CHAPTER 5.

TRAUMA OF WARS
Saul Bellow in his memorable talk ON RECENT AMERICAN FICTION, published in Encounter said:

... The First World War with its millions of corpses gave an aspect of the horrible to romantic valuation of the self...In the communist countries millions were sacrificed in the building of socialism...A second great assault on the separate self sprang from Germany in 1939. Just what the reduction of millions of human beings into heaps of bones and mounds of rags and hair or clouds of smoke betokened, there is no one who can plainly tell us, but it is at least plain that something was being done to put in question the meaning of survival, the meaning of pity, the meaning of justice and of the importance of being oneself, the individual's consciousness of his own existence...

It would be odd indeed if these historical events had made no impressions on American writers even if they are not on the whole given to taking the historical or theoretical view. They characteristically depend on their own observations and appear at times obstinately empirical...

So the latest works of
writers like James Jones, James Baldwin, Philip Roth, John O Hara, Joseph Bennett, Wright Morris and others show the individual under a great strain. Labouring to maintain himself or perhaps an idea of himself (not always a clear idea), he feels the pressure of a vast public life which may dwarf him as an individual while permitting him to be a giant in hatred or fantasy. In these circumstances he grieves, he complains; rages or laughs. All the while he is aware of his lack of power, his inadequacy as a moralist, the nauseous pressure of the mass media and their weight of money and organisation of cold war and racial brutalities...¹

James Jones, Norman Mailer, Joseph Heller, and William Styron all participated in the World War Second. And but for styron all of them generally show a world dominated by a run away logic. They show that there is no way in this world to distinguish between madness and sanity. Styron on the other hand dramatises the war as a condition of life. William Styron developed a post-war perspective which he himself calls a bridge between two generations.

Styron like many others of his
contemporaries had joined army and had actively participated in the World War Second. The end of it had brought in its trail the Korean War for which Styron like many other reserves was called back to the active duty. These practical experiences went a long way in determining Styron’s interests and attitude towards the selection of the subject matter of his novels. In almost all his novels there is either a direct or an indirect impact of some war of the other. Richard Pearce says in this regard:

Having come of age during the World War Second Styron saw his position as radically different from that of the writers who influenced him most—Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Wolfe and Hemingway. They were initiated by the civil war which no matter how ferocious, was nevertheless remote. It left Americans disillusioned but intact.

Styron’s generation was not left intact. And its experience was not so much the failure or impotence of old values, for it was initiated by the atomic bomb and the senseless overwhelming destruction of Hiroshima. It was traumatised by the war experience, by the unimaginable
presence of the bomb, by the feeling that the war was perpetual, was in fact the condition of life. The World War Second turned into the cold war 'whose clammy presence brozed into our nights and days. And the cold war turned into Korean War for which Styron like many of his contemporaries was recalled to duty.²

No wonder then, that the feeling of war as a condition of life pervades all the novels of William Styron. In LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS Payton Loftis commits suicide on the day the bomb was dropped on Nagasaki; THE LONG MARCH gives a detailed description of senseless military manoeuvre; SET THIS HOUSE ON FIRE has Cass who traces the beginning of his self destruction into the World War Second which drove him to the psychiatric ward and even THE CONFESSIONS OF TURNER, though set a century earlier has its own spirit of battlefield. And SOPHIE'S CHOICE has the gas chambers of Birkenau.

Styron's first novel, LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS has Milton Loftis as the second most important character in the novel. He joined army as a second lieutenant and actively
participated in the World War Second. He was promoted to the position of a caption. He married Helen, the daughter of a colonel.

