most frequent concepts in war discourse. According to Caruth (1996), the fundamental purpose of trauma in literature is represented by the unimaginable agony and lasting psychological harm. Caruth's concept of trauma is referred to in the literature as the 'classic model', according to which psychological laws control and interpret trauma's functions and symbols in terms of universal traits and outcomes (Leys, 2000). This led critics to employ a psychological framework in interpreting how trauma affects language, perception, and society. This classic model stresses the repressive, repetitive, and dissociative nature of trauma. It establishes a connection between personal trauma and cultural or historical trauma by emphasizing the intimate bond that exists between the traumatized person, society, and history.

Since the development of literary trauma theory with the mission of bearing "witness to traumatic histories in such a way as to attend to the suffering of the other" (Andermahr, 2015, p. 500), there is a close relationship between trauma literature and progressive political activism (Balaev, 2014). Indeed, trauma literature has been largely associated with a political cause such as women's rights and/or anti-war movements. Furthermore, world literature features a strong link between trauma theory and war fiction, which comprises all the novels and short stories concerned with describing the horrors and brutality of the war. Although it is an old tradition of literature to talk of war since it dates back to Homer's *The Iliad*, Virgil's *The Aeneid*, and *Beowulf*, the outbreak of two great wars in the 20<sup>th</sup> century made it a distinct literary genre (Schellinger, 2014). With World War I, many war novels were published where novelists from different countries came to reflect their anger and disappointment in the war, such as Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* and Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (Hynes, 2011). World War II added to the significance of the war fiction genre, where many novelists assumed responsibility for witnessing and testifying to the war events (e.g., Biesen, 2005; Henkes, 2001). In such novels, writers, some of whom were war survivors themselves, came to depict the traumatic conditions of the war on the lips of their characters and narrators (Schellinger, 2014).

Although literary trauma theory was developed much later by the end of the 20th century, the description of traumatic experiences is one of the most recurrent themes in war fiction in the 20th century. Yet, Craps (2013) argues that trauma theory has largely failed to recognize the sufferings of non-Westerners. That is why it is largely perceived as being Eurocentric. Bastable (2014) mentions that the closing years of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century witnessed an increasing number of wars and conflicts all over the world addressing the nature of war memories, ethical groundings, and repercussions. In many of these narratives, survivors come to speak of or tell their histories of trauma to an attentive listener. Lahti (2012) argues that the recent literary approaches to war fiction reshape our

scholarly understanding of the texts' representation of war trauma. She adds that the tragic events of the Iraq War, for instance, proved that it has become necessary for literary criticism to develop new approaches to trauma experiences in a different way, which is not limited to war trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder.

### C. SFL and Trauma Narratives

By applying the principles of SFL, scholars can delve into the intricate layers of war trauma depicted in literature. SFL's emphasis on language as a social semiotic system allows for a nuanced examination of how authors use language to convey the devastating effects of war on individuals and societies (Nørgaard, 2003). Through the analysis of metafunctions, thematic structure, and experiential meaning, SFL provides a powerful tool to uncover the underlying meanings and communicative purposes behind literary representations of war trauma. This approach not only enhances understanding of the psychological and emotional impact of war but also sheds light on the broader social structures and relationships that are shaped by such traumatic experiences. By analyzing the metafunctions of narratives' language, SFL unpacks the intricate ways in which authors depict war trauma (cf. Lukin & Webster, 2005). The thematic structure analysis further reveals the recurring motifs and symbols that serve as powerful metaphors for the devastating consequences of conflict. Moreover, by examining the experiential meaning, SFL exposes the raw emotions and personal experiences of individuals affected by war, offering a profound insight into the human condition in times of crisis (Pasaribu et al., 2020).

Several studies have applied the SFL approach to analyze trauma narratives, shedding light on the complex linguistic choices made by individuals when recounting their experiences of trauma. For instance, Caddick and Smith (2017) conducted a study examining the linguistic features of the trauma narratives of veterans, revealing patterns of lexical choices that reflected their emotional states. Similarly, Tsyntar et al. (2022) explored the syntactic structures used by survivors of sexual assault in their narratives. They uncovered how these structures served to convey their emotions and experiences. Also, Matsuoka (2016) conducted an SFL transitivity analysis to reveal how Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* portrays the dehumanization of soldiers through the analysis of material and mental processes. Findings showed that German soldiers were represented as passive participants (Goals) in material processes. This highlighted their victimhood and lack of agency during war.

Additionally, Neziri et al. (2024) found that the analysis of material and verbal processes as well as irony in Heller's *Catch-22* showed the contradiction in military logic. Finally, Al Khazraji (2024) conducted a critical discourse analysis of Powers' *The Yellow Birds*. The analysis of characters' linguistic choices, metaphorical expressions, and narrative structures revealed their ideological stances about post-war. These studies highlight the potential of SFL to provide a deeper understanding of the ways in which individuals navigate and communicate their traumatic experiences. Furthermore, the application of systemic functional linguistics in the study of trauma narratives has also shed light on the role of power dynamics and social structures in shaping survivors' accounts (e.g., Chueasuai, 2017; Zhang & Hu, 2021).

