

War and its Impact on Children: A Study of Nosaka's “Grave of the Fireflies”

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Abstract

War is often seen through political and historical lenses, and very less attention is given to the consequences borne by one of the most helpless and the most vulnerable group, that is, the children. Akiyuki Nosaka's "Grave of the Fireflies" (1967) gives a poignant portrayal of childhood suffering during wartime Japan. The story portrays two children who become orphans solely due to war and how the rest of society becomes indifferent to their suffering. This paper studies the psychological, physical and social impact of war on children, focusing on themes of loss, neglect, and survival in an indifferent society. Through the characters of Seita and Setsuko, the story portrays war as a tragedy that dismantles innocence in a failing societal structure.

Keywords: war, trauma, children, orphanhood, society.

Introduction

War narratives are powerful literary narratives that shape how societies remember and emotionally process conflicts. Beyond documenting battles, they also explore war's psychological and moral consequences. While some narratives emphasise heroism and nationalism, others challenge these dominant perspectives by highlighting the sufferings of civilians and the scars left on individuals and

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communities. War narratives thus become spaces where history, memory, and identity intersect, offering both a record of devastation and a critique of the forces that produce it.

The war narrative in Akiyuki Nosaka's "Grave of the Fireflies" (1967) dismantles heroic and nationalistic representations of war by portraying the serious sufferings of civilians, particularly children. Rooted in Nosaka's own experiences, the story transforms war into a narrative of guilt, memory, and moral reckoning. Nosaka himself says, "Children suffer most in war" (qtd. in Lahiri), emphasising the universality of civilian trauma due to conflicts. The story focuses on starvation, displacement, and emotional abandonment, which shows how children suffer because of the decisions made by those in power. Seita, the elder brother, fails to protect his little sister Setsuko, despite his best efforts. By portraying these characters, the author makes the narrative autobiographical and a personal apology to Nosaka's deceased sister. This war narrative thus presents survival itself as an ethical dilemma, rather than a triumph. The story, set in postwar Japan, reflects a broader cultural movement that associates war with hunger, suffering, and civilian devastation, reinforcing pacifist memory and intergenerational transmission of trauma. Thus, Nosaka's work redefines war narratives as spaces of mourning and self-critique that expose war's psychological and moral consequences.

The narrative centres on two siblings, Seita and Satsuko, struggling to survive in Japan during World War II. The children lose their mother, and presumably also their father, who does not appear in the story at all. After their mother dies, they are taken in by their aunt for some time. But she soon grows tired of them and begins neglecting them, gradually pushing them to leave and live on their own. Nosaka presents this short story as a powerful critique of war by highlighting its impact on children, not on the battlefield, but in the clutches of starvation, displacement, and abandonment. This paper explores how the story reflects the broader consequences of war on children in a failing societal system.

Literature Review

Nosaka's "Grave of the Fireflies" foregrounds trauma, guilt, and memory through a semi-autobiographical lens. Critics argue that the text resists heroic war narratives and exposes the collapse of the caregiving structures that affect children. Jo Boyden notes, "children's resilience should not be overstated" (Boyden 3). In the story, Seita and Setsuko's resilience is tested to the extreme. Their childhood is reduced to a site of deprivation and abandonment, rather than protection and growth.

Psychoanalytic frameworks further illuminate this breakdown. Cathy Caruth defines trauma as an "overwhelming experience...not fully grasped as it occurs" (Caruth 4). Seita's denial and emotional withdrawal after losing his mother make this evident. His condition also aligns with Freud's concept of melancholia, where "the loss of the object. . . is withdrawn into the ego" (249). This is evident through Seita's refusal to acknowledge reality. Setsuko experiences regression, caused by the

absence of adequate adult support and food. This can be viewed through Doi's concept of *amae*, described as the "desire to depend and presume upon another's love" (Doi 22). The absence of someone to depend upon underscores the siblings' emotional deprivation. Thus, Nosaka's short story reveals war not only as a material catastrophe, but also as a profound rupture of psychic and relational life.