The seeds of Milton's destruction were sown with this marriage. The War had left the Colonel fabulously rich, and Helen's mother before she died, left twenty thousand dollars for her daughter. The loftis family spent this money in getting built a comfortable house with a garden around it. Milton had begun his career as a lawyer and had some political ambition too. But this easy money made him realise that he could live life without doing any thing, and he began passing his time in playing golf and social drinking. This ultimately resulted into complete disintegration and destruction of the Loftis family. Robert K Morris says:

LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS reflects almost a perfect disintegration ...

love fails; sex fails;
religion fails; tradition fails;
psychotherapy fails; or rather succeeds in effecting the great holocaustal synthesis of all negation at Hiroshima. 3

In 1942 when the citizens of Portwarwick were alerted about the possible air-raid,
Milton was appointed a warden. As such Helen had herself to take Maudie to the university hospital in Charistettesville for check up. This was yet another step in hastening the destruction of Loftis family. Milton was alone and Dolly joined him. They had Dolly's wish (of sleeping with Milton in Helen's bed) fulfilled—causing the rift grow wider between Helen and Milton, leading to nothingness. Though in this novel there is not any direct impact visible but the invisible hands of World War Second are noticed here and there causing irreparable damage to the lives of the characters.

The second novel of William Styron was based on his personal experience of training camp. THE LONG MARCH has for its central action a thirty six miles' long march ordered by the corporal with a view to making the reserves fit for the active duty in Korean War.

There is Captain Mannix, a Jew from Brooklyn, and there is Lieutenant Culver, from whose point of view the story is told. Both are veterans of the World War Second. After the war they had just adjusted themselves to
the civilian life of the post-war prosperity and comfort when they were called back to the active duty again to be trained and made fit for the Korean war. As such they feel that the reserves' System is impractical and unreasonable. The training camp has all the signs of a battleground. Richard Pearce says:

The kind of war depicted in THE LONG MARCH is not the World War Second, the justice of which could guarantee some meaning to death and destruction. It is not even the battleground of the Korean War where despite the senselessness there was still an identifiable enemy. This is a Marine training manoeuvre. The enemy was labelled Aggressor on the map, brightly spattered with arrows and symbolic tanks and guns. Although there was no sign of his aggression, he fled them nonetheless and they pushed the sinister chase, sending up shells and flames as they went.4

To complete the scene, there were two mortar shells that exploded accidently killing fifteen of the young marines who were lunching at the time. The two reserves who are the representatives of the lot, feel that the entire system is meaningless and senseless.
Mannix tried to defy the colonel by driving his men to accomplish the march. His inevitable defeat comes in the form of a threat of court-martial. Styron presents the military world as full of terror, and cruelties governed by the capricious forces making the subordinates senselessly alarmed, afraid and humiliated.

Mannix and Culver both are shocked and surprised to see the dead, dying and mutilated bodies of the young marines, "lying incongruously sprawled in the welter of blood, flesh and half-eaten food." and ask themselves why this should have to happen in the peace time America. Mannix's rebellion begins from here and the entire training camp becomes a bloody wasteland in the eyes of Culver and Mannix. The sight of blood, death, mutilated bodies, wounds were expected, excused and could be even ignored during war but not in 1950, the time of peace and affluence:

Now feeling insecure and uprooted, prey of many fears, seemed the battalion had been on the trail of an invisible enemy eluding them, keeping them pressing on across
swamps, fields, alien streams... five hour's pause, five hours in a tent somewhere... surrounding grooves and trees... Echo of command post, feeling lonely and uprooted as they pushed on after the spectral foe into the infinite strangeness of another swamp or groove... In the morning he awoke feeling weary... the displacement and confusion filled him with an anxiety which would not have been possible six years before... The tent in its tiny momentary permanence... this home he desperately hungered for...

The above quote presents the condition of Culver who is a lieutenant. He is desperately hungering for home and the fear of Korean war has deprived him of his home. His condition represents the condition of the rest of the reserves who have all been called back to the active duty and are undergoing the fitness training programme. He feels adrift upon a dark and endless sea. He feels that his quarters have turned into a coffin. The radio signals appear to him to be the "cries of souls in anguish of the hell and the single night in his tent is as naked as the light in... the execution chamber..."
Mannix also is beset by the feelings of constricted chaos, helplessness, abandonment, untimely ripped from the womb of peace. He recalls a night during the last war when two drunken marines had dangled him naked up side down the window of a hotel, ten stories above the ground.

Thus the two representative characters exemplify and show the absurdity of the military world—absurd to the point of accidental and humanly willed disaster. Even Colonel Templeton’s orders of thirty six miles long hike proves nothing except that his men can and should walk the distance.

