

Evil in the Military: A Study of Norman Mailer's the Naked and the Dead

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Abstract: *The evil forces of totalitarianism in the military establishment had been a major concern to Norman Mailer in The Naked and the Dead. Mailer says "the soldier has become an automated machine. Totalitarianism, Mailer, says, – "has slipped into the body cells and psyche of each of us". Mailer associates institutions, persons with totalitarianism by their intentions and functions. According to Mailer, totalitarianism as an institution is more powerful than the individual. Totalitarianism is a kind of cancer and is embodied in General Edward Cummings, the reactionary military leader who perpetuated the militarization of American society. Gen. Cumming and Ser. Croft stand for the totalitarian forces of society. The main theme of Norman Mailer's The Naked and the Dead is the problem of military command. It elucidates the adjustments of the power structures in the American Army where ' power flows from the top down'. The General who wanted to be the perpetrator of totalitarianism has himself become the "Victim of the military machine. The philosophy of Norman Mailer in The Naked and the Dead is that every rung in the hierarchal ladder is to fear authority and at the same time fight within fear ladder against fascists.*

Keywords: Totalitarianism, military establishment, clash of ideologist, war within war & fight with in fear ladder

An outspoken intellectual and celebrity, Norman Mailer is a leading literary figure in contemporary American literature. He is highly regarded for his prodigious ability as a novelist and social critic. Mailer's writing attempts to engage and reenact the major crises of the modern world to affect greater understanding of self and society and is mirrored in reality by his active participation in national events. Mailer achieved a lot of fame with his first novel, *The Naked and the Dead*.

The evil forces of totalitarianism in the military establishment had been a major concern to Norman Mailer in *The Naked and the Dead*. In *The Naked and the Dead*, the soldier has become an automated machine, "The Robot" (Adams 5). Totalitarianism, Mailer, says, – —has slipped into the body cells and psyche of each of us". (Genter132). Institutions or soldiers, —Mailer associates institutions, persons or forces with totalitarianism by their intentions, functions and effects in the world." (Begieging). According to Mailer, totalitarianism as an institution is more powerful than the individual and in his *Presidential Papers*, Mailer says, Totalitarianism has modified into every popular art, social craft and political technique and divorces us from guilt. Totalitarianism is a kind of cancer and is embodied in General Edward Cummings, the reactionary military leader of *The Naked and the Dead*, who perpetuated the militarization of American society. Gen. Cumming and Ser. Croft stand for the totalitarian forces of society. Cummings represents "the hot breath of the future". (Trilling 152). Cummings had great admiration for the tactics employed by the fascist leader, Hitler and opined that fascism failed mainly because it was started in the wrong country. He feels that America is the perfect soil where totalitarianism can have a full growth. Through his conception of fascist power and its application, —Cummings emerges as a kind of demonic organization man". (Miller162). It's clear in Mailer's *The Naked and Dead* that it is —the individual and individual integrity that must be fought for and preserved; the organizations, the army state,

or industry- is the enemy. (Millgate 150). Though the external theme of *The Naked and the Dead* is war, it is critically an "effective novel of social protest". (Harper 102). While our chief fascination lies with war, the pacific campaign of Mailer is a fiction, yet Mailer achieves in illuminating the conditions of the characters who suffer under the authority of the Army officers. The conditions on Anopopei, Mailer's mythical Pacific island; the routine life of army; the many actions forced on the men and their developing conflicts experienced on the platoon possibly —represent a composite view of the Pacific war" (Mailer 410). Mailer uses the novel as a social commentary to promote the ideology of liberalism in the *Fear Ladder*. —To make an Army work you have to have every man in it fitted into a fear ladder... The Army functions best when you're frightened of the man above you and contemptuous of your subordinates--Gen. Edward Cummings, *The Naked and the Dead* . (6:1)

Examining the nature of military mind and the complex behavior of the Army Generals towards the soldiers, World War II novel emerged as a social document and as a literary work. Many American writers use the battlefield as the stage upon which they explore an individual in the twentieth century, an individual mired in the military establishment of the modern industrial world. Fictionalizing the experiences of war, its changing nature, its effect on Army culture, major novelists like Norman Mailer portrayed the military organization - its armed conflict, its impact on society, the changing intra and interpersonal relationships within the military structure all - which convey universal experiences of the military service. The emergence of the military organization and its social implication is inextricably connected to class struggle and clash of ideologies. Many writers felt the hierarchical structure of the military organization embodied a clash of ideologies between liberalism and fascism. Lt. Hearn, the liberal intellectual, and General Cummings, the fascist terrorist, want to dominate the men of the Recon platoon in the pacific war

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campaign between America and Japan. He wants to toss up America as —an imperialist” power with military supremacy.

