

Simon Stephens's *Motrtown*: Veteran's alienation in light of Sebastian Junger's Notions

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Abstract

The alienated homecoming veteran is an important subject in modern societies that affects the fabric of everyday life. Alienation is a sense of nostalgia of a homecoming who comes again to his country to find himself strange among his family and friends. This paper examines the alienation of a homecoming veteran, who leaves his country and takes risks on behalf of his people for sake of their safety. The homecoming veteran who experiences a tribe-like life in the army hopes to re-establish the same old relations in the army. Yet, he discovers that this society is by no means like his previous one. Thus, this study aims to investigate how the veteran is alienated from his society when returning home, and that leads to show the veteran inability to reintegrate or make healthy and balanced relations. Moreover, the study shows how does such veteran lose the sense of communal life in the army. Throughout a textual analysis and by depending on Sebastian Junger's Notions that he outlines in his book *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging* (2016), this paper analyses Simon Stephens's *Motortown* (2005) from Junger's notions of homecoming veteran.

Keywords: Sebastian Junger, Alienation, tribe, social isolation.

Introduction

Alienation means separation and it is a "state of feeling estranged or separated from one's milieu, work, products of work, or self"(Lacan, p.1). The emergence of the notion of alienation in the twentieth century is mostly caused by the two world wars that left great destruction and death among nations. Moreover, losing faith in God and trust man's power and intelligence only, generate depression, loneliness, and isolation. Rousseau states that humanity is established on goodness, yet, spoiled by the rules and constrictions that limit man's liberty. Alienation is found where an individual is unable to attach to their rules or values that bring no pleasure or happiness to his life (Cranston, 1991). Marx defines alienation as a feeling when the worker in the capitalist society, feels selling his labor or self as a commodity, and feels helpless that leads him to depression and alienation (Marx, 1963). Seeman gives five variants of alienation, powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, self-alienation, and social isolation which is the most important to this study. Social isolation occurs when those romantics feel the lack of communal life in urban society, it is the opposite of integration (Geyer, et al. 2012). Fromm defines alienation as deactivating one's feelings and make them an object depending on outside power to leads him. Fromm confirms that alienation is not permanent, yet it could be a repeated threat for individuals. Modern secular societies promote individualism and celebrate capitalism that leaves people alone, lives meaningless life and without human values and norms (Lio, 1989).

The alienated homecoming veteran is an important subject in modern societies that affects the fabric of everyday life because veterans represent an important and active group in society. Alienation is a theme that extended a long time ago. It is this sense of nostalgia when someone is away from home and family and feels alone in the place where he is. This study goes further to examine a particular sense of alienation, which is the alienation of homecoming veterans. Veterans coming back home almost suffer from dangerous issues, one of them is post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD. Junger, (2016) states that "both [PTSD and homecoming alienation] result from military service abroad, so it's understandable that vets and clinicians alike are prone to conflating them" (p.53). Junger puts forth a great intention to the concept of tribe and that this community, from his point of view, is more appropriate and significant for the individuals to live in. Junger

confirms that the tendency to tribal life is because it protects from hardships of life. Junger finds out from studying and comparing tribe community and modern society that "the findings are in keeping with something called self-determination theory, which holds that human beings need three basic things to be content: they need to feel competent at what they do, and to feel authentic in their lives; and to feel connected to others" (p.14). Junger confirms that these values are essential to achieve happiness and stability and other things like money, beauty, and social status are just shells that can't save persons from loneliness and alienation.

The Alienated Veteran in Stephens's *Motortown*

Simon Stephens (1971) is a British playwright and the most prolific one. His star has brightened in the late 1990s. A success followed others from 2003 to 2015, he wrote 20 plays and most of them performed in the United Kingdom and out in Germany, where he met great success. Also, his works have been performed in France, Spain, and other European countries. Dan Rebellato, the scholar "established him as one of the key playwrights of the decade" (Menefee, 2019, p.103). Stephens' plays have tackled many themes that belong to everyday life. he says that "I write about death, love, alcohol and children, and the plays you can almost see as one where death is very present, one where love is very present, one where alcohol is very present, or the combinations of these two things" (pp.2-3). In *Motortown*, the returning soldier from Iraq, Danny, represents the working class with all his violence and brutality. Stephens asserts that he "wanted *Motortown* to be a play that troubled its audience. it was important to me that a play that looked at such a brutal, ghastly war should take a position that may undermine the expectations of the court's liberal regulars" (p.5).