Objectives and Aim

The primary aim of this study is to analyse the impact of war on children, as represented in the story. The study focuses on psychological trauma, physical suffering, and the collapse of social support systems that heavily affect the children. The study examines how childhood is disrupted through the characters of Seita and Setsuko by highlighting premature maturity and the loss of innocence. It further aims to explore the psychological consequences of war, including emotional isolation, denial, and other coping mechanisms. The research also analyses the depiction of starvation as a central element of wartime suffering, and focuses on the adverse effects it has on the helpless lot.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretative approach to analyse war's impact on children. The research focuses on the story's tragic elements, character development, and narrative structure to understand the psychological, physical, and social dimensions of childhood suffering. The study focuses on recurring themes such as loss of innocence, starvation, and social neglect. The researcher employs secondary sources, including scholarly works on war studies, childhood trauma, and film discourse, to support her analysis. The researcher also draws upon the elements of trauma theory to interpret the behavioural and emotional responses of characters. Thus, the researcher presents a critical examination of the work, both as a cultural text and as a humanitarian commentary on war on children.

War and the Loss of Childhood

A crucial aspect of the story is the loss of childhood. Setsuko, a young child, is forced into a reality where she must live separated from her mother. In the beginning of the story, she is a typical child, playful, dependent, and full of wonder. She finds joy in simple things, like a piece of candy. But the reality of war forces her to confront situations far beyond her years. By describing Setsuko, Cavallaro shows how her innocence contrasts sharply with the horrors she faces. This highlights the emotional resonance, as the readers witness "a child's simple needs remain tragically unmet" (Cavallaro 98). Setsuko's childhood happiness gives way to hunger and fear. She starts playing with fireflies and sucking on marbles, representing her desperate attempts to hold on to her childhood amid the destruction around her. As survival becomes difficult, her childhood begins to erode. Hunger becomes the biggest turning point of her life. The candy tin, once a symbol of joy, becomes a symbol of desperation as she starts hallucinating marbles as candies.

Seita is slightly older but still a child. He tries his best to give Setsuko her childhood, while his own is completely ruined. Thomas Lamarre reads Seita as a

character caught between childhood and adulthood, noting that he is “forced into a premature role of responsibility, that he is ill-equipped to sustain” (Lamarre 73). He is compelled to assume adult responsibilities without any emotional or social support. This takes a heavy toll on both him and his sister.

Right from the beginning of the story, the author shows the sharp contrast between the innocence of a child and the horrors of war, which adulterates it. The children are forced to adapt to the cruel realities of war. Seita, being the eldest, bears a heavier weight of it.

... Seita as if he had been sent a staggering blow broke into a run; his previous plan had been to escape to the embankment at Ishiya River, and he ran eastward along the elevated line of the Hanshin Railway, but the area was already in a state of chaos with people dashing for shelter, people dragging large full carts, men carrying great bags of bedding, old ladies calling out for people in shrill voices, fretting with impatience he turned toward the sea, still then the sparks were flying, he was still wrapped in the cry of falling missiles ... (Nosaka 448)

Seita's loss begins with responsibilities. Overnight, he becomes a caretaker, provider, and an emotional support system for Setsuko. Unlike Setsuko, Seita lives his life painfully aware of the reality around him. He understands hunger, rejection and social abandonment. His inability to seek assistance or compromise reflects a child assuming an adult's role. This internal conflict defines his tragedy: he must act like a man, but he is still a boy. Through these characters, the author shows how war robs children not only of safety, but also of identity and emotional development.

... but the real tragedy of *Grave of the Fireflies* is the indifference of so many of the Japanese toward Seita, Setsuko, and others like them. When an aunt steals what little they have, her neighbours do nothing; they have “already tired of war orphans.” A doctor callously explains to Seita that his sister is sick because she needs better nutrition, and recommends foods that are impossibly out of reach for the children like white fish, egg yolks, and butter. When Seita attempts to steal food to feed Setsuko, a farmer shows him no mercy. (Fincher)

Psychological Trauma and Emotional Isolation

The psychological toll of war shows in both children. Seita's love for Setsuko is deep. He tries to shield her at his own expense. He steals for her and gets beaten for her. Whenever he can, he creates small moments of happiness for her. Adolescent and inexperienced, he tries to make himself and Setsuko happy on his own. Though Seita does his best to keep Setsuko happy, she gradually declines. This is not only because of physical malnourishment, but also because of emotional distress. She starts hallucinating, imagining marbles and stones as food. These hallucinations and her eventual death highlight the effects of devastating trauma on a child's psyche.