Lieutenant Culver recalls from a brief peace time stretch in Washington Square with his wife beside him, baby in the baby carriage, a cat and a record—player which haunt his mind through out. This is definitely to remind one of the different and a sane world outside the spectral and weird military enclosure.

Thus THE LONG MARCH gives us an insight into William Styron’s vision in which the military world does not bother his persons so much as the civilian world, living a
traumatised life in the shadow of war and bombs and mortar shells.

In SET THIS HOUSE ON FIRE it is the post-war Italy that is the place of action. “The World War Second rumbles beneath the surface as the most powerful undercurrent of this novel.”

The protagonist Cass Kinsolving had joined army and actively participated in the World War Second. From there he was driven to the clinic of a psychiatrist who prescribed him the study of the classics as the treatment and gave him his own copy of OEDIPUS THE KING along with some other books. The artist Cass had found it difficult to retain his sanity under the strain of maddening affairs of the war. It is in Sambuco, in Italy that we find Cass (after the war) trying his utmost to attain his balance. Regarding the choice of Italy as the central spot of action Richard Pearce says:

Italy was a good choice for the central action. It has been traditionally a kind of arcadia for American writers and artists and functions ironically in the pattern of Cass’s development. It was a major battleground for the
World War Second and the seat of totalitarianism and the experiences of war and totalitarianism are seminal in the novel.

As such, when Peter Leverette arrives at the Gothic Piazza he finds himself exposed to the flitter of American affluence and stark poverty of Italian country side. The war that had bailed America out of depression and made it the richest country had cursed it with the evils of affluence too. That is what Peter’s father is so bitter about:

What this great land of ours needs is something to happen to it—something ferocious and tragic...so that when people have been through hell fire and the crucible and have suffered agony enough and grief, they will be men again, human beings, not a bunch of contented hogs rooting at the trough, ciphers without mind or soul or heart, Soap peddlers... No, I mean it son, these are miserable times...

The wisdom of all the ages, all the precious teachings of his ancestors, they were lost upon him. He spat on his brother Negro and wore out his eyes looking at T.V. and fornicated with his best friend’s wife at the
county club. He had all these wonder drugs to prolong his life and what happened? At the age of seventy he was an empty husk saddled with a lot of ill-gotten lucre and a pile of guilt, terrified of death, lying down there on the sand at Miami beach, pitying himself...

This general depravity, moral and spiritual bankruptcy that Peter's father has talked about has all been the result of the 'ill-gotten' lucre from the World War Second. Hard earned money makes one stronger morally and spiritually but ill-gotten lucre has the tendency of making one bankrupt both morally and spiritually. Being a war hero provided you with special honour and dignity. And that is why people like Mason Flagg try and to a great extent succeed in making people believe that he is a war hero. He boasts that he had suffered a bullet injury in the war, even though he was a draft dodger.

It is this Mason Flagg who had invited Peter to one of his 'group-interplays'. Peter had found the thing too much for his senses and had avoided the whole thing. The little talk between Peter and Mason here expresses
the trauma of war that had affected the whole generation:

At Harvey Glansner's
... Peter found... blue lights, howling saxophones and bitter and sweet smell of marijuana, high hollow giggles, copulating and copulatory motions... frantic... Mason told Peter."Peter, these cats are crazy. Kicks and excitements are all they want. They are the last rebels left."
"What are they rebelling against?" Asked Peter. "Against the H-Bomb... A world they never made".11

In Sambuco, Cass befriends Corporal Luigie. He thought him to be a German and as such, began to accuse him of his betrayal to humanity; and Luigie tried to justify himself. Their talk is an eye-opener:

"I am not a spiritual fascist... No Italian is a spiritual anything in politics... I am an opportunist... It is a betrayal of the soul for any man to embrace communism, which is anti-human, barbaric and a monstrous depotism..."
"So when you joined the cops you junked all that and became a fascist. You forgot all about that camp in Poland where they melted down millions of little Jewish babies for butter
and saddle soap...or near Rome
in a cave mowed several hundred
of your countrymen with machine
guns in one fearful senseless
slaughter...Don't tell me about
Mussolini's fine roads..." 
"Please, we are not Germans...
please listen..."12