Based on this extensive literature, it is clear that few studies adopted an SFL approach to the analysis of war narrative, with special focus on war trauma. Therefore, this study seeks to contribute to the field by applying Halliday's SFL approach (namely, transitivity framework, thematic structure, and experiential meaning) to Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds* in order to explore how linguistic choices represent the inner and outer conflicts experienced by the characters as a result of war trauma. By focusing on material, mental, and relational processes in the characters' speech and narration, the analysis aims to uncover how war trauma shapes identity, agency, and interpersonal relationships in the novel.

### III. METHODOLOGY

The research design adopted in the present study is exploratory and qualitative in nature, as it allows for a deep understanding of the phenomenon under investigation and captures rich and descriptive data (Dörnyei, 2007). The main corpus of the present study is Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds* (2012), first edition. The key concepts of SFL, including the metafunctions of the novel's language, thematic structure, and discourse structure revealing the power dynamics among characters, are applied to the text. Linking these concepts helps to unpack the ideological representations of the Iraq War traumatic experiences (cf. Caruth, 1996). Following Riyono et al. (2018), the analysis will explore the significance of the Powers' lexical and syntactic choices to depict the traumatic experiences of characters as well as their ideological stances. It will also reveal the hidden ideologies behind modality, discourse markers (both referential and interpersonal), and discourse structure employed by the author when depicting such traumatic events (cf. Maschler & Schiffrin, 2015).

Of the six processes marking Halliday's transitivity framework (Halliday, 1994), the analysis will focus on the material, mental, and relational processes to cast light on power dynamics among the different participants in the novel. The analysis of material processes will help to identify the main characters causing (Actors) and affected (Goal) by war traumatic events. Also, analyzing mental processes will help to reveal characters' (Sensors') thoughts and feelings about war events. Finally, the analysis of relational processes will help to identify the key attributes of characters as Carriers. The purposeful sampling technique is implemented to identify the clauses that reveal the novel's thematic structure as well as the attributes that Powers ascribes to characters. This is done manually for more accurate verb categorization since Bartle's voice as a narrator and as a key character in the plot intermingles.

## IV. DATA ANALYSIS

Powers' *The Yellow Birds* (2012) is set in the two Iraqi cities of Mousel and Al Tafari where Powers himself worked as an army machine gunner. The story is about Bartle, who is sent to Iraq and promises Murphy's mother to keep him safe. At first, Bartle did not like to promise Murphy's mother anything. However, Murphy dies, and this affects Bartle badly, as he considers himself responsible for Murphy's death. After the war, Bartle comes home, but he still acts as if he were still in Iraq. He still lives the moments of war with all its cruelty and brutality. It is through the description of literary trauma that Powers was able to describe the Iraq War in all its details.

The following sections analyze the novel in terms of the metafunctions of its language as well as the transitivity framework and its role in highlighting the novel's thematic structure, power dynamics, and ideological representations.

A. *The Metafunctions of the Novel*

This section explores how the novel's language is used to construct meaning and convey ideological perspectives. By focusing on the choices made by Powers in terms of language and thematic structure, this framework enables a detailed examination of the ideological representations grounded in the characters' traumatic experiences. As far as the ideational metafunction of Powers' language in *The Yellow Birds* is concerned, it is found that it serves as a powerful tool in conveying the psychological and emotional toll of war. By using vivid imagery and poetic language, Powers invites readers to intimately experience the characters' trauma, forcing them to confront the harsh realities of war. For example, in chapter 10, Powers describes Bartle's experience of witnessing Murphy's death in vivid detail using sensory language to immerse the reader in the chaos and horror of war. Consider the following excerpt.

We pulled Murph free from the tangle of brush and laid him out in some shadow of respectability. We stood and looked him over. He was broken and bruised and cut and still pale except for his face and hands, and now his eyes had been gouged out, the two hollow sockets looking like red angry passages to his mind. His throat had been cut nearly. (Powers, 2012, p. 127)

This excerpt challenges the dominant narrative of heroism and honor often associated with war. Rather, it offers a raw and unfiltered perspective on the lasting psychological effects that soldiers endure. Through his vivid descriptions of the soldiers' physical and emotional scars, Powers humanizes them and reminds readers of the war atrocities. In war, all people are just numbers. It does not matter whether the killed is Malik (the Iraqi interpreter), the hajji fucks (as Sergeant Sterling calls them), or Murphy. Bartle's philosophy is that war kills everybody.

