

The Impact of Psychological Warfare and PTSD on James Reece's Character in Selected Novels by Jack Carr

Abdulkhaliq Kamal Mahmood
Prof. Amal Nasser Frak (Ph.D.)

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Abstract

Psychological warfare is an unmatched field that demands attention. Technological advancement often facilitates novel forms of psychological and cognitive manipulation. In the era of knowledge, the psychological aspect of a battle is just as significant as its physical aspect and has grown much more pertinent. In today's turbulent world, traumatic events leave lasting psychological effects on individuals.

This study investigates how psychological warfare affects Reece's life. It provides a deeper understanding of the psychological toll of modern warfare and how it intersects to shape the experiences of soldiers. Besides, it sheds light on the representation of PTSD in literature drawing on the works of scholars such as Cathy Caruth, Roger Luckhurst, Martin Modlinger, Dominick LaCapra, and Bessel van der Kolk whose works offer critical frameworks for understanding trauma's lingering effects.

The study shows the devastating effects of psychological warfare on Reece's character and mentality. Its effects are part and parcel of his PTSD which eventually leads to his suffering and change. The symptoms like intrusive thoughts, survivor's guilt, emotional numbing, and hyperarousal shape Reece's character and make him a psychologically conditioned operative whose identity becomes defined by violence and whose sole purpose in life is revenge.

Keywords: Psychological Warfare, PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder), Trauma Theory, Soldier Identity, Literary Representation

1.1 Introduction

Warfare always exists in human history, and it changes throughout time. There have been several changes in the nature of conflict and fighting from the stone implements of our prehistoric ancestors to the advanced drones and cyberwarfare tactics of today. This voyage, which is characterized by strategic changes, technical

breakthroughs, and moral reflections, vividly depicts a society in transition where the definition of confrontation is always being redefined. (Youvan, *The Unified Operational Doctrine*, 2023: 1).

Humans are members of a species that is incredibly resilient. Since the beginning of time, humans recover from many natural and man-made calamities, unrelenting wars, and personal acts of cruelty and treachery. However, traumatic events do leave their mark, either locally, on our families, where dark secrets are subtly passed down through the years, or globally, on our histories and civilizations. Additionally, they have an impact on our immune systems, biochemistry, and even our ability to feel joy and closeness (van der Kolk, 2014: 1).

1.2 Overview of Psychological Warfare

War, peace, and issues of global stability have long piqued the interest of psychologists and other social sciences. However, until recently, there was a severe lack of both quality and quantity in the literature on this subject (Rieber, 1991: XV).

Psychological warfare, also known as psychological operations (PSYOP), refers to the use of psychological tactics to influence the emotions, motivations, and behavior of adversaries, allies, or neutral parties. It is a strategic tool used in military and political contexts to destabilize opponents, spread propaganda, and gain a psychological edge without direct physical confrontation. Psychological warfare can involve tactics such as misinformation, intimidation, manipulation, and the exploitation of fear or uncertainty (Linebarger, 2015: 23).

Carr's *The Terminal List* is a fascinating novel that masterfully incorporates psychological warfare into its plot, illustrating the emotional toll, compulsion, and manipulation it has on James Reece, the main character. Through targeted gaslighting, mental confusion, and official deceit, Carr demonstrates how psychological warfare is employed to manipulate and destroy people. Reece's story highlights the pernicious tactics of psychological warfare that exist both inside the institutions of state authority and on the battlefield.

1.2.1 The Inescapable Effects of Psychological Warfare

Carr plants the seed of distrust in Reece and his team's thoughts from the start. The psychological stress that soldiers feel when they sense that something is wrong is more than just a gut feeling. An environment of internal mistrust is produced by the mission's unusual ease and improper command-level meddling. Reece's inner monologue illustrates how psychological warfare causes him to become unstable even before an enemy attack occurs.

