

War Trauma Moral Choice and Civilian Reintegration

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Introduction

War does not end psychologically when weapons fall silent or a uniform is removed. Combatants, refugees, and civilian survivors may return to ordinary settings while continuing to experience intrusive memories, guilt, fear, anger, grief, estrangement, or a damaged sense of identity. Ujkan Hysaj's short film *Kolona* and Alan Sillitoe's story "Isaac Starbuck" explore different forms of this difficult return. *Kolona* centers on Adem, a civilian father forced during the 1999 Kosovo war to choose which child will survive at a checkpoint. Sillitoe's Isaac is a former serviceman whose habits, relationships, and self-understanding remain unsettled after military life. Read together, the works show that reintegration depends not only on individual resilience but also on moral interpretation, family response, social belonging, and opportunities to rebuild a meaningful civilian identity.

Avoiding the Stereotype of the Permanently Violent Veteran

The original discussion begins by suggesting that soldiers are trained to kill and therefore return with minds fundamentally unlike those of civilians. That claim is too broad and risks stigmatizing veterans. Most people exposed to war do not become chronically violent, and distress can appear through withdrawal, sleep problems, guilt, numbness, anxiety, depression, substance misuse, or difficulty trusting others rather than aggression. Military training may create habits of vigilance, discipline, rapid threat assessment, and emotional control that are useful during deployment but awkward in civilian settings. Reintegration problems also affect refugees, medics, prisoners, families, and civilians who never carried weapons. A careful analysis therefore distinguishes exposure, symptoms, moral conflict, and social conditions instead of treating all former soldiers as dangerous or psychologically identical (National Center for PTSD).

Kolona: A Choice Manufactured by Violence

Kolona, directed by Ujkan Hysaj, is set against the forced displacement and checkpoint violence of Kosovo in 1999. Adem is stopped with his family and confronted by armed men who remove two boys from the vehicle. He offers money, a car, and possessions, but is told that his resources can purchase only one life. The apparent "choice" is therefore not a free moral decision. It is a coercive situation

created by perpetrators who control the weapons, the road, and the terms of survival. Adem's later anguish should not be interpreted as proof that he bears equal responsibility for the killing. The film instead examines how victims may internalize impossible responsibility when violence forces them to participate symbolically in an outcome they neither desired nor controlled (Hysaj).

The Wedding and the Return of the Past

The film's temporal structure links a present-day wedding with memories of the checkpoint. A celebration that should confirm continuity, family, and survival becomes inseparable from the child who is absent. Roads, vehicles, relatives, and the surviving young man function as reminders of the earlier event. Trauma memory is often experienced not as a voluntary historical recollection but as a vivid return triggered by sensory or emotional cues. The wedding also intensifies survivor guilt because joy appears to testify that life continued for some family members while another life was violently ended. Adem's inability to remain fully in the present is not simply a refusal to "move on." The film shows how unresolved grief and moral pain can occupy the same mental space as love, pride, and gratitude (Ehlers and Clark).

Guilt, Responsibility, and Moral Injury

Moral injury describes lasting psychological, social, behavioral, or spiritual distress after events that violate deeply held moral beliefs. It may follow actions, failures to act, witnessing, or betrayal by authorities. Adem's situation resembles moral injury because he believes that his decision is connected to his son's death, even though the armed perpetrators created the dilemma. His pain involves more than fear; it concerns fatherhood, loyalty, responsibility, and the belief that a parent should protect every child. Clinical and ethical interpretation must therefore separate felt guilt from actual culpability. Telling a survivor that there was "no reason" to feel guilty may also be inadequate, because moral pain often requires acknowledgment, narrative reconstruction, mourning, and restoration of relationships rather than a purely logical correction (Litz et al.; Norman and Maguen).