Motortown, the production of 2006 is Stephens's fourth play that performed at The Royal Court, and has brought a great success that enables Simon Stephens to win "The Best Foreign playwright". The eight scenes play has shown many themes or more precisely depicted feelings of fear, anxiety, violence, war's brutality, and soldier's traumatic experience (Gunenc, 2018, p.129). The political events that stimulate Stephens to dedicate his play about them are, the first and most shocking ones are 11th of September 2001 when Al-Qaeda terrorists bombed the twin towers in New

York, US. This incident makes the US and the UK and other countries declare war on terrorism and invaded Afghanistan and after it Iraq (Gunenc, p.132). The second event is during the process of writing this play on 6 July 2005 just one day before the London bombing of the train transport system. So, the play depicts the destructive consequences of war and violence besides displaying the moral dilemma of British society. Finally, Stephens' attention for writing *Motortown* is to declare his rejection of war against Iraq.

Stephens shows the effect of war on individuals like Danny, the protagonist, and on his family and neighbors, like Tom, Lee, Paul, and others. They all display a kind of isolation in critical times with all the political, economic changes that accompanied the terrorist attacks and the war on Iraq and Afghanistan (Gunenc, 2018, p. 637). It is not Danny alone who suffers alienation from his society, it is the whole citizens. However, Danny participates in a war that is not a war for surviving but for economic reasons, the struggle for controlling the oil markets. The play extended for a whole day started with Danny's arrival at his brother Lee and ended with the same location in Lee's apartment but with different feelings. The first meet was happy with the returning veteran and the final one was full of anxiety, fear, and contradiction. Danny confirms that when saying; "*he had one hell of a day*" (Stephens, p.203). In the second scene, Danny visits Marley, his girlfriend, and discovers that she is with another person and she confesses that he frightened her through his letters being sent to her when he was in Iraq. This rejection by Danny's girlfriend makes his status worse that he loses his connection to his people. And other events like meeting Paul and knowing about the marches against the war that he participates in enhance his alienation from his society, environment, law, and norms. This alienation leads him to commit a crime by killing a black teenager and trying to convince his brother to turn a blind eye to his crime. The play goes around Danny and how he fails to start or more precisely, restart his life after returning from Iraq. And from Danny's suffering and trauma, we discover the main defects of the society as selfish, individualistic, and unsupportive to its people especially those who fight for its safeness. Danny, the protagonist and the veteran who comes back from an indistinct war in Iraq, is back with serious, psychological troubles that are supposed to be mitigated with the

help and support of his family and friends. Instead, he discovers that his girlfriend has abandoned him and refused to see him. Moreover, he finds himself unable to contact his parents, or visit them. "*Lee. You going to go and see them, you think?*" /

Danny. I don't think so, no". (Scene one, 150). Danny can be diagnosed easily with PTSD trauma of war. Stephens was very cautious when depicting Danny's character. He shows Danny as a distinctive pattern for a veteran with a traumatic experience, and he isn't content only with that but shows also "the lack of family support and psychological disorder of contemporary British society" (Gunenc, 2018, p.132). That is to say that Danny has experienced the war trauma and what comes with it from losing arms mates, shocking events, and whatsoever symptoms of PTSD:

From hallucinations, nightmares, and absent-mindedness all the time as the veteran experiences his catastrophic events over and over again. Danny returns home with all these horrible things and it is like he can't get over the war even at his home (Gunenc, p.133).

Moreover, Danny like any home comer would feel loneliness and strangeness between his people and family a sense that most veterans suffer from.