By questioning himself — “*Maybe it's the headaches... Maybe it's a bit of paranoia...*” — Due to his brain tumor and inexplicable weariness, Reece is already

fighting an internal battle of perception. This loss of mental clarity is a part of a broader, intentional sabotage, not an accident. The headaches turn into a physical symptom as well as a warning sign, indicating that there is a systemic corruption going on within in addition to a physical issue. He further acquires a sense of guilt: "Your men trusted you, Reece. And now they are dead. Focus. Something is not right. Something is just not right." (Carr, 2018: 21) The above statement is a perfect example of psychological warfare amplifying internalized guilt. As the troop commander, Reece is supposed to be the strategic leader and moral compass. However, his inner monologue turns accusatory following the incident. Reece's leadership becomes a psychological burden when survivor's remorse is combined with a systemic betrayal from inside the command. He starts to doubt not just the objective but also his own part in it, which is precisely what the conspiracy's masterminds want: to destroy him from the inside out.

1.2.2 Government Manipulation as a Mechanism of Control

Carr presents a terrifying depiction of institutional compulsion and political manipulation, masterminded by figures such as Captain Leonard Howard, Admiral Gerald Pilsner, and Secretary of Defense Lorraine Hartly. These individuals use bureaucracy and power as weapons to publicly and mentally demolish Lieutenant Commander James Reece in addition to hiding their personal guilt. What happens is a planned campaign of narrative control, gaslighting, and character assassination—all of which are characteristics of institutional psychological warfare.

Hartly is a prime example of psychological warfare in the context of statecraft. She wants optics management rather than justice. Her character epitomizes the self-centered, obstructive political person whose choices are motivated by political expediency rather than moral clarity. Furthermore, her insistence on isolating survivors and portraying Reece as a "modern-day Custer" is a component of a planned perception operation (PSYOP) that aims to delegitimize the symbol before it can elicit compassion or attention from the public. She wants Reece to be unsecured and vulnerable to attack, not jailed straight away because a martyr in chains may make people worried. This story is still going on and can be easily thrown out without the protection of due process (Carr, 2018: 39).

The way that Secretary Hartley described Reece as a "domestic terrorist" (Carr, 2018: 307) is an excellent example of how government officials manipulate situations involving conflict. By portraying Reece in this way, she changes the story of the expedition, making him a monster rather than a soldier who suffered terrible outcomes. By strategically assigning blame on an individual rather than systemic

flaws, the government is absolved of responsibility for the operation's catastrophic result.

1.2.3 The Fragile Boundary Between Justice and Vengeance

Knowing that he had a fatal illness frees Reece as he sets out to kill the people who killed his family: "Knowing that he was already dead from a tumor growing in his brain was nothing short of liberating" (Carr, 2018: 188). This realization serves as a trigger for Reece, removing any moral inhibition that he may have had and enabling him to concentrate only on getting revenge. The idea of emancipation in spite of death serves as an example of how psychological warfare may distort a person's moral compass and sense of purpose, so reinforcing a man's propensity to accept murder as a solution.

It is clear that Reece has completely adopted the role of the hunter in a psychological warfare paradigm when he states, "I'm coming for them and I'm going to put them all in the ground" (Carr, 2018: 218). Here, Reece's resolve shows a break from the conventional morality of law enforcement and soldiering, portraying his search as a moral crusade rather than merely an act of retaliation. He defines the moral lines he is prepared to violate with language that exudes an imminent, almost predatory sense of purpose. The moral boundaries that normally regulate human interactions are further undermined by this hunting story, which implies that his targets are reduced to nothing more than objects in a game of elimination.

A total moral breakdown is demonstrated by Reece's readiness to kill an innocent lady in order to further his goal: "He didn't want to kill her, but if her waking up would compromise his mission he had no qualms about putting her down" (Carr, 2018: 226). This comment highlights a terrifying psychological shift; Reece puts his goals ahead of human life, demonstrating how psychological warfare affects his conscience. His utilitarian viewpoint captures the grim reality of combat, when causing collateral harm is acceptable in the name of achieving a higher objective. Reece has been desensitized to violence and views the removal of any dangers as merely a tactic, which is typical of those who have been mentally conditioned by their surroundings.