The main theme of Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* is the problem of military command. It elucidates the adjustments of the power structures in the American Army where ‘power flows from the top down’. In this part the development of the conflicts between the men within the military hierarchy takes place. The soldiers, metaphorically seen as —ragil” are victims of the —old”, which is the war. Joseph Heller, a bitter critic of war and its unwieldy organization, in his celebrated work, *Catch 22*, mounts an attack on so called war heroes and military veterans. According to him the soldiers are the scapegoats for promotion of higher officials.

Whenever there are little surges of resistance from the soldiers, it calls for a redirection of power. General Cummings’ Army structure is a microcosm of American Army. It is a kind of —laboratory experiment” in —fear psychology”. Democracy is not the staple demand of the Army soldiers but the officers in the Army who represent an insidious form of fascists. Self-knowledge and not self-assertion is their way to knowledge. It is possible through action, according to General Cummings. General Cummings’ theory of power morality:

I’ve been trying to impress you, Robert that the only morality of the future is a power morality, and a man who cannot find his adjustment to it is doomed. There’s one thing about power. It can flow only from the top down. When there are little surges of resistance at the middle levels, it merely calls for more power to be directed downward, to burn it out. (324)

To Lt Hearn, Cummings’ theory of the military authority and his view of man and society reflect fascism itself. Lt Hearn’s prewar intellectual ideology makes him —a liberal intellectual who by nature hates to be subjected to authority”. (Ride out). With this intellectual framework of military experience, Lt Hearn sees war —an imperialist toss up” (320). To him, America is equally as bad as Japan for whoever wins will —use up Asia” (320). What is intolerable to him is that —millions of people are killed because one joker has to get something out of his system” (320) in the structure of the fear ladder. Lt Hearn seeks the importance of individual freedom and human dignity as this clearly identifies Hearn as a liberal ideologist against fascist authoritarianism.

Mailer identifies the military organization as an evil system with the power structure. General Cummings, the key figure, is in command of the Anopopei Island in the Pacific, an ideologically proto-fascist organization with an urge for omnipotent power. The conflict between General Cummings and Lieutenant Hearn is high-handedness which constitutes the most important element in the novel. Gen Cummings urges for an omnipotent power of the platoon, while Sergeant Croft’s urge is to scale Mt. Anaka in order to overthrow Gen Cummings and take complete power over his men. Sgt. Croft and his platoon fail to come to power when they are chased away by the bees. *The Naked and the Dead* is a war story which deals with the conflict between

the individual obedience and collective allegiance to the military organization. The social origins of the main soldier-characters of the army platoon deepen the theme of military command. It revolves round a single army platoon and later turns into a conflict between Sgt. Croft and Pvt. Valsen of the platoon extending to Gen Cummings and Lt. Hearn. The main conflict in the novel arises out of the ideological differences between the fascist Gen Cummings and Lt. Hearn, his aide-de-camp, a liberal intellectual and between Sgt. Croft, a crypto fascist and Pvt. Valsen, a shy liberal.

Gen. Cummings’ command is to send a patrol mission out to the Japanese positions. He is a traditional stereotyped military genius. He is intelligent, strong-willed, brilliant and has fine military competence: —Here was not a facet of the operations of the division with which he was not familiar”. (Mailer 110). Initially, to Lt. Hearn, Gen Cummings is a —great man” who believes that military discipline should be based on authoritarian domination. To Gen Cummings, the Americans in the American Army are the ‘worst soldiers’ in the world, and they have an exaggerated idea of the rights due to themselves as individuals and no idea at all of the rights due to others. —It’s the reverse of the peasant, and it’s the peasant, who makes the soldier” (175).

The individual soldier must be fitted into a —fear ladder”. This is the key to his command. The best armies, according to Gen Cummings show —a superior material force and a poor standard of living.” —To make an Army work you have to have every man in it fitted into a fear ladder... the Army functions best when you’re frightened of the man above you, and contemptuous of your subordinates. (176).

It is his typical authoritarian tendency to dominate others of lower status and simultaneously to excuse arbitrary higher authority. Gen Cummings repeatedly says, —Every time an enlisted man sees an officer get an extra privilege, it breaks him down a little more” (175). He condemns individual personality as it is a hindrance to the army. This class consciousness of the enlisted men in the army arouses hatred towards officers who vent their anger on the enemy. —They cannot turn it on us, so they turn it outward” (176) is a feeling described by the enlisted men.