In many instances throughout the novel, the first-person narrator adopts a poetic style and communicates his thoughts through well-structured short sentences, as shown in the following lines taken from the novel.

To go on, only to go on, (p. 8)

I felt like I was looking at a lie, but I didn't mind. The world makes liars of us all, (p. 35)

It only comes back faster and with more force, (p. 43)

And all the little embers burned like lamps to light my way, (p. 109)

Everything falls away from everything else. (p. 134)

As can be easily observed, the sentences are short and well-formed. Such well-formedness reflects a sense of persuasion ability. That is, Bartle/the narrator is a psychologically balanced man who comes to witness and tell history. Using an extended image of canaries, Powers depicts the American soldiers in Iraq as canaries, just as the canaries Murphy's father bought and set free from the cages. Although the canaries were freed from the cages, they willingly ceased to sing. They still live in their past, where they were caged and unable to sing. Back in the US, the American soldiers who were sent to the war cannot live their normal lives. They are literally caged. They live in voluntary imprisonment since they lost their vitality in the Iraqi desert, where their souls are now buried. Now, they are just soulless bodies. Bartle himself is a canary that is finally set free from prison, but he is not able to lead a normal life. This extended image recalls the title of the novel, which is suggestive and symbolic. The author indicates that the sweet birds of youth were thrown into the yellow deserts, and these sweet birds turned out to be yellow and dry, just like the desert.

The use of metaphors and symbolism in the novel further enhances the exploration of war trauma. For instance, the recurring image of war as an unstoppable, mythic force that kills patiently and mercilessly, "*The war tried to kill us in the spring. ... While we ate, the war fasted, fed by its own deprivation. It made love and gave birth and spread through fire*" (p. 8). Death is pervasive and gruesome, and identities are stripped of identity, "*The war had killed thousands by September. Their bodies lined the pocked avenues at irregular intervals... the faces puffed and green, allergic now to life*" (p. 8). Such vivid imagery transports the reader into the heart of the battlefield, where the weight of the characters' suffering becomes almost palpable. They experience moral dissonance, caught between horror and necessity. For instance, Bartle mentions, "*I realized with a great shock that I was shooting at him and that I wouldn't stop until I was sure that he was dead, and I felt better knowing we were killing him together*" (p. 18).

The excessive repetitions in the novel, as in "*the war tried to kill us in the spring*" (p. 3) and "*the war tried to kill us as the heat blanched all colour from the plains*" (p. 3) serve to describe the traumatic experiences of the characters due to the relentless nature of war. Furthermore, the author's deliberate use of fragmented syntax and fragmented narrative structure mirrors the fragmented lives of the soldiers. Such fragmented syntactic structures emphasize the disorientation

and confusion experienced by those who have been through traumatic events. For example, Powers utilizes fragmented syntax to convey the fractured state of mind of Bartle, as shown in the following example.

I put my hand on Murph's shoulder. "We're going to be cool," I said. "We've got each other. We know what's up". (p. 31)

This stylistic choice of disjointed and fragmented sentences creates a sense of unease and instability for the reader as it mirrors the psychological turmoil that soldiers used to face. Similarly, Powers' use of fragmented narrative structure further reinforces such disorientation and confusion. The narrative jumps back and forth in time and blurs the lines between past and present, memory and reality. This narrative technique serves to immerse readers in the fragmented and shattered world of war and allows them to empathize with the soldiers and understand the lasting impact of their experiences. Additionally, the author's choice of using the passive voice, as seen in "*He would be buried and forgotten by all but her .... We were covered in dust and deafened before any sound could reach us*", suggests a lack of agency and control over their own fates. Also, it highlights the power dynamics at play.

The interpersonal metafunction of Powers' *The Yellow Birds* is evident through his characters' internal struggles and their relationships with each other. Powers skillfully portrays the complex dynamics among soldiers, highlighting the bonds formed in the face of adversity. This metafunction not only enhances the overall narrative but also underscores the need for empathy and understanding in a world marked by violence and conflict. Powers expertly captures the conflicting emotions of camaraderie and fear that exist within these relationships, showing how they can both strengthen and fracture under the pressure of war. Consider the following excerpt from chapter 1.

The war had killed thousands by September. Their bodies lined the pocked avenues at irregular intervals. They were hidden in the alleys, were found in bloating piles in the troughs of the hills outside the cities, the faces buffed and green, allergic now to life. The war had tried its best to kill us all: man, woman, child. (Powers, 2012, p. 8)

In this scene, Powers depicts a group of soldiers huddled together in a foxhole during a fierce battle. As the bombs explode around them, their shared fear and vulnerability create an unbreakable bond. However, as the battle rages on and casualties mount, the constant threat of death begins to erode these relationships. This exposes the fragile nature of human connections in times of extreme stress and trauma.