1.3 Trauma Theory and Post-Traumatic Psychological Disorder (PTSD)

Due to the contributions of numerous academic disciplines, including medicine, psychiatry, law, political science, history, and cultural studies, trauma studies have expanded into a massive field of multidisciplinary inquiry with a wide range of topics, methodologies, and orientations (Zapf, 2011: 145). The word trauma comes from the Greek word for wound. It was originally used in English medicine in

the seventeenth century to describe physical harm brought on by an outside force. Physicians administered traumatic herbs or balsams to wounds, using the same name for what is injured and what is treated (Luckhurst, 2008: 2).

Trauma is defined as a wound that is inflicted on the mind rather than the body in medical and psychiatric literature, and it is most prominently used in Freud's writings. Similar to physical wounds, mental wounds are not straightforward and easily healed; rather, they are experienced too quickly and unexpectedly to be fully understood, and as a result, they are not accessible to consciousness until they recur repeatedly in the survivor's nightmares and repetitive behaviors. Therefore, trauma is not located in a person's past violent or unique occurrence, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature later haunts the survivor (Caruth, 1996: 4).

According to Dominick LaCapra, post-traumatic individuals who are acting out are either fatalistically trapped in a melancholic feedback loop or haunted or possessed by the past. They are also performatively enmeshed in the obsessive reenactment of traumatic scenes, where the past reappears and the future is blocked. Tensions collapse when acting out, and it feels like one is reliving a horrific event from the past (2001: 21). This is inevitable after trauma, but traumatized people must start working with their traumatic experience in order to navigate the confinement that defines their lives and to re-engage with life in the present (Schick, 2011: 1842). Prolonged acting out following traumatic occurrences can be dangerous since it frequently leads to more violence if the emotional experience is not resolved (1846).

Working through is a complicated process that is never neatly resolved; it is neither a linear process nor can it be divided into two categories: acting out and working through (Schick 1847). It requires going back to problems, working them over, and perhaps transforming the understanding of them. Even when they are worked through, this does not mean that they may not recur and require renewed and perhaps changed ways of working through them again. In this sense, working through is itself a process that entirely transcends acting out and that, even in the best of circumstances, once and for all (LaCapra 149).

Carr's *The Terminal List* chronicles James Reece's terrifying journey as his life falls apart following the tragic death of his fellow soldiers in a clandestine mission gone wrong. The psychological effects of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) may be powerfully examined via Reece's behavior as he sets out on a quest of vengeance against those responsible. The story provides a visceral examination of how trauma appears under dire circumstances and significantly changes a person's mental state. Reece's fragmented recollections and violent retaliation are consistent with Caruth's idea of trauma as an incident that upends the story of experience.

Meanwhile, the wider ramifications of Reece's suffering are clarified by Luckhurst's observations on how trauma is portrayed in culture. Reece's reactions are influenced by more than simply memories; they also influence his behaviors and emotional states, as shown by Van der Kolk's understanding of how trauma affects the body and brain. Finally, LaCapra's ideas about the politics of memory help Reece understand his moral dilemmas as he tries to put his sad past behind him. Carr's novel is more than just a revenge thriller; it also gives a compelling look at how PTSD changes who you are, what you can do, and what your moral obligations are when faced with violence by showing a soldier fighting serious trauma.

1.3.1 The Lingering Trauma of War and Loss

Reece deals with the stress and sadness that come from losing friends and family. His need for revenge is closely tied to how he feels after being on the battlefield and losing someone close to him. Here, Reece's goals are shaped by his recollections of his soldiers and loved ones, and Dominick LaCapra's differentiation between "acting out" and "working through" trauma offers a helpful foundation for comprehending his mental state.