Cummings exploits the essential nature of human weakness. He does not believe in man’s innocence as described in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. In his younger days Gen Cummings was influenced by Freudian psychology on the futility of man, that —man is a worthless bastard, and the only problem is how best to control them” (420). Like Hitler, he believes man is intrinsically evil. Like Hitler, he admits the guilt of the twentieth century man that, —we’re all guilty, that’s the truth.... why do you think Hitler was able to stay unmolested so long... the interpreter of twentieth century man” (313). It is here that General Cummings is identified as a fascist.

According to Mailer, it is in such military organizations that the leaders of future America are born. Cummings emphatically states that —the Army (is) a preview of the future” (321-324). General Cummings is like an American Nietzschean superman, who loves war with —unique urges”

(81). His deepest urge, is —omnipotence” of power, like Faustian urge, he wants to overpower everyone .Gen Cummings believes that —~~man~~ is in transit between brute and God”, not —~~something~~ between a brute and an angel” (323). Like Hitler, he believed that the present age was a reactionary and one had to react. —You're a fool if you don't realize this is going to be the reactionary's century, perhaps their thousand-year reign.” It's the one thing Hitler said which wasn't completely hysterical. (4:1)

He loves war because it is concentration of power. He believes that —the only morality of the future is a power morality” (323). Further, in war to make power morality work, —~~the~~ machine techniques of this century demand consolidation” (177). Gen Cummings sees war as a game of chess where the pawns are manipulated by a player through the fear ladder. Thus, to Cummings, war provides the best opportunity to show power. It is —~~the~~ Battle is an organization of thousands of man-machines who dart with governing habits across a field, sweat like a radiator in the sun, shiver and become stiff like a piece of metal in the rain”(569).

To Cummings, Hearn is an idealist who wants only perfection and is unable to come to terms with reality. Hearn's rebellion is contradictory to —bourgeois intellectualism’ for this reason Cummings characterizes Hearn's as: —you are a reactionary just like me (84) but afraid of rebellion. Hearn's reactionary nature becomes evident when he takes over the reconnaissance platoon. *The Naked and the Dead* —presents a terrifying view of men at war and war, as we see it in the novel, is used as —a mirror of vaster social and historical issues, issues that pertain to the kind of world men must live in when the battles are finally won or lost” (Hassan) O! Punish them and that was not enough. The other kind of fear was lacing the unreasoning one in which his powers were immense and it was effectively a variety of sacrilege to thwart him. The cigar butt on the floor was a threat, a denial of him as fully as Lanning's defection, or a Japanese attack on his lines, and he had to meet it directly and root loosely. The longer you tarried with resistance the greater it became. It had to be destroyed. Mailer introduces internal conflict between officers.

Lt Hearn is contemptuous of his position as assistant to General Cummings. Unconsciously Lt Hearn is attracted to the power Cummings wields over his men. The confrontation between Gen Cummings and Lt Hearn culminates with Hearn's smashing cigarette butt in the General's tent. Gen Cummings summons Lt Hearn to his tent throws his cigarette on the floor and orders him to pick it up. Afraid of facing a court-martial, Lt Hearn crawfishes before the General. Hearn's humiliation by the general—to pick up a cigarette butt from the floor reflects a real situation in Mailer's life when he found himself —craw fishing’ before his own superior officer and felt the same self-loathing that Hearn does in the book. (Mills80). Angered at this incident, in the absence of Gen Cummings Lt Hearn throws a cigarette butt out on the spotless floor and mashes it with his heel. This incident shocks Gen Cummings. It is an evidence of troop's resistance of military discipline. He cannot tolerate any deviation or

resistance of the fear ladder by the soldiers. The advancing troops fail to reach the island due to vast stretch of jungles and bad weather appears as an infraction. Further Gen Cummings receives reports about his men's silent resistance. Cummings tightens the division in the platoon. To Cummings it was the symbol of the independence of his troops, their resistance to him. The fear, the respect his soldiers held for him now was a rational one, an admission of his power (318).

Lt Hearn's open resistance of authority and his intellectual logic angers Gen Cummings. To avoid Lt Hearn, Gen Cummings transfers him to Sergeant Croft's platoon to lead the reconnaissance mission. Ironically Lt Hearn becomes the head of a Cummings' fear ladder. He is torn —between his obligation to the military hierarchy to which, as an officer, he automatically belongs and his obligations to the men under him.”(Aldridge 137).