"Isaac Starbuck" and the Uneasy Return to Civilian Life

Alan Sillitoe's "Isaac Starbuck," published in the collection *Guzman, Go Home*, presents reintegration through the pressures of working-class civilian life. Isaac is not portrayed only through a diagnostic lens; he is also shaped by labor, marriage, money, masculinity, political frustration, and the desire to escape routine. The original essay emphasizes his fear that conflict might release a "wild" part of himself, quoting the moment when he is "scared for himself, any minute ready to go out on the wild" (Sillitoe 260). The line conveys self-surveillance: Isaac recognizes that anger can escalate and fears what he might do. His awareness complicates any simple description of him as naturally violent,

because fear of harm can itself become a source of withdrawal and shame.

Military Identity and the Loss of Structure

Military organizations provide explicit roles, schedules, chains of command, collective purpose, and a language of belonging. Civilian life can feel less coherent when those structures disappear, particularly if work seems repetitive or socially undervalued. Isaac's restlessness can be read as a conflict between learned expectations of action and the limited opportunities available in postwar civilian society. He seeks movement, speed, autonomy, and temporary release from domestic and industrial routines. Yet the same efforts to escape can weaken relationships or deepen financial and emotional instability. Sillitoe therefore places reintegration inside class conditions rather than treating it as a private medical problem. A person's ability to build a post-service identity depends partly on whether civilian institutions offer respect, purposeful employment, education, community, and room for agency (Sayer et al.).

Marriage, Distance, and Fear of Attachment

War-related absence changes families as well as service members. Partners learn to manage households, children grow, and routines develop without the deployed person. On return, affection may coexist with resentment, uncertainty, and unfamiliarity. Isaac's distance from his wife can be understood as both self-protection and relational failure. If he believes that closeness will end through another separation, death, or loss of control, emotional withdrawal may appear safer than dependence. However, withdrawal can make the feared abandonment more likely by leaving family members unsupported. Reintegration therefore requires more than placing a veteran back inside a household. Families may need time, communication, renegotiated roles, and professional support to understand how deployment experiences and civilian changes have affected everyone involved (Sayer et al.; National Center for PTSD).

PTSD and Moral Injury Are Related but Distinct

Post-traumatic stress disorder can involve intrusive memories, avoidance, negative changes in mood and beliefs, hyperarousal, and impaired functioning after exposure to traumatic events. Moral injury is not a formal diagnosis and may occur with or without PTSD. Fear-based symptoms can be prominent when a person repeatedly expects danger, while moral injury often centers on guilt, shame, betrayal, anger, loss of trust, or spiritual crisis. Adem's story is especially concerned with coerced responsibility and survivor guilt, whereas Isaac's narrative combines possible trauma responses with identity, anger, and social alienation. The distinction matters because a single label may overlook what the person finds most painful. Assessment should explore threats, losses, actions, omissions, betrayals, beliefs, relationships, and cultural meanings rather than assuming that every war-related difficulty has the same cause (National Center for PTSD).

Civilian Survivors, Refugees, and the Wider Field of War Trauma

Kolona expands the discussion beyond military veterans by focusing on a civilian family moving through a militarized landscape. Refugees and displaced people may experience direct violence, family separation, deprivation, loss of home, uncertainty about missing relatives, and prolonged insecurity after reaching safety. Their distress is shaped by legal status, housing, language, discrimination, and the ability to reconstruct community. This broader perspective prevents the study of war trauma from becoming exclusively a study of soldiers. It also clarifies that moral injury can arise when civilians are forced to choose among loved ones, cannot prevent harm, or feel betrayed by institutions that should have protected them. Reintegration for survivors therefore includes social justice, recognition, and material stability as well as individual psychological treatment (Hollis et al.).