The quote that highlights the early paralyzing effects of trauma is "Reece was in too much shock to even help with the funeral arrangements" (Carr, 2018: 61). This example shows not only despair but also the severe disconnection from reality that often happens after terrible things happen. LaCapra's word "acting out" refers to how people could act out trauma without taking the time to think about it more deeply, which could help them heal. Reece's inability to actively deal with the aftermath of his family's death shows this idea. He is stuck in an early stage of trauma reaction because he is in shock and can't deal with the practical or emotional weight of his loss. Instead of facing his grief, he is in shock.

The sentence "REECE SAT ALONE IN the darkness of his living room" (Carr, 2018: 66) makes Reece's loneliness even more clear. Darkness represents his mental state, which is filled with memories of his family and the growing awareness of his own mortality due to his tumor. His visions of reuniting with deceased loved ones and his overwhelming anguish underscore the profundity of his pain and his yearning for connection. Reece sees death as a way to escape pain, not as a way to deal with his anger and sadness. This is similar to LaCapra's idea of "acting out." His desire to "end it all" shows how loss can change a person's sense of self and direction.

1.3.2 Trauma Intrusions and Unresolved Grief

Reece's emotional environment is greatly affected by trauma, unresolved grief, and the constant memories of loss related to his family and friends. Cathy Caruth's idea of "belatedness" and Roger Luckhurst's idea of "trauma hauntings" both

help to explain how Reece's experiences are invasive and persistent, pushing him to deal with his unresolved emotional pain. Caruth thinks that individuals often grapple with the experience significantly after the occurrence itself. The idea of "belatedness" refers to how tragedy can take a long time to sink in and have an emotional effect. Reece's creepy thought, "I should have been here," sums it well. I should have died with them (Carr, 2018: 66). Trauma can create a disoriented perception of time, wherein the immediacy of loss is experienced long after the event has transpired. His feelings of shame and desire to have had a role in his family's fate show this. Reece is also dealing with the mental stress of thinking that surviving at that time was a moral failing, in addition to the death of his loved ones. His point of view shows a deep, painful remorse that comes out as survivor's guilt. Reece has to relive horrific moments since he is sad now, which makes the trauma that plagues him all the time even worse.

Reece's emotional stakes are heightened by the recollection of specific occurrences, such the camping vacation he shared with his family "just before his last deployment" (Carr, 2018: 186). He is haunted by the echoes of his past happiness, which stand in stark contrast to his current anguish. These emotional moments serve as powerful reminders of what he has lost forever. Reece's mental conflict is heightened when good memories are used in the context of trauma, forming brain and emotional connections that continuously pull him back to an unresolved past.

1.3.3 Survivor's Guilt and the Burden of Responsibility

Reece's journey is greatly affected by survivor's guilt and an overwhelming sense of responsibility for the murders of his coworkers. These subjects resonate profoundly with contemporary understandings of PTSD. Reece's inner struggles are a great example of how trauma can affect a person's mind and the moral problems that come with being in the military.

The statement, "*I've lost my team. It is my responsibility*" (Carr, 2018: 18), sets up a recurrent theme in the story: the burden of accountability that Reece bears as a leader. This instance perfectly encapsulates survivor's guilt, which Caruth defines as catastrophic events that upend self- and reality-narratives. Reece's loss of his team and family is more than simply a tragic event; it tears his identity apart, and he feels like he isn't a good leader because he thinks he isn't good enough. His ongoing struggle to reconcile his military duties with the severe consequences of those commands exemplifies the emotional dissonance arising from the contrast between loss and commitment.

Reece's thought, "*I should have been here. I should have died with them*" (Carr, 2018: 66), is the pinnacle of his survivor's guilt. This need to be with his family

is a sign of the severe psychological damage caused by the conviction that he did not safeguard them. These feelings are closely related to the condition of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), in which people frequently want to leave their present reality because it feels uninhabitable because of shame and sadness. This idea, which is not only about seeking revenge but also an existential reflection on belonging and duty, captures the desperation of someone dealing with trauma.