In *The Naked and the Dead*, it is the smallest military unit where the dynamic relations between the superior and the subordinate are best experienced. Most of the enlisted men are motivated by a spirit of adventure, curiosity, and patriotism. Sgt. Martinez, a Mexican immigrant, sees the army as a fulfillment of the American Dream: —Mexican boys also breathe the American fables. If they cannot be aviators or financiers or officers they can still be heroes” (67) Goldstein, a New Yorker, dreams of opening a welding shop with his money saved in the army. Sgt. Brown views army as testing grounds for manhood: —fyou succeed in the Army there isn't any other place you won't succeed” (121). To Gallagher, the Irish Bostonian, service in the army is an apprenticeship to use weapons in order to fight more wars with Communist Jews back in Boston. Wyman views war as kind of romantic adventure, firing machine guns from across a field. And soldiers like Roth and Minetta think that the establishment uses them as cannon fodder and thus hate the army. What is common to these soldiers are the hardships, tedious, boring drills and homesickness faced in the military camp. They express their resentment against those who are responsible for their sufferings. Their resentment is against the Japanese enemy and not against the army and its privileged officers. Their continuous struggle is exchanged by the momentary sensory gratifications reflected in the chorus sung in the novel—“He Chow line,” —Wmen,” —What is a million dollar Wound?” —Rtation,” and —@ what we do when we get out” (86,184,428, 499, 710).

On the other hand the stereotyped American individual takes refuge in the army as ideal. Red Valsen represents the typical American individual and believes in the validity of individual dignity. By Gen Cummings theory of fear ladder, Red Valsen's poor living standard makes him a good soldier. Pvt. Red Valsen is representative to Sgt Croft's platoon. Valsen is not a good soldier but thinks that army exploits the soldiers and that he should take a —revolutionary action” against army. When Lt Hearn takes over the command of the platoon, he finds Valsen, of all the men in the platoon, is the only one —worthtalking to” and —worthbuddying with” (436, 599)

Valsen's animosity and bitterness is directed against Sgt.

Croft, his immediate oppressor in the platoon. His resistance against Sgt Croft is doomed when Sgt Brown remarks: —“you’re picking the wrong boy to mess with” (32). In the Platoon Sergeant Croft is ruthless and represents the physical aspect of Cummings’s —“a ladder”. Sgt Croft loves violence and cruelty and thinks sometimes that he (Croft) has —“a instead of blood” in his veins (121). He is an efficient fighting machine, who will stop at nothing to get the job done. He will do everything to ensure his own survival. When he first enlists, Sgt Croft finds the army the best place to satisfy his appetite for power. His power lust oddly mixed with cruelty and barbarity is exposed in two incidents: his killing of a Japanese enemy prisoner and smashing of Roth’s bird. During a skirmish with the Japanese, Sgt Sam Croft captures a Japanese enemy whom Valsen kills. Sgt Croft loves violence and enjoys killing the Japanese as a hunter does. Sgt Croft offers the Japanese prisoner cigarette, a candy bar and even his canteen before he shoots him in the face.

He believes that violence is a way to eliminate fear of the situation with the Japanese. During the patrol Croft sees Roth fondling a crippled bird found on the jungle trail, he ruthlessly crushes it between his fingers. Earlier, Lt Hearn comments Croft’s cruel and domineering personality as —“a frightening command of a wrong kind” (503) and held an answer to something he wanted. —“It was so pure, so austere.” (497). Climbing the mountain had nothing to do with the patrol mission. It was his sheer will to overpower Hearn to test his endurance and get rid of him as he posed an obstacle to him. Lt Hearn opposes the platoon leader’s decision to turn the patrol back. While leading his men the Japanese army ambushes the platoon and Lt Hearn is killed by a machine gun bullet. —“Lt Hearn’s attempts to maintain his crumbling beliefs of dignity” end with his death. (Olmstead 147).

The troops, on advancing the island, fail to reach due to vast stretches of jungle and bad weather. Further Gen Cummings receives reports of his men’s silent resistance. Hearn openly resists Cummings’ authority. Cummings tightens the division in the platoon:

Lt Hearn’s death by the war machine is inhumanly brutal. We see a more important conflict between Sgt. Croft and his men, whose representative is Pvt. Red Valsen. The actual combat emerges from this conflict. It is important to understand what the thoughts and agonies of the men are in a combat. However —“Hearn’s death does not end the novel”. The novel’s climax begins when Sgt Croft’s instructs the men to climb Mt Anaka much against their reluctance. Valsen defies Sgt Croft’s instructions.