At the textual level, the theme and rheme in most sentences are clearly established. The theme is concerned with the exploration of the emotional and psychological effects of war on soldiers, while the rheme focuses on the impact of loss and the constant presence of death in war. In so doing, Powers managed to explore the emotional and psychological effects of war on soldiers and how these effects can manifest in their relationships with others. For instance, in Bartle's statement that "*We thought that if we remained ordinary, we would not die*", the theme ("*we thought*") introduces the soldiers' mental state about their own coping mechanism in the face of constant threat. The rheme ("*that if we remained ordinary, we would not die*") reveals their naive belief in the protective power of ordinariness. This new information exposes the flawed logic and the tragic human attempt to impose order on chaos. The clause thus embodies the larger theme of disillusionment and the failure of internal narratives to shield one from the brutality of war.

The use of discourse markers throughout the novel is crucial to understanding characters' perspectives. They serve as signposts that guide readers through the narrative and shape the flow of information. Powers strategically employs these markers to highlight the characters' internal struggles, the complex nature of war, and the moral dilemmas they face. For example, when Bartle reflects on his experiences in Iraq, he uses the discourse marker '*however*' to mark the transition between his initial idealism and the harsh realities of war. This conveys his internal struggle and the disillusionment he feels. Additionally, the use of '*meanwhile*' allows Powers to juxtapose different storylines and perspectives with the main objective of providing a multifaceted view of the characters' experiences. Another interesting example is related to Murphy, who grapples with the ethical dilemma of following orders versus acting on his own moral compass. This internal conflict is highlighted through the use of the discourse marker '*yet*' to contrast Murphy's desire to do what is right with the pressures of his military responsibilities.

Furthermore, the use of deontic and epistemic modality was implemented to refer to the speaker's attitude towards the truthfulness or likelihood of a statement. Powers' skillful use of modal verbs and adverbs, such as '*might*', '*possibly*', and '*perhaps*', adds layers of uncertainty and ambiguity to the narrative. Also, they reflect the unpredictable and chaotic nature of war. This uncertainty is further emphasized by Powers' choice to include conflicting perspectives from other characters in the story. For instance, Lieutenant Johnson believes that following orders is the only way to maintain order and discipline within the military, whereas Sergeant Thompson argues that soldiers should trust their instincts and act on their own moral compass. This divergence of opinions not only adds depth to the internal conflict within Murphy but also invites readers to question the notions of duty and morality in the context of war.

#### B. Transitivity (Material, Mental, and Relational Processes)

This section analyzes how the material, mental, and relational processes unpack the ideational metafunction of the traumatic discourse in the novel. Table 1 summarizes the occurrences of verbs underlying these processes as distributed over the novel's main characters: Murphy, Bartle, Sergeant Sterling, and Mrs. LaDonna Murphy.

TABLE 1  
THE FREQUENCY OF VERBS UNDERLYING THE MATERIAL, MENTAL, AND RELATIONAL PROCESSES IN THE NOVEL

Character	Material Processes		Mental Processes (Senser)	Relational Processes (Carrier)
	Actor	Goal		
Bartle	12	8	19	9
Murphy	13	9	6	4
Sterling	14	-	6	8
Murph's Mother	8	1	7	6

All four characters in the novel assumed the participant roles of Actor and Goal except Sergeant Sterling. Bartle kept the largest number of verbs associated with mental processes, as he is the protagonist and the narrator in the novel. In terms of material processes, Powers presents Murphy as wandering off during patrol, engaging with Sergeant Sterling, and ultimately disappearing, being killed in combat. Bartle leads Murphy as ordered by Sterling, carries out cleanup, returns home, and withdraws physically. Sergeant Sterling commands patrols, orders Murphy's movement, and participates in disposing of Murphy's body. Mrs LaDonna Murphy sends care packages and contacts Bartle upon Murphy's death. Regarding mental processes, Murphy experiences fear and psychological breakdown under fire, feeling internal guilt and yearning for a meaning to his life. Bartle agonizes over promises to Murphy's mother. He is always haunted by memories, guilt, and PTSD symptoms. Sergeant Sterling shows volatile emotional states under stress. Murphy's mother feels deep worry and fear for Murphy, seeking truth after his disappearance. Finally, in respect of relational processes, Murphy is defined by his friendship with Bartle and promise to Murphy's mother. Bartle relates as keeper of Murphy's fate and son-promise to Murphy's mother. Also, he defines himself via trauma and memory compared to civilian life. Sergeant Sterling exerts authority over Bartle and Murphy as a disciplinarian and field figure.

The attributes (qualities) of each character can be traced through the adjectives associated with them. Table 2 classifies these adjectives into positive, negative, and neutral.