1.3.4 Revenge as a Symptom of Trauma and a Tool of Identity

Reece's quest for vengeance is closely linked to his psychological trauma, showing how it serves as a way for him to redefine who he is and as a symptom of that trauma. Reece's drive for vengeance eventually serves as a cathartic but destructive force in forming his identity, revealing the depths of his inner torment and the manner in which it mirrors deeper psychological wounds.

Reece's reflection that "the next world was calling, the one with his wife and daughter" (Carr, 2018: 113) points to his acute awareness of mortality and his deep-seated grief. His idea of death is elevated to a heroic concept—a "warrior's death"—when he considers the possibility of dying in a fight for revenge rather than from natural causes. Retaliation appears here as a way to recover agency in the face of destruction. This is consistent with Bessel van der Kolk's theory that trauma may skew a person's identity by making them fixated on their losses and driving them to do acts that could completely alter their way of life. Reece is able to create a narrative in which his violence is justified by seeing retribution as a purposeful endeavor that would allow him to respect the memories of those he lost while also reaching dignity in death.

It foreshadows the climax of his trauma, where surviving and exacting revenge on his slain colleagues surpasses his moral limits, when he loses control and gives in to his "primal need for vengeance" (Carr 280). Reece's mental instability, which is sparked by the retaliation he is seeking, is a powerful example of how trauma may distort one's moral compass and have negative effects. In the end, it appears that Reece's drive for vengeance is both a representation of his grief and a way for him to confirm himself, which is a concerning reflection of the psychological toll that trauma takes.

Conclusion

Carr's novels focus on military operations, warfare, and the experiences of soldiers. His time in SEAL add authenticity to his works. Reece character represents the American soldier after deployment and the issues that soldier faces. By blending elements of psychological warfare and PTSD Carr makes a combination of action, excitement, and difficult moral dilemmas.

Reece's struggle with the effect of psychological warfare and PTSD is portrayed in *The Terminal List*. Through deception, gaslighting, and mental manipulation, Reece is pushed into isolation and despair. Besides, he suffers through his flashbacks, sense of guilt, emotional detachment, suicidal ideation, violent actions, and moral disengagement. Reece's quest of vengeance becomes part and parcel of his identity.

As a result, Psychological warfare fractures Reece's identity, ultimately leading him to accept killing as the only viable solution. He reaches a point where his sole desire for vengeance has triumphed above morality and responsibility. Though, Reece's psychology is not broken but the psychological scars of his traumatic losses have redefined his sense of purpose, driving him to equate survival with the act of killing. Thus, the effect of the psychological manipulation and his traumatic losses are interwind.

Reece states of suffering, memories, grieve, guilt, and a burden of responsibility, puts him in a state of "acting out". His suffering seems to be cyclical even when there are signs for healing "working though". This regression illustrates, as Dominick LaCapra argues, that 'working through' is not a fixed endpoint but a fragile and reversible process. When Reece starts a healing process with meaningful connections, physical rituals, and time spent in nature, he shows progress and awareness of his condition.

As revenge becomes part of Reece identity, it seems that he finds freedom in the violent action he does. Besides, knowing that he is dying from a brain tumor it gives him justification for his violence and makes a sense of independence from social restraints. When he accomplishes his revenge in *The Terminal List* his sense of unsafety continuous until he puts himself in a new quest for revenge in *Savag Son*. Ultimately, Reece becomes an instrument of violence—not out of rage, but because revenge subsumes his very identity.

Recommendations:

This study is going to pave the way for many studies about Jack Carr's novels. There are many recommendations for further studies, like:

1. Post-colonial study: scholars could study Carr's mentality as a person who promote the Americans' mentality and how he depicts that all what America do is for the sake of global peace.
2. A feminist study: the female characters are few in the novels, put they play a central role in the development of the plot, whether positively or negatively.
3. The American identity via post-9/11 events: Carr's novels show a deep influence of 9/11 event. A study can show how military thrillers can explore reflect,

or challenge national identity, patriotism, and perceptions of state power in the wake of global terrorism.

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