Seita, trying his best to be strong, begins to show denial and pride. He refuses to seek help even when it becomes necessary. His emotional isolation underscores a key theme that war does not only fracture families; it also fractures the

psychological resilience of children, leaving them unable to process loss or seek support effectively.

Breakdown of Societal Structures

The author heavily critiques the failure of societal systems during wartime. “Armed conflict destroys the social worlds of children, undermining the very conditions that make childhood possible” (Boyden 3). People become cold and heartless. Their indifference is directed even towards helpless children. “Research on trauma in war-exposed refugee children generally focuses on children’s symptoms but pays little attention to their subjective experience. Thus, there is a risk of underestimating the psychological consequences of the potentially traumatic events they were exposed to” (Tsuchigahata et al. 245). After losing their mother, Seita and Setsuko find shelter in the house of their aunt, who seems cheerful in the beginning. She initially takes Seita and Setsuko in, fulfilling an emotional and a moral duty. But as resources become scarce, her attitude shifts. She eventually becomes resentful towards them. “...she was fixing her daughter’s lunch box, making rice balls for the lodger, with the rice bartered for his mother’s kimono, while for their lunch she served parched oilless beans, once having fresh in her mind the taste of rice Setsuko lost her appetite for the stuff. . .”(Nosaka 455). Though the aunt sells their mother’s kimono to get some food, she refuses to feed the children properly. That is her way of showing them her unhappiness towards having them under her roof.

Seen through the lens of war, the aunt also lives through food scarcity and rationing. She lives to protect her household and manage fear and scarcity. Her harshness reflects anxiety and survival instincts, rather than pure malice. The aunt’s role is crucial because she reflects society’s failure. She is the ‘adult system’ that should have protected the children, but instead becomes one of the forces that contribute to their downfall. This reflects a broader societal reflection, where survival instincts override compassion. The children are forced to survive either under their resentful aunt or take shelter somewhere outside by themselves, and Seita chooses the latter. “They were away now from the enforced blackout, but the darkness of the shelter at night seemed even more pitched in black, he hung the mosquito netting from the supports, climbing inside the only link to life was the buzz of the wings of the mosquitos swarming. . .”(Nosaka 457). Thus, war dismantles social safety nets.

Starvation and Physical Suffering

Nosaka also presents the brutality of starvation and physical suffering, besides emotional trauma. Seita’s inexperience in providing for himself and his younger sister becomes one of the central forces in their tragic fate. He lacks both the practical skills and emotional maturity to survive. This leads to starvation. Starvation in the story is gradual and cruel. Setsuko does not suddenly collapse. Her weakness progresses gradually, which leads her into hallucination, and then, death. Seita watches helplessly as his sister deteriorates. He suffers from hunger too, but feeding his sister becomes his priority. He gives her the better portion, lies about food, and pretends everything is under control as long as he can. As starvation deepens, his

body grows weak, but he keeps pushing himself.

Starvation becomes worse because of society's indifference. The children have no family to take care of them or provide them with rations, and they find it hard to survive outside the system. Neighbours, strangers, and even relatives fail them. Food exists, but not for them. It can be said that the children don't starve only because of war, but also because people choose not to help enough. Seita becomes so desperate that he resorts to stealing to feed Setsuko. "Whenever Seita went out he always stole from the home vegetable gardens a cucumber the size of his little finger or a green tomato, feeding it to Setsuko" (Nosaka 458). He gets caught by the farmer he is stealing from, who thrashes him very badly. Thus, it can be seen how Seita is forced to put his life on the line and endure inhumane conditions to feed himself and his sister. Owing to the lack of proper food, Setsuko starts suffering from malnutrition, and that eventually leads to her death. This highlights the brutal reality faced by countless wartime children. The author portrays that war extends far beyond combat zones, infiltrating the most basic aspects of survival.