Triggers, Memory, and the Limits of Avoidance

Both works show how present circumstances can reactivate the past. Adem encounters a road and family celebration that connect directly to loss; Isaac experiences domestic conflict and ordinary frustrations through a self already altered by military and social experience. Avoidance may reduce distress temporarily, but it can narrow life by separating people from places, conversations, relationships, or activities that matter. Trauma-focused therapies often help people approach memories safely, examine meanings, and reduce the sense that the event is happening again in the present. Such treatment does not require forgetting, forgiving perpetrators, or declaring a morally terrible event acceptable. Its purpose is to integrate the memory into a life story that allows choice, connection, and functioning without denying the reality of what occurred (Ehlers and Clark; National Center for PTSD).

Community Reintegration as a Social Process

Reintegration is frequently described as the veteran's task, but communities and institutions also have responsibilities. Employment systems must translate military skills without stereotyping applicants. Health services must be accessible and confidential. Families need information without being turned into unpaid clinicians. Religious groups, veteran organizations, refugee associations, and peer networks can provide recognition and belonging, but they should not pressure individuals to narrate experiences before they are ready. Research with post-9/11 veterans indicates that moral injury can make trust, meaning, communication, housing, employment, and social connection more difficult. These findings support a model in which recovery is relational: people rebuild through reliable communities that can hear moral complexity without either glorifying war or reducing survivors to damage (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs).

Paths toward Treatment and Moral Repair

Evidence-based PTSD treatments such as Cognitive Processing Therapy, Prolonged Exposure, and Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing can reduce trauma symptoms, including some guilt and shame. Moral injury may also require focused work on responsibility, context, forgiveness, values, grief, spiritual questions, and reparative action. No single intervention is suitable for everyone. Some survivors benefit from individual therapy, group treatment, medication for co-occurring conditions, family work, peer support, chaplaincy, creative practice, or community service. Moral repair should not become an expectation that victims reconcile with perpetrators or perform public redemption. For Adem, the central need may be to relocate responsibility and mourn; for Isaac, it may involve controlling anger, rebuilding trust, and developing a civilian identity that does not depend on flight from family or work (Litz et al.; Norman and Maguen).

How Film and Fiction Represent Internal Conflict

The two works use different formal methods to make invisible suffering perceptible. *Kolona* compresses a family history into a short visual narrative and uses editing between past and present to show that chronological time has not resolved moral pain. The wedding's movement and color contrast with the remembered checkpoint, creating tension between survival and absence. Sillitoe uses close attention to thought, vernacular speech, physical movement, work, drink, and conflict to portray a man whose distress cannot be separated from class and masculinity. Neither work offers a clinical case study, and literary characters should not be diagnosed as though they were patients. Their value lies in revealing how trauma is narrated, concealed, embodied, and interpreted within particular social worlds (Hysaj; Sillitoe).

An Ethical Reading of Choice after War

A responsible reading must resist blaming survivors for reactions produced by extreme circumstances. Adem did not create the checkpoint or authorize the killing, and his coerced selection should not be treated as an ordinary choice between equal options. Isaac remains responsible for harm he may cause in civilian life, but responsibility does not require denying the influence of war, class pressure, or psychological distress. Ethical interpretation holds context and agency together. It asks what happened to a person, what the person did, what alternatives were realistically available, who held power, and what repair is now possible. This approach avoids two extremes: excusing every action because of trauma and condemning survivors without understanding how violence reshaped their choices, beliefs, and relationships (Shay; Litz et al.).

Conclusion

Kolona and “Isaac Starbuck” show that the transition from war to civilian life is not a simple return to a previous self. Adem carries the moral agony of a choice imposed by armed violence, and the surviving family’s happiness remains intertwined with grief. Isaac struggles with anger, attachment, work, and the loss of a structured identity, yet his difficulties cannot be reduced to an assumption that veterans are inherently violent. Together, the works distinguish fear-based trauma from moral injury while showing how both are shaped by family and society. Durable reintegration requires truthful acknowledgment, appropriate treatment, practical opportunity, and communities capable of receiving survivors without stigma. Recovery does not erase the past; it allows the past to be remembered without controlling every present relationship and decision.

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