It's not only the American characters
that seem to be greatly influenced by the War
but Italians too are shown to be sufferers in
the novel. Even Peter Leverette expresses his
disgust at the indiscriminate killing and
bomining. His sense of guilt over the Second
World War is expressed in his apology to the
Italian Lady when he tells her, "I am sorry
lady, but I didn't bomb your home."13

Thus it is the World War Second that is in the
background of the novel affecting the lives of
all the characters in it. This is what Richard
Pearce also says:

As in his earlier novels, war
is a condition of life, the
World War Second rumbles
beneath the surface as a
powerful undercurrent here in
SET THIS HOUSE ON FIRE too,
Cass fought in the war and
ended in the psychiatric ward-
which marks the beginning of
his search. More over the
novel is set in the post war
Thus no doubt the World War Second which left America as one of the richest nations in the world but the riches in their wake brought all other evils affecting the entire young generation of the country. It induced people towards newness, slickness and thrills resulting in a general depravity, spiritual and moral bankruptcy drawing a whole generation into blue lights, howling Saxophones, marijuana, drinks and dopes. Thus the World War Second which is in the background, has traumatised the lives of all the characters in the novel.

William Styron's fourth novel, THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER, though claimed to be a meditation on history and is set in the 1830's of the South America, there is a war waged by a chattel slave against the injustice and the cruelties of the white masters. During this operation more than fifty white people were killed. Had his plans succeeded, he would have wiped the whitemen off the Virginia region. But since that was not to be, most of his men were either killed or arrested. Nat himself was arrested and
imprisoned and then tried and sent to the gallows. In this regard George Core has said:

Ravaged by reckless planting of tobacco, economic greed, Virginia becomes a wasteland, cursed by the presence of slavery... Slavery as Styron sees is the primary reason for social and economic and political changes which take place in the world of Nat; whereas the failure of religion to provide a mythology shows the hollowness of its values which are prudential and expedient, the collapse of this society, Styron implies, is caused by its arrogant commercialism and its inhumanity. Nat like any other slave is affected on both counts.15

Nat had inherited the rebellious pride from his father. This plus the partial education that he receives, tickle him with the idea of hope of freedom. And when he finds his hope being denied, the object of his initial anger are those liberal white men who had tickled him with the idea of hope of freedom. He begins to consider them Satans and decides to wage a holy war against them. For the purpose:

He sets out to recruit
desciples from amongst his downtrodden people...He is an instrument of wrath than mercy, advocated sword than peace.....For to Nat so sorely sinned against, all nature is charged not with the grandeur of God but with abominations of generations of white vipers.....He embues his desciples with the spirit of black militancy and converts Napolean Joshua, David into black heroes bestriding the carnage of the white world ...and preaches that only an everlasting pride will make them free.16

Of course the war in this novel is of a different kind—that of a slave uprising, for a short duration and on a small dimension, none the less it was a war. Nat's hatred and fantacy are gigantic, but as an individual he is dwarfed. He grieves, complains, rages, wars and becomes aware of the lack of his own power against the power of the pressure of mob and its racial brutality of which he becomes both a hero and a victim. Robert H fossum makes a very subtle analysis of it when he says:

If Styron can not explain why it has happened he has written notes that mean a great deal.
His typical protagonist can not offer systematic explanations either theological or otherwise. But what that protagonist can do, he finds, is wrestle with the blackness and resist the embrace of nihilism. Milton Loftis wrestles against his own moral paralysis; Al Mannix against the enslavement of his will; Cass against a nihilistic spirit of denial; and Nat against the injustice that mocks the very name of God... 17

So it can be seen that the war in THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER is not a war like the World War First or World War Second. It is a personal war or at the maximum the war of a community of the region against the oppressors. But that in no way minimises its seriousness. Bernhard Reitz says;

Styron makes us understand Nat not as some one standing apart but as an embodiment of his society and time... Nat clearly reflects the notions and limits of the world he is part of... Nat is not an unnatural monster but monstrous only in the way he embodies the limitations of his age and time. Styron grants Nat an awareness, when facing death, that takes him beyond the limits of the Virginia Tidewater... His life
story explains why he became a rebel. But it is his self-questioning before his execution that makes him a human being... He has to recognise that he was neither a victim of a conspiracy nor the instrument of divine will... At the end of Nat's meditation on the ambiguities of time and history, there remains no design greater than himself and it is for this reason that we can conceive the nineteenth century rebel slave as our contemporary. 18

Thus inspite of all the regional aspects of the strife in THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER, the strife originates out of oppression, takes in its stride all the suffering, physical and mental, has its fair share of bloodshed leaving behind a trail of suspicion, anxiety, hatred, and distrust of one community against the other, traumatising their days and nights for a long time to come.

