

Contagion of Memory- In Retrospection of David Morrell's First Blood and Hollywood's Inception of Rambo

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The end of the Second World War marked a period of relative peace, albeit the emergence of newworld players, rekindled feuds that later shaped the contemporary sociopolitical discourse questioning the repercussions of war, the recuperating violated body and jingoism-infused demarcations. David Morrell's novel *First Blood* marks the emergence of Rambo- a homebound, shell-shocked veteran. In pitching him against Madison's sheriff, Morell juxtaposes subjectivity against authority and corporeality against institutionalized identity. The novel ponders over myriad questions, excavating answers from domains of myopic political vision and a quest to revise and rewrite history. By focusing on memory this research project aims to highlight not just the horrors of a conflict that marred the body- be it the use of Agent Orange¹ or the returning zombie[fied] alienated soldiers' body but also how memory becomes redacted. Analyzing the Hollywood cultural industry in the novel's adaptation and glorification, this research project shall also delve into the politics of myriad endings, critiquing the various predicaments and fetishes such archival nationalist understanding of trauma creates.

KEYWORDS: Memory, Culture Industry, Traumatized Body, Revisionist History, Hollywood

¹ Agent Orange, mixture of herbicides that U.S. military forces sprayed in Vietnam from 1962 to 1971 during the Vietnam War for the dual purpose of defoliating forest areas that might conceal Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces and destroying crops that might feed the enemy.

It is a historically proven fact that since the earliest inception of humanity, war has been the part and parcel of human settlements. Right from the Sumerian conflict to the present day, war has shaped and chiseled human history, defining in essence what it means to survive and articulate various facets- right from the reasons that led to the development of a warlike situation to the aftermath of the same, the same also taking into account the various tangents war drew concerning memory, revision and official historicity. Ernest Hemingway wrote that one should “never think that war, no matter how necessary, nor how justified, is not a crime,” reminding one how the official dominant narrative is mostly invoked to sanitize war of its horrendous and debilitating effects. ⁷ The United States of America’s military interventions in Vietnam that led to the “deaths of over 58,000 Americans and somewhere between two and three million Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians, the expenditure of billions of dollars” (McMahon 160), further attests to the ignominy of war. The Vietnam War as most Americans remember it or simply “war” as Nguyen calls it in ⁵ *Nothing Ever Dies Vietnam and the Memory of War*, the war was indeed a changing point for American identity, supremacy and false bravado the nation had conceived post the Second World War.

While it becomes intriguing to ponder over the myriad reasons that led to the defeat of the American regime in the South East Asian nation, one needs to also gloss over the American milieu of the sixties to concretize the many elements that helped built resistance against the American intervention in Vietnam, the most important of which was the Antiwar Movement that began in 1965, a movement spearheaded by left organizations in the US colleges which often included ² prominent artists, intellectuals and members of the 'hippie' movement, i.e., the growing number of mostly young people who rejected authority and embraced the counterculture. It is indeed the confluence of these varied situations that David Morrell’s *First Blood* highlights, presenting thereby to its readers a protagonist who became the epitome of Americanness despite a flawed identity. Morrell’s novel via Rambo tries to bring the war back home and in doing so it

confronts the American psyche which had earlier been modelled to justify the war through propaganda agendas and devices. The novel presents a “violent polarization of America” (Morrell 15), where Morrell’s wish to enact a “small version of the Vietnam War itself, the private war tak[ing] place in the United States” (Morrell 15), becomes the novel’s epicenter; the same later sanitized by Kotcheff who presents Rambo’s actions as only reactionary.

This paper’s primary aim thus is to build upon the numerous debates surrounding the American intervention in Vietnam and the multiple ways the memories of Vietnam haunt, demoralize and insinuate the masses into believing the utility of the war. Drawing a parallel between the novel and the movies, the research paper by means of close reading shall question how the discourse of memory and trauma affects what is remembered and what is forgotten thereby reigniting the debate between the role and function of national, cultural and personal memory.