TABLE 2  
A CLASSIFICATION OF THE ADJECTIVES ATTRIBUTED TO THE NOVEL'S KEY CHARACTERS

Character	Attributes		
	Positive	Negative	Neutral
Bartle	relieved	spectral	listless
	happy	coward	pale
		scum	young
		forgotten	alone
		angry	quiet
		wounded (in effect)	dry
		trembling	hollow
Murphy	solid	aloof	short
	good	dead	eighteen
		lost	blue-eyed
		unknowable	blond
		frightened	quiet
		palsied	American
		strange (behavior)	tired
Sterling	harsh but fair	brutal	tall
	competent	dominating	muscled
	decorated	necessary (contextually mixed)	white-toothed
	admired	Hard	older
	evolutionary (in skill)	fucking (aggressive tone)	blue-eyed
		feared	alert
Murphy's Mother	proud	small (contextually frail)	younger than my mother
	kind	frail-looking	blond (faded)
	excited	brownd (teeth)	working-class (implied by clothing)
	generous	forgotten (implied later)	blue shirt

The adjectives associated with Bartle reflect a person in crisis suffering under the pressure of what he has done and witnessed. The attributes 'relieved' and 'quiet' occur at the beginning of the novel, marking a temporary emotional state. As the narrative deepens, new aspects of his personality are revealed. Adjectives like 'spectral', 'forgotten' and 'coward' mark a man haunted by guilt and alienation, with scars that make him bleed physically and emotionally after the war. Adjectives like 'listless' and 'pale' are signs of emotional dissociation common in PTSD. Similarly, Murphy is initially described as 'solid', 'quiet', and 'eighteen', all of which reflect a childlike person not ready for the atrocities of war. The transformation in his character is marked through a shift in adjectives. As war started, he became 'frightened', 'aloof', and 'unknowable', and finally ended as a psychological and literal causality that was 'tired', 'lost', and 'dead'. Conversely, Sterling is depicted as an ideal soldier who is 'competent', 'evolutionary', and 'admired'. However, he ends as a tool of violence, being described as 'harsh' and 'brutal'. Before Murphy's death, his mother is described as an epitome of maternal love that is 'kind' and 'dignified'. After Murphy's death, she became 'frail-looking' and 'faded'.

C. The Thematic Structure of the Novel

A close reading of *The Yellow Birds* shows that the author's thematic view focuses on the psychological impact of war, the loss of innocence, and the complexities of human relationships during wartime. Powers ideologically represents war trauma as a deeply personal and isolating experience, having almost all characters grappling with guilt, fear, and the haunting war memories. In so doing, he highlights the devastating effects of war on both the individual and the whole society. Furthermore, he explores the theme of the loss of innocence as young soldiers like Bartle are exposed to the harsh war realities that force them to abandon their youthful naivety. The novel also shows the complexities of human relationships, as soldiers form intense bonds with their comrades while struggling to maintain connections with their loved ones at home. Such bonds formed among soldiers in the middle of war are forged through shared experiences of danger and survival. The strain of war not only affects the soldiers themselves but also their families and acquaintances, further emphasizing the far-reaching consequences of conflict.

Equally important, power dynamics in the novel reflect the broader societal power imbalances during wartime. Through the exploration of character interactions, readers get to know the ways in which power is exerted, challenged, and ultimately shaped within the novel. For example, Sergeant Sterling's authoritative demeanor and control over Bartle highlight the power imbalance within the military hierarchy. The name itself reflects his power and authority, but ultimately, he commits suicide. This dynamic is further explored when Bartle witnesses Sterling abusing his power by mistreating and killing an innocent Iraqi civilian. Another interesting example is when Bartle is assigned to a new platoon and comes face-to-face with Captain Anderson. Captain Anderson's unwavering commitment to the mission and his ability to make decisions instantly solidify his position of power. As the story unfolds, the power dynamics between Bartle, Sergeant Sterling, Lieutenant Jenkins, and Captain Anderson continue to shape the narrative.

## V. DISCUSSION

The study aligns with Caddick and Smith (2017), Tsyntar et al. (2022), and Matsuoka (2016), who used systemic functional linguistics (SFL) to analyze trauma narratives. That is, drawing upon Halliday's ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions, this study showed how war discourse in Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds* is stylistically crafted to construct trauma through war narratives. It revealed how lexicogrammatical choices reflect soldiers' emotional distress and psychological disintegration. Also, it showed how material, mental, and relational processes portray trauma's impact on identity and agency, while fragmented syntax and metaphors mirror disorientation and loss. For instance, the predominance of mental processes and fragmented syntax reflect Bartle's internal disorientation, similar to how Matsuoka (2016) showed dehumanization of soldiers via mental and material processes. Additionally, the use of discourse markers and modality uncovers deeper ideological tensions, particularly concerning power dynamics and the dehumanizing effects of war.