With all hardship, traumatic memories, and the danger and violence of war, Danny has faced in Iraq, they have affected him completely upon returning home. First of all, through his traumatic attitudes and secondly, within himself that he feels he has been betrayed by his girlfriend and his family. From his first day at home he was told by his brother Lee that Marley, Danny's girlfriend asked him to tell Danny that she would leave him and never want to see him again; "*Lee. She doesn't want to see you, she told me to tell you*" (Scene one, 148). If Danny finds another treatment from his family, girlfriend, and people, he will not be that violent person, he becomes. Danny finds himself in a different place, he is at home but not completely the home he remembered it. Sebastian Junger describes his experience in Afghanistan with the other soldiers and how life in the army is organized and

collaborative. It is a tribe like the society that one can feel as if at home and with his own family. Junger told his own experience as;

Life in the military is that you are rarely alone. Day after day, month after month, you are close enough to speak to, if not touch, a dozen or more people. When I was with American soldiers at a remote outpost in Afghanistan, we slept ten to a hut in bunks that were only a few feet apart. I could touch three other men with my outstretched hand from where I lay. They snored, they talked... but we always felt safe because we were in a group (Junger, p.56).

This is the group that Danny was living in and felt balanced. He is never being alone, and his work was performed collaboratively. However, his violent behavior is started at home. He confirms that at the end of the play, and after committing murder. He tells his brother how his life was in the army; *"Danny. I don't blame the war. The war was all right. I miss it. It's just you come back to this (Scene eight, 228)*. The word "this" is so important here, "this" means here at home that is supposed to be the place of his safeness, his real belongingness, and where his close people live. At "this" home Danny fails to reconnect with his close people. Danny is like thousands of veterans who go to war fighting for their country and their people, but when they come home, they find that they are no longer being related to it. They relive as alienated persons, sometimes abandoned by their close people, like Danny who has been left by his girlfriend, Marley. Danny insists on keeping his relationship with Marley although she refuses him several times. That leads to thinking of some hidden motivations, a psychological one for sure. Marley is considered a nice reminder of his past before going to war, because she is Danny's schoolmate and the only link with his society, that he is now alienated from, after returning from war. She is the only person Danny wants really to contact her and have an actual relationship with. Yet, he gets a rejection from Marley. For the present or future, Danny has nothing to look forward to. He has the past only and the memory of his past with his family and friends. Gunenc (2019) asserts that "Danny always tries to use his memories and to narrate them around, for that

reason cannot adopt present situation" (p. 135). Danny's other betrayal is from society. He witnesses, as Stephens does, the anti-war campaign and marches on Hyde Park against the government's decision to support America in the war in Iraq. Stephens asserts his rejection of war and his main intention for Motortown is to label it as "being a criticism of the war and a criticism of the anti-war campaign" (ibid). Rebelleto (2013) addresses the culture and environment of Danny that turn him to be a violent person;

Any criticism espoused by the play is directed less towards the army than the culture of which it is extensive. If those boys are violent, chaotic, or morally insecure, it's because they are a product of a violent, chaotic, and morally insecure culture. It's inaccurate to dismiss them as being part of something else (p.113).

The society, he returns to, is a fertile ground for enhancing Danny's trauma, psychological trauma, and alienation. He can't find the welcome or support that any veterans deserve after military service especially the serving in Iraq war. Explaining Danny's status is through his own words to the couple he met in a hotel, he says "*I come back home. It's a completely foreign country*" (Stephens, 2009, 7). The foreign country is his home "England", and his deep words show how alienated he is.

England waged a war against terror and advocated the freedom and safeness of the country. Yet, it used the same policy and tactics as the terrorists. Besides that, Danny witnesses the anti-war marches that are also pretended to be morally better than the government. These hypocritic, contradictory, and misjudgments create confusion for Danny, moreover, leads him to act and behave like that. Stephens asserts that Danny is part of this society, a society that is a "violent, morally corrupted, and chaotic culture" (p.140). Danny pretends to be a good person, a successful film special effects maker has a wife who died in a robbery accident shot. He creates a forged realm for himself. The returning veteran has nothing at home, no family or wife even has no home or work to restart his connection to his society. He has only the pretense of being part of his society. Most of the Iraq war plays show the veterans' problems of reintegration, and this disintegration is laying blame on the lack of support from society to its