And the last novel SOPHIE'S CHOICE has the German War in the background. The protagonist in this novel is a Polish lady who had more than her fair share of miseries and survived. But this survival had left her with a total loss of her identity. Inspite of
every thing she does to reconcile to the conditions of life, she is unable to restore her self respect and ultimately she commits suicide.

In no other novel the trauma of war is so strong and so long losting as it is in SOPHIE'S CHOICE. The protagonist suffers all the inhuman indignities of the war. When the war ends she finds herself in a refugee camp. From there an international relief organisation sends her to Brooklyn in America. And here also the harrowing war continues to torture her and ultimately forces her to destroy herself.

In one of her recollections she tells Stingo that the German soldiers came to Cracow in 1943 and slowly they began to spread their dangerous network around. First of all, all the teachers of the University of Cracow were arrested and shot dead. Her father was a university teacher. Her husband was an instructor in the department of Mathematics so both of them were taken away and put to death. She was herself arrested when she was trying to smuggle away some meat for her sick mother. She was sent to a concentration camp where the
S.S. Functionary told her:

You have come to a concentration camp, not to a sanatorium and there is only one way out-up the chimney... Any one who don't like that can try hanging himself on the wires. If there are Jews in this group, you have no right to live more than two weeks... Any nuns here.? Like priests you have one month. All the rest three months. 19

She is unable to forget how from the concentration camp she was put on a train and sent to Auschwitz which was meant for keeping the labourers who worked to maintain the extermination work at Birkenau. She was sent to Auschwitz because she was young, beautiful, and was expert in shorthand typing and even translation work.

At Auschwitz, she was shocked to find that the evils and the cruelties were being inflicted not by German soldiers but by the civilians. The task force consisted mostly of bakers, carpenters, bookmakers, waiters, office clerks, waitresses, nurses, firemen, lawyers, musicians and all other common people forced into doing and maintaining the work of extermination. She wondered why they didn't
revolt or at least show some leniency to their own fellow brothers and sisters.

Sophie suffered the worst onslaught when she was asked to choose to keep one of her two children and let the other go to the gas chamber. She was forced and said that she wanted to keep Jan and let Eva her daughter go. She could never pardon herself for this heinous act for the rest of her life. She was both the victim and the accomplice of this machine of torture. She recollects the scene to Stingo reliving the whole past and tells:

"You may keep one of your children. The other will have to go." Said the doctor, to Sophie. "you mean I have to choose?"
"You are a Polack, not a kid. That gives you a privilege—a choice."
"I can't choose...I can't choose."
"Hurry now and choose... Choose...Godamn it choose or I shall send them both over there." "Don't make me choose."
She heard herself plead in whisper, "I can't choose" "Send them both over there." The doctor said to his aid.
"Then take my little girl"...
The aid...tugged at Eva's hand led her away into the waiting legion of the damned. She
would for ever retain a dim impression that the child had continued to look back beseeching... She was driven nearly mad by the last glimpse of that vanishing small form. 

Whenever she looked out of the window of the military chief's house, she always saw the continuous "sickening a vaporous residue spiral skyward from the chimneys of Birkenau." 

Here mass gasing and burning of the Jews was being done continuously. Adolf Ross's was the only house into which the foul smell of the burning of the human flesh didn't penetrate.