The ideational metafunction is evident in the way Powers explores the psychological and emotional impact of war on soldiers, leaders, and families, particularly Bartle. Through Bartle's introspective narration, readers gain insight into the inner workings of his mind and the profound effects of his experiences on his mental and emotional state, especially after the loss of Murphy. This metafunction also allows Powers to delve into larger themes such as guilt, trauma, and the loss of innocence. In this regard, Koussouhon and Dossoumou (2015) offered empirical evidence on the role of ideational metafunction analysis in encoding a writer's experience and his/her own version of reality.

Additionally, the analysis of the interpersonal metafunction helped to explore the relationships among characters. For instance, the interactions among Bartle, Sergeant Sterling, and Captain Anderson are characterized by a constant struggle for power and control. These power dynamics not only shape the narrative but also raise questions about the morality of war and the responsibility of those in positions of power. This finding affirms Chueasuai's proposition that the analysis of the interpersonal function of a novel is an effective analytical tool for uncovering power dynamics among the participants, given the text's lexicogrammatical features (Chueasuai, 2017).

The textual metafunction is evident in Powers' stylistic choices and narrative structure. The fragmented and non-linear nature of the storytelling reflects Bartle's fragmented psyche and disjointed memories. Powers' use of symbolism, metaphor, and extended imagery helped to enhance the novel's thematic depth. This is also affirmed by Saldivar (2014), who showed that metaphors, symbols, and other stylistic choices influence readers' minds by rendering thoughts more engaging and interesting. Through Powers' use of vivid images and descriptive language (through adjectives), readers can almost feel the weight of the soldiers' burdens and the toll that war takes on their mental and emotional well-being. For example, Powers' use of the *canary* metaphor symbolically represents the loss of vitality and youth due to war. As Fairclough (1992) argues, such linguistic choices and discursive practices "are ideologically invested in so far as they incorporate significations which contribute to sustaining or restructuring power relations" (p. 91).

Like previous studies (e.g., Craps, 2013) that criticized literary trauma theory for being Eurocentric and neglecting non-Western victims, this study reinforces the Western-centric lens of trauma as it focuses on American soldiers' psychological trauma. Yet, unlike Al Khazraji (2014), who studies *The Yellow Birds* from a critical discourse analysis perspective, this study provides a more grounded and data-driven analysis of the novel by integrating the three metafunctions (ideational, interpersonal, and textual). Finally, while previous studies addressed trauma as a theme, this study links nonlinear structure, discourse markers, and modality to the cognitive instability of the traumatized mind. This insight strengthens the explanatory power of SFL in trauma discourse.

## VI. CONCLUSION

This qualitative, exploratory study investigated the ideological representation of war trauma in Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds* using an SFL framework. It applied Halliday's metafunctional model, with special focus on transitivity, thematic structure, and experiential meaning. Powers' linguistic choices managed to encode characters' psychological sufferings because of war horrors. Furthermore, the analysis of material, mental, and relational processes uncovered power dynamics and emotional disintegration on the part of soldiers. This notion is also emphasized through the fragmented narration and symbolic imagery that deepened the impact of traumatic experiences associated with war. Additionally, discourse markers and modality exposed ideological stances and moral ambiguities within military hierarchies. Future research may build on this study by applying SFL analysis to a wider range of post-9/11 war narratives or by comparing representations of trauma across different cultural or linguistic contexts to further understand the global dimensions of war discourse.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study is supported via funding from Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University project number (PSAU/2025/R/1446).