Sgt Croft meets resistance from his men because they find there is no reason to move patrol because their presence has been already detected by the enemy. Thus it appears to them that Croft’s furious attempt to climb the mountain as crazy. With the tragic death of Roth the men begin to rebel. Sgt. Martinez, an accomplice in Hearn’s death, feels guilty and tells Croft they should turn back. Gallagher supports Martinez’s suggestion. But both are subdued by the authority and superiority of Croft. The real threat that jeopardizes Croft’s —“a ladder” comes from Red Valsen.

On learning that Hearn’s death was plotted by Croft and was exploited to satisfy Croft’s maniacal desire for domination, Valsen challenges Croft that they will not ascend the mountain. This is a critical moment for Croft. He aims his gun to fire Valsen. Nobody dares to stop Croft. Helplessly Valsen sits and bows back down; his resistance against Croft is completely broken. We see a shy liberal individual defeated by the military system of authority.

Valsen’s failure, like Hearn’s, to defy Croft shows his inability to act - a cynical rejection of the system - which Croft symbolizes. A feeling of resignation overwhelms him. He is guilty but —“was glad it was over, glad the long contest with Croft was finished, and he could obey orders with submission without feeling that he must resist” (696). Valsen realizes one’s helplessness in the struggle with the system and how it reduces one’s individuality to the mere —“bit” of a machine: —“you kept fighting everything, until in the end you were just a little goddam bolt holding squealing when the machine went too fast” (704). With Hearn’s death and Valsen’s defeat, Mailer condemns the military system and its authoritarian power structure embodied in Gen Cummings and Sgt Croft. Mailer nullifies the victory of military ethic. Sgt Croft fails to climb the mountain against the resistance of the men. Croft furiously drives them up the mountain to reach the summit and as he just reaches the summit, he stumbles over a hornet’s nest. Hundreds of hornets fly out of it and attack the exhausted men. The men flee down the mountain, ignoring Croft’s order. Both Croft’s final conquest of the mountain and his command authority are signally defeated by the presence of insects.

Mailer attempts to uphold liberalism and nip expedient fascism by the introduction of a mediocre officer Valsen who defeats the fascist General Cummings and Sergeant Croft. In spite of the historic defeat of the two Americans, Cummings and Croft, Mailer forces the fact that Americans won the Pacific war. Mailer portrays a superficial victory of Gen Cummings and Sgt Croft to show that power morality does not work without the support of mass will of the lower rung soldiers. Croft admits the power of the soldiers that —“he could not have gone without them (the men). Walter B Rideout rightly upholds Mailer’s view of the support of mass will against power moralists: —“the inability of power moralists to manipulate history in opposition to mass will.” (272).

The individual who is reduced to an automaton by the military establishment and military authority deserves a serious study. The talents of the individual are further crushed by militarism, totalitarianism and growing materialism. Mailer attempts to portray this individual, who is bereft of dignity and identity, to represent post World War II America. Mailer’s novel, *The Naked and the Dead* illustrates how liberal democratic America is engaged in its fight against the evil of fascism perpetuated by the reactionary authoritarians. While dominance of the Generals is the subject of Fascism, *The Naked and the Dead* primarily deals with the theme of confrontation. It is interesting to note here that the confrontation is not between the Japanese and the Americans but between differing ideologies, between personalities and lastly the confrontation within the minds of the leading characters.

Mailer suggests that totalitarianism as an institution is more powerful than the individual. It is a plague and leaves no one safe. Both Cummings and Croft feel defeated towards the end of the novel. The victory of the campaign is brought out by the unimaginative Major Dalleson in the absence of General Cummings and Croft's failure to conquer Mount Anaka.. —The controller of the island is himself controlled in Unfathomable Ways"(Tanner 351). The General who wanted to be the perpetrator of totalitarianism has himself become the —Victim of the military machine that absorbs everything---even Generals--- into itself" (Kazin 72).

Mailer's heroes, Lt Hearn and Pvt. Valsen hold on to their integrity to triumph through the fear of authoritarian fascist leaders, Cummings and Sgt. Croft. Mailer's ruthless indictment of the reactionary forces in *The Naked and the Dead*, establishes him as an anti-fascist, neoliberal making a powerful plea for individual freedom. The philosophy of Norman Mailer in *The Naked and the Dead* is that every rung in the hierarchal ladder is to fear authority and at the same time fight within fear ladder against crypto fascists like Sergeant Croft and General Cummings who are dangerous to Liberal American society.

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[13] Critics like Norman Podhoretz, *The Embattled Vision*," and Diana Trilling, *The Moral Radicalism of Norman Mailer*; Joseph J. Waldmeir, *American Novels of the second World War*; Wayne Charles Miller, *An Armed America*; Chester E Eisinger, *Fiction of the Forties* mostly see the novel in the simple dichotomy between liberalism and fascism.