Even in Brooklyn where she was trying to banish from her mind the memory of the savage past, it used to spring back on to her vision and shake the tender equilibrium of her mind. when she heard the news on the radio that Herman Goring had died in his cell, she was visibly shaken as she was reminded of the cruelties of the concentration camps. Goring was the German leader responsible for instituting the concept of concentration camps. As such, the news once again brought to her mind the horrible Warsaw ghetto and she clicked off the radio. She was terribly
smitten, by the horrible past. This is what Stingo testifies:

The turmoil that was grinding them to pieces had double origins, deriving perhaps equally from the black and tormented underside of Nathan's nature and from unrelinquished realities of Sohie's immediate past trailing its horrible smoke as if from the chimneys of Auschwitz—of anguish, confusion, self deception and above all guilt.22

Sophie had lost every thing—her father, mother, husband, son, daughter and even her nation at the cruel hands of German soldiers. The past did not allow her to be happy with the present. She tried her utmost to forget her past and establish a new identity but failed. She tells Stingo:

I have nothing left of the past. Nothing at all. That is one of the reasons, why, you see, I feel so incomplete... Every thing you see in this room is American. There is nothing at all that remains of Poland...My memory of what was, what could have been and now can not be...23

Thus the constant recollection of the horrible past never allowed Sophie any peace
of mind. The losses she had suffered continuously kept her aware of her incompleteness, which ultimately drove her to end her life with Nathan. Louis D Rubin Jr. says:

A mere pre-occupation with the past and with its relations to custom and human ceremony may very well lead to a rather empty life and there is enough of this attitude... in a suggestion of the past's residing in the present.24

Thus like other novels of William Styron, this one too has a war, the Second World War, in the background. Though its immediate effect had been death and destruction of millions of lives, it aftermath for America had been affluence making its citizens loudmouthed, barbarous, lost, rootless and devoid of all universal virtues of self reliance, good manners and decency of behaviour, promoting a suicidal mania and a death-wish amongst its people. That's what Stingo's father says:

It's the effect of the war son. Every thing in this country has become richer and richer. It took that war to bail us
out of depression and in the process turn us into a most powerful nation on the earth. If there is one single thing that is going to keep us ahead of communists for many years, it’s just that: money, and we have got a lot of it...25

The money that Stingo’s father said his country had sackfuls had begun producing Mason Flaggs, Kinsolvings, Miltons, Dollys, Peytons, Nathans—the drunkards, the drug addicts sans all morality and good codes of life. Though Stingo’s father thinks that having a lot of money will keep his country ahead of Russains for a long time to come, there are signs telling the contrary. It is this contradiction of American life which is expressed in Luigie’s utterances:

Your president and the dictator in Kremlin both are peasants. But yours is a cretin and the other is shrewd...I would always cast my lot with a shrewd man no matter how ruthless...It’s just this Cass. Some day the Russians will have their refrigerators and the bathrooms that you Americans have. But although it is repressed at the moment, the Russains have a spirituality which you Americans have never developed.
They will be educated people with refrigerators and bathrooms. You will be ignorant people with refrigerators and bathrooms and the educated people will triumph...26

Thus we see that the feeling that the war is a condition of life pervades all the novels of William Styron. In LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS, the entire misery in the Loftis family is triggered off just by the money given by the Colonel’s wife to her daughter Helen; THE LONG MARCH presents Mannix as wrestling against the enslavement of his will to the senseless war machinery; SET THIS HOUSE ON FIRE presents Cass Kinsolving tracing origin of his debasement and strife into the World War Second which had driven him to the psychiatric ward. He is set fighting against the nihilistic spirit of the self negation born out of the World War Second. Even THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER which goes back into time almost a century earlier, is grounded on the spirit of the battlefield. And the SOPHIE’S CHOICE has the most cruel, most shocking, harrowing trauma that ultimately drives the protagonist to the point of
committing suicide. Thus in all the novels of William Styron, there is some war or the other affecting either directly or indirectly the lives of characters. Be it Milton, Peyton, Helen, Dolly in LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS; be it Mannix Culver, and young Marines in THE LONG MARCH,; be it Cass, Mason Flagg, Peter Luigie, Poppy in SET THIS HOUSE ON FIRE; be it Nat, Will, Emmeline, Hark, Nelson, Travis etc in THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER or be it Sophie, Nathan, Steingo, Eva, Jan, they all lived (as long as they did) restless traumatised lives because of some war or the other and ended their lives or destroyed their lives due to them. Of course there are some like Cass who fight bravely and regain their sanity and peace in life. But of course their number is very small.
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