## REFERENCES

- [1] Alaei, M., & Ahangari, S. (2016). A study of ideational Metafunction in Joseph Conrad's "Heart of darkness": A critical discourse analysis. *English Language Teaching*, 9(4), 203-213. <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v9n4p203>
- [2] Al Khazraji, N. H. (2014). *A critical discourse analysis of war narratives in The Yellow Birds by Kevin Powers*. The International Third Conference (pp. 1086-1104). University of Kerbala, Iraq.
- [3] Andermahr, S. (2015). Decolonizing trauma studies: Trauma and postcolonialism. *Humanities*, 4(4), 500-505. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h4040500>
- [4] Balaev, M. (Ed.). (2014). *Contemporary approaches in literary trauma theory*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- [5] Bartlett, T., & O'Grady, G. (2017). *The Routledge handbook of systemic functional linguistics*. Routledge.
- [6] Bassil, Y. (2012). The 2003 Iraq war: Operations, causes, and consequences. *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 4(5), 29-47. <https://doi.org/10.9790/0837-0452947>
- [7] Bastable, J. (2014). *The 21st-century novel: Notes from The Edinburgh world writers' conference*. Edinburgh University Press.
- [8] Biesen, S. C. (2005). *Blackout: World War II and the origins of film noir*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- [9] Caddick, N., & Smith, B. (2017). Combat surfers: A narrative study of veterans, surfing, and war trauma. *Movimento (ESEFID/UFRGS)*, 23(1), 25-38. <https://doi.org/10.22456/1982-8918.71264>
- [10] Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- [11] Chueasuai, P. (2017). The interpersonal Metafunction and translation of power relations: A case study of fifty shades of grey. *MANUSYA*, 20(3), 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.1163/26659077-02003001>
- [12] Craps, S. (2013). *Postcolonial witnessing: Trauma out of bounds*. Palgrave.
- [13] Dörnyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics: Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methodologies*. Oxford Applied Linguistics.
- [14] Fairclough, N. (1992). *Discourse and social change*. Blackwell.
- [15] François, J. (2018). The stance of systemic functional linguistics amongst Functional(ist) theories of language and its 'Systemic' purpose. In A. Sellami-Baklouti & L. Fontaine (Eds.), *Perspectives from Systemic Functional Linguistics* (pp. 6-25). Routledge.
- [16] Halliday, M. A. (1978). *Language as social semiotic: The social interpretation of language and meaning*. Hodder Education.
- [17] Halliday, M. A. (1994). *An introduction to functional grammar* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Edward Arnold.
- [18] Halliday, M., & Webster, J. J. (2009). *Bloomsbury companion to systemic functional linguistics*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- [19] Henkes, R. (2001). *World War II in American art*. McFarland.
- [20] Holstun, J. (2019). Shoot and cry: Modernism, realism, and the Iraq war fiction of Kevin Powers and Justin Sirois. *Cultural Critique*, 104, 1-38. <https://doi.org/10.5749/culturalcritique.104.2019.0001>
- [21] Hynes, S. (2011). *A war imagined: The First World War and English culture*. Random House.
- [22] Koussouhoun, L. A., & Dossoumou, A. M. (2015). Exploring ideational metafunction in Helon Habila's oil on water: A re-evaluation and redefinition of African women's personality and identity through literature. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*, 4(5), 129-136. <https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.4n.5p.129>
- [23] Lahti, R. A. (2012). Gesturing beyond the frame: Transnational trauma and US war fiction. *Journal of Transnational American Studies*, 4(2). <https://doi.org/10.5070/t842012749>
- [24] Leys, R. (2000). *Trauma: A genealogy*. University of Chicago Press.
- [25] Lukin, A., & Webster, J. (2005). SFL and the study of literature. In R. Hasan, C. Matthiessen, & J. Webster (Eds.), *Continuing discourse on language: A functional perspective* (Vol. 1, pp. 413-456). Equinox Publishing.
- [26] Maitland, B. S. (2021). 'How to write a true war novel': A study of the typology and structure of war novels [PhD Thesis]. University of Wollongong, Dubai, Emirates.
- [27] Martin, J., Doran, Y., & Figueredo, G. (2019). *Systemic functional language description: Making meaning matter*. Routledge.
- [28] Maschler, Y., & Schiffrin, D. (2015). Discourse markers *Language, meaning, and Context*. *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, 189-221. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118584194.ch9>
- [29] Masmoudi, I. (2015). *War and occupation in Iraqi fiction*. Edinburgh University Press.
- [30] Matsuoka, A. (2016). Representing the horrors of war: A transitivity analysis of *All Quiet on the Western Front*. *Journal of*

- Language and Politics*, 15(1), 102–122. <https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.15.1.05mat>
- [31] Musiał, A. (2020). *Victimhood in American narratives of the war in Vietnam*. Routledge.
- [32] Neziri, A., Turku, M., & Pavliková, M. (2024). Exploring the absurdity of war: A literary analysis of catch-22. *Journal of Education Culture and Society*, 15(1), 521-532. <https://doi.org/10.15503/jecs2024.1.521.532>
- [33] Nørgaard, N. (2003). Systemic functional linguistics and literary analysis: A Hallidayan approach to Joyce, a Joycean approach to Halliday. *JLSE*, 34(1), 69-73. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jlse.2005.34.1.69>
- [34] Pasaribu, A. N., Sinambela, E., & Manik, S. (2020). The contributions of systemic functional linguistics to literary text analysis. *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Translation*, 3(9), 81-86. <https://doi.org/10.32996/ijllt.2020.3.9.8>
- [35] Powers, K. (2012). *The Yellow Birds*. Back Bay Books.
- [36] Riyono, A., Emzir, E., & Lustyantje, N. (2018). Investigating ideology through lexical choice: A critical discourse analysis of the translated Novel “The dancer” and the original “Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk”. *JETL (Journal of Education, Teaching and Learning)*, 3(1), 82. <https://doi.org/10.26737/jetl.v3i1.532>
- [37] Sagar, S., & Shehadah, M. (2021). Post-traumatic stress disorder in *The Yellow Birds*: A case-study in the light of psychoanalytical theories. *Psychology and Education Journal*, 57(9), 6662-6673. <https://doi.org/10.17762/pae.v57i9.3639>
- [38] Saldivar, R. (2014). *Figural language in the novel*. Princeton University Press.
- [39] Schellinger, P. (2014). *Encyclopedia of the novel*, Vol. 2. Routledge.
- [40] Smithpeters, J. N. (2005). “To the latest generation to the latest generation”: *Cold War and Post Cold War U.S. Civil War novels in their social contexts* [PhD Thesis]. Louisiana State University, the US.
- [41] Tsyntar, N., Kushneryk, V., Tonenchuk, T., Mudra, O., & Bloschynskiy, I. (2022). Syntactic means of expressing Emotivity (On the basis of the English literary works). *World Journal of English Language*, 12(6), 505-513. <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v12n6p505>
- [42] Van, H. V. (2021). “Metafunctions of language” in systemic functional linguistics: A framework for the interpretation of meaning of text in social context. *VNU Journal of Foreign Studies*, 37(4), 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.25073/2525-2445/vnufs.4750>
- [43] Voice, M. A. (2018). *Writing Fighting: Critical cognitive approaches to the language of killing in war* [PhD thesis]. University of Sheffield.
- [44] Yang, H. (2017). The interpersonal Metafunction analysis of Barack Obama’s inaugural address. *International Journal of Languages, Literature and Linguistics*, 3(1), 27-31. <https://doi.org/10.18178/ijlll.2017.3.1.105>
- [45] Zhang, D., & Hu, R. (2021). The applicability of systemic functional linguistics and its role in discipline integration. *Journal of World Languages*, 7(3), 515-535. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jwl-2021-0028>