Nguyen builds upon the idea of collective memory and how it differs based on a person’s social identification[ary] markers, these symbolic pointers highlight the way things are remembered, for to truly trust memory is a troublesome task, nonetheless denying memorial artefacts often conflicts and opaque out subaltern and tangential narratives sidelining, in essence, the “dead, who cannot speak for themselves” (13). Similarly, one needs to substantially situate the war- returning soldier who had been fighting around in Vietnam with the kind of treatment that was meted out to ‘patriots’ in the American society plagued by issues of race, gender, identity and social utility. Morrell notes how *First Blood’s* “plot was a massive, sprawling investigation of a town’s hostility toward a stranger whose looks they don’t care for and their too-late discovery that he’s the last man they should anger” (17), demarcates between the many ways memory is invoked through the complex structures of culture industry; whereby the

Hollywood Rambo is docile towards his American counterparts, Morrell's print hero's only aim comes down to subverting Teasle's authority. This demarcation raises questions on how memory is often colored by perspective, changing in entirety the characteristics of Rambo.

But to fully scrutinize the historical importance of Rambo and his character one needs to also assess the way the same has been created through multiple layers of editing and juxtapositions, a coming together of various threads into one. Invoking multiple tropes Morrell's Rambo is shown to have "mud-crusted boots, the rumpled jeans ripped at the cuffs and patched on one thigh, the blue sweatshirt speckled with what looked like dry blood, the buckskin jacket," (10) which puts him in at odds with the Madison police chief Teasle who is "short and chunky behind the wheel, wrinkles around his eyes and shallow pockmarks in his cheeks that gave them a grain like a weathered board" (11). The novel presents both Teasle and Rambo as anti-thesis of each other. Right from choosing coke against coffee (14), the demarcations set forth highlight a dialectical division, the oscillating viewpoint of the narrative voice in the novel's chapters signifying a blurring of boundaries which further trouble in sequestering Rambo's true identity as Morrell's intended juxtaposition only offers him characteristics that are at-most comparative to a major degree. The novel's Rambo cannot "stop his mind from completing the circle...return[ing] to war" (19). The varied nuances of his character like how "he could remember, crying, softly crying," (126) only humanize him, critiquing, in essence, the vessel of war. Despite being a ferocious killing machine who single-handedly decimates the entire town of Madison, the novel kind of exonerates Rambo's action highlighting how he becomes in totality byproduct of a faulty revisionist military setup that abounds only in jingoist reverberation.

On the other end, Hollywood's onscreen adaptation of Rambo becomes the polar opposite of the novel; if the novel's protagonist is shown to imbibe certain human characteristics, the most fundamental of that highlighted by his internal monologue, the Hollywood version of Rambo is sanitized of any human characteristics whatsoever and mechanized to echo the dominant political narrative out there.

Kleinen opines how the "western film culture helps to construct identities and world views by setting up the differences between 'us' and 'them': in this case, between 'the West' and the 'Rest' who became the subject of European imperial expansion" (434). This demarcation becomes rampant when one sees through the façade of Hollywood's revisionist idea about presenting an alternative historiography of the American occupation in Vietnam, the many ways the trajectory of America symbolized by Rambo come together with each other. The production of the films *First Blood* and *Rambo First Blood II* tries, via Rambo, to present the changing schema of US foreign policy. His position as a war veteran who only fights when first blood is drawn by his nemesis becomes a symbol for America justifying its violence and blood gore in Vietnam. An example of that can be found in the ending scene of *First Blood* where the end credits roll out and Jerry Goldsmith's "It's a Long Road" plays with the following lyrics- "tell me what do you do to survive/When they draw first blood." Needless to say, this idea of banking on violence as a reactionary mechanism that Hollywood employs only furthers right-wing ideology like that of Nixon and the lot. "Such films attempt to rehabilitate the Vietnam morass by depicting military superheroes...Rambo embodies not merely the forgotten warrior [but he also] emerged as a symbol of patriotic, betrayed manhood" (Pollard 128).