War as a Humanitarian Crisis

"War is not the continuation of politics with different means; it is the greatest mass-crime perpetrated on the community of man" (Adler). Rather than portraying war as a national or political conflict, "Grave of the Fireflies" frames it as a humanitarian crisis. Nosaka does not blame a specific enemy. Instead, he focuses on the universal suffering war causes. He shifts the perspective from victory and defeat to loss and empathy. In this context, children become the helpless, innocent victims of destruction, in a situation beyond their control or consent. The effects of war on children are portrayed through the devastating loss of innocence and security. War forces children into harsh realities where childhood is replaced by survival and premature maturity. This highlights how war distorts the natural growth in children, leaving them emotionally vulnerable and isolated. The story also emphasises the physical and psychological suffering caused by war. War not only destroys homes and families, but also erodes human empathy.

The Film Version and its Discourse

The story has a famous movie version, directed by Isao Takahata. Released in 1988 under the same name, it is an anime movie produced by Toru Hara and animated by Studio Ghibli. Rather than focusing on combat, the movie, like the story, focuses on the disruption of everyday life. As Racel notes, the film "recounts, through Seita's eyes, the tragic events" (56) experienced by ordinary Japanese people, emphasising how children become victims of a mass conflict. Through its non-linear structure, which begins with Seita's death, the film removes suspense and instead creates a sense of inevitability, forcing viewers to confront the tragedy as a process rather than a sudden event. The narrative choice intensifies the emotional impact. It emphasises that deaths are not isolated, but part of historical reality.

Furthermore, the film can be read as a part of a broader discourse that frames Japanese civilians, especially children, as victims of World War II. While this

perspective powerfully humanises suffering, it has also been questioned for its lack of portrayal of Japan as an aggressor. As Racel observes, the film “focuses on the suffering of ordinary Japanese people during the final months of war” (56). By centering the narrative on Seita and Setsuko, the film intensifies emotional engagement, but risks what the critics identify as “victim consciousness” (Napier 162) in postwar Japan. As Napier argues, these portrayals “encourage empathy with individual suffering, while leaving larger political responsibilities unexamined” (162). The image of suffering children, therefore, becomes both emotionally compelling and politically complex. This invites empathy, but also promotes critical reflection on history.

Findings and Results

The study finds that “Grave of the Fireflies” portrays war as a deep human crisis, emphasising disproportionate suffering among children who endure psychological trauma, physical deprivation, and social neglect. Setsuko and Seita illustrate the erosion of innocence and the burden of forced adulthood. This reveals the manifestations of trauma in them, as discussed in the paper. The analysis also highlights the indifference of society during wartime, where survival instincts overshadow empathy, contributing significantly to the children’s tragic fate. The results of the study conclude that war causes heavy destruction of childhood, not necessarily caused by violence, but by forcing children to the edge of an unlivable condition and depriving them of all the necessary elements needed for their survival.

Despite any of the foregoing reservations that might be entertained, however, “Grave of the Fireflies”, and more particularly its significance as an attempt to transpose the essence of Nosaka Akiyuki’s 1967 short story of the same name, stands out as a benchmark in Japan’s post-war treatment of the war experience, and of the capacity of animation to facilitate precisely the complex overlapping of fictive and historiographical ‘refiguration’ as articulated at the outset (Swale 518).

Conclusion

This article has studied how “Grave of the Fireflies”, as a literary piece, is impactful. “Constant exposure to literature and film designed to preserve painful memories of the plight of non-combatants, such as “Grave of the Fireflies”, created a shared vision of the past for the Sengo (after-war) generation, even among people who were not alive during the war years” (Racel 57). Through the portrayal of Seita and Setsuko, the story reveals the consequences of war on children, which include psychological trauma, physical suffering, and societal abandonment. It makes readers think about the cost of war, highlighting that its greatest victims are often those with no voice in its causes or outcomes. “War in the Pacific. . . blurred the line between combatants and civilians, exposing entire populations to suffering” (Dower 45). The story thus serves as a powerful reminder of the need for compassion, responsibility, and the protection of children in times of conflict.

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