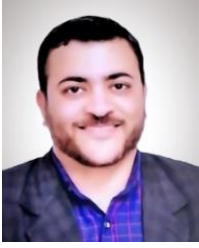
**Hissah M. Alruwaili** is Head, College Research Unit, College of Arts, and an Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics at Jouf University. She holds a PhD in Applied Linguistics from Lancaster University and a postgraduate degree in Applied Linguistics from King Saud University. As a postgraduate supervisor, she guides research in areas including language learner agency, discourse analysis, and sociolinguistic dynamics in Saudi higher education. Her research expertise encompasses systemic functional linguistics, critical discourse analysis, multimodal discourse studies, and corpus-assisted language analysis. She specializes in examining ideological representations through linguistic frameworks and has contributed to advancing methodological approaches in applied linguistics research. Her work demonstrates commitment to innovative language analysis methodologies aligned with Saudi Vision 2030. She can be reached at [hissah@ju.edu.sa](mailto:hissah@ju.edu.sa); ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7877-3076>



**Mohamed Elarabawy Hashem** is a lecturer of English Islamic Studies at the Faculty of Languages and Translation, Al-Azhar University, Cairo. In 1997, he got M.A. in Islamic Studies from University of Leiden, The Netherlands; and in 2009, he got PhD in Islamic Studies from University of Birmingham, England. Since then, he has published at international journals like *International Journal of Advanced Computer Science and its Applications*, *World Journal of English Language*, *Discourse & Society*, and *Bulletin of the Faculty of Languages & Translation*, Al-Azhar University, Cairo. His research interests include Islamic Translation Studies, Qur’anic Studies, Semantics, Islamic Discourse Analysis, and Hermeneutics. Email: [Arabawyhashem8@gmail.com](mailto:Arabawyhashem8@gmail.com); ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6818-799X>



**Abdulfattah Omar** is an Associate Professor of English at the Faculty of Arts, Port Said University, Egypt, and a lecturer at the Canberra Institute of Technology (CIT), Australia. He completed his PhD in Computational Linguistics at Newcastle University, UK, in 2010. He served as a lecturer at Northumbria University (2010–2011) and as a researcher at the Australian National University (2023–2025). His research interests include computational linguistics, corpus linguistics, digital humanities, literary computing, and discourse studies. Email: [a.a.omar2010@gmail.com](mailto:a.a.omar2010@gmail.com); ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3618-1750>



**Waheed M. Altohami** is currently Associate Professor of Linguistics in the Department of English Language and Literature, College of Science and Humanities in Al-Kharj, Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia. He is a standing Associate Professor of Linguistics and English Language in the Faculty of Education, Mansoura University, Egypt. In 2015, He got PhD in Linguistics from Egypt. Since then, he has published at international journals like *Studies About Languages*, *Journal of English Language and Linguistics*, *International Journal of Advanced Computer Science and its Applications*, *Cogent Arts and Humanities*, *Frontiers in Psychology, Humanities & Social Sciences Communications*, *World Journal of English Language*, and *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*. His research interests are general linguistics, cognitive linguistics, critical discourse analysis, and translation. Email: [w.m.altohami@gmail.com](mailto:w.m.altohami@gmail.com); ORCID

iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8742-1366>