Essentially, a side-by-side analysis of Morrell's novel and the later re-adaptations of the novel into movies by Kottcheff and Cosmatos reveal much about the functioning cultural

industry that shaped and chiseled Rambo making him the national icon and the ultimate symbol of American pride. There indeed are vast differences between the novel and the movies and critics as well as Morrell himself have, at times, pointed out how the storyline of the novel has been tweaked and portions added and deleted to address the growing demands of not just the then audience but also of the American public policy. Critics have argued how Hollywood in its revision phase goes on to justify and validate the war reclaiming to have won in a place where it certainly had lost. For instance, *Rambo First Blood II* begins with Rambo asking his superintendent, Colonel Sam if they ⁴ get to win this time to which the Colonel replies that it was up to Rambo to figure out his fate “allow[ing] Rambo to 'win' the war in his way” (Marchetti 222). This meta shift in the Colonel’s answer accounts not only for the changing narrative around the role of Rambo in the society he’d earlier been incarcerated but also challenges the erstwhile foreign policy followed by the States. Interestingly, the novel ends with the death of Teasle and Rambo- the former is shot down by Rambo while the protagonist himself is shot by Colonel Sam (225), a nom de guerre for “Uncle Sam” (Morrell 19). Further, in *First Blood I*, Rambo’s act of violence is masked, and the audience witness no deaths on screen. A mere observation allows one to assess the knee-jerk type of reaction Rambo is made to go through, all in the name of catering to the larger cause of American patriotism.

The problematics associated with Morrell and *First Blood* have been often commented on by academic and film critics alike who unravel multiple loopholes in the text which get further capitalized on in the movie adaptations. For starters, Mizumura-Pence's essay, where he comments on the book-length work by Sylvia S. Chong on Morrell, highlights, how the primary issue with Morrell appears to be how he “simply or not so simply misremembered many events of 1968 and mixed events from other years into his recollection” (14). Morrell’s protagonist indeed tends to live on borrowed identity cultivating with his clothes and his hippie style a figure

of “a loner, a Native American, unassimilated, perpetually angry, and not easily placed within America’s political party structure,” (Marchetti 224) yet the assertions of the film *Rambo* from the first part questions the political motive behind the war. Declining it to be 'his war' in front of his symbolic father, Sam Trautman, John’s assertion for an autonomic position where he can use his subjectivity defines the only antiwar stance the movie takes; this stance later gets modified into saving the American soldiers kept as prisoners of war in the *Cosmatos* movie. The antiwar theme turns out to be relevant only in case of critiquing prior political stances developing into a hollow façade.

Secondly, the impact Morrell’s protagonist has over the world cannot be negated. Teasle in a conversation with his deputies mentions how one “can’t promise dead men. A promise like that doesn’t count,” (202) highlighting how one of the primary reasons the novel sold multiple copies was because it offered a tribute to the uncountable, unaccounted casualties of war. The Hollywood *Rambo* can in most make it his mission to not let the world forget about the issues and problems at hand; this act of memory’s invocation serving the dual purpose of not only highlighting the troubles the grunts faced, as evident by the death of John’s friend due to cancer—a repercussion of the use of ‘Agent Orange’—but it also embeds on the world a sense of alternative remembering of history. Vietnam, an Occidental nation, is often associated by critics in conjunction with the West as a feminine nation, and Hollywood’s implementation of the same, rescues America from its precarious position of defeat hence re-masculinizing the country.

Surmising thus, in a nutshell, Morrell’s novel employs multiple tropes to present to its audience the story of *Rambo*, a returning veteran who suffers from shell shock and is unable to comprehend the changed outlook the society has over the likes of him—returning veterans. Unable to validate the sequestering treatment at the hands of his fellow society members

triggers the Green Beret into a frenzy, thus giving to them the taste of the war at home. The movies on the other hand pick up Rambo's rage and solitary lifestyle to create a false comforting sieve while conflicting with the nation's defeat. Looking and interpreting memory thus becomes paramount because on one hand memory functions to denude the person's subjectivity whereas, on the otherhand, memory is created; this artificial rendering only being a false creation invented to appease the national mass which had started to question the shroud of war amidst other important issues. Thus, in a world where memory functions in helping one recall and remember things of the past, Morrell's novel lays bare how the same is utilized by the sharks of the culture industry, in here Hollywood, to corrupt, re-bundle and present alternative historic understanding. Needless to say, the false web of lies falls off, ultimately, raising a question to every answer it provides, waiting to be disillusioned and murdered off by institutes of hegemony, or left to meander like John transfiguring from an individual to an entity.

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