soldiers. Sherman (2015) confirms that the war and its effects on soldiers are not the nation's concern, people bear no burden of it. Instead, it's the soldiers' obligation and debt. The same is true at war zone and home, the citizens aren't ready to share the soldiers' suffering or even supporting them. This is the main cause that most returning soldiers are prone to addiction to either drugs or alcohol, as a result of feelings of loneliness, isolation, and lack of social support. Sharman translates what is in the mind of veterans when are at home to their people and society. She says; "you, as a citizen... are partially responsible for sending me to war, keeping me at war, and integrating me into the workforce when I come home" (p.34). Junger has the same notion in focusing on social support for healing their returning veterans. He calls it "social resilience", which is to make soldiers participate in the actual work for their country. Junger puts good attention to this concept and states that "all the praise in the world doesn't mean anything if you're not recognized by society as someone who can contribute valuable labor" (p. 59). That is to feel important and active as they were in the military service.

Danny's trauma and psychological troubles are enhanced with the disconnected family relations and with Marley's decision to leave him. He finds himself in isolation and strange in his home. Jackson, (1983) describes Danny's feelings precisely; "in perceiving himself as unloved, unwanted, a non-person... and worthless, he comes to think of himself in derogatory terms. The knowledge of this real self is so painful" (p.140). He is psychologically injured, and he becomes so aggressive. Danny buys a gun from his friend Tom, he intentionally wants to use it in abducting and killing Jade, Paul's girlfriend. Jade is fourteen year- old black girl, she leaves her school and accompanies Paul. Danny insists on taking her on a picnic to Foulness Island, where he gets his training to join the army. The depiction of torture is so violent and scary, that seems so realistic for the audience, and a scene like this could happen in real life. Danny doesn't show regret for committing such a horrible crime. He describes her as a nice doll to play with and at the end breaks her mercilessly.

Danny chooses Jade to revenge his alienation to show that he is in control of his society and he has the power to destroy anything in front of him. His brutality is the product of his society, it is the symptom and result

of extensive violence and chaos of his society. Junger confirms that America is a powerful country, and nothing can disturb its safeness, except America itself. When this superior country leaves its people and its veterans financially unstable, out of jobs, in return the capitalists increase their wealth, then, for sure alienation is the result. That is exactly what Marx warns societies and capitalist societies from, and its results would be chaos and violence .

Conclusion

Danny, the British veteran returns home, after serving in Basra, suffering serious trauma. He fails to contact his parents and is abandoned by his girlfriend, Marley who refuses to see him because of his disturbing attitudes. He meets her begging her to stay with him, even he threatens her. Through wandering a long day which is the whole time of the play, he meets different people and discovers the big gap between his belief and values and his society. Danny reflects Stephens' belief in which he rejects the war and also shows his discontent with the anti-war marches as he describes them as hypocritical and subjective in presenting their viewpoint. Danny suffers loneliness and war trauma that turns him to imagine a different life he owns, and to create another world he lives in with a wife and family. Danny suffers loneliness and war trauma that turns him to imagine a different life he owns, and to create another world he lives in with a wife and family. He tells the people he meets about his successful job and his wife who waits for him at home. This world has no connection to soldiers' world, he even develops a sense of hatred toward veterans when he pretends that his wife has been killed by a soldier in a robbery accident. Yet, in a moment of consciousness, he finds himself alienated from his family and friends and betrayed by his girlfriend. These feelings lead him to an extreme and brutal action which is torturing and shooting a black teenage girl. Danny doesn't find social support or proper treatment for his psychological trauma. His trauma enhances through negligence and isolation. Danny's violent action is due to perceiving himself as an unlovable and worthless person. This thinking of himself is so painful, that leads him to be aggressive and violent. This aggressiveness and violence are a fake show of power, Danny, the helpless wants to prove that he is in control of his life and has the power to destroy anything. His brutality reflects his society's culture that results from extensive violence and

chaos. And it is the result of neglecting veterans inactive, jobless, and without proper treatment.

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