

reactions which were complicated by the sudden, violent circumstances in which they occurred. Moreover, these children continued to live in an insecure political environment amidst extreme poverty in Kabul.

The magnitude of personal and physical losses which affected all levels of Afghan society may have overwhelmed traditional coping mechanisms and undermined customary social support systems, leaving children more vulnerable to emotional neglect by their bereaved and/or traumatised caregivers. Elbedour *et al* propose that the fragmentation of community ties predisposes children to emotional disturbances in times of conflict. In Kabul, these ties were violently severed and the entire social fabric had been devastated by two decades of civil warfare.

Finally, the persistent consequences of armed conflict on children and youth should make us question the belief that children's resiliency automatically reduces their distress levels, as Eisenbruch⁸ has cautioned. The notion of resiliency could easily become a new form of denial of post-traumatic stress and complicated grief reactions among children, whereby government leaders may evade responsibility for helping war-affected children and youth⁹. ●

The author gratefully acknowledges Hafiza Rasouli, UNICEF Kabul Project Officer, for her invaluable assistance with the translation and data collection aspects of this psychosocial assessment.

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BEREAVEMENT IN THE ARTS

Hecuba

Euripides

Translator, Tony Harrison



London
Faber and Faber,
96pp
£8.99 pb
ISBN 0 571 22791 0

By amazing good fortune, Londoners have been treated recently to two productions of this gripping play, written in 424 BC but as relevant today as then. It is rarely performed, though it should be more often, but it can at least be read in Tony Harrison's excellent translation.

Hecuba, the queen of a defeated Troy, is, with the surviving Trojan women, a captive slave of King Agamemnon, one of the victorious Greeks. A savage indictment of war, the play focuses on the effect on Hecuba of her cumulative losses – her husband, King Priam, Hector, her eldest son, her home, her city, and her freedom. But she has hope in the future because her youngest son, Polydorus, had been sent to neighbouring Thrace, together with the gold of the kingdom of Troy, and is now, as she believes, safe under the protection of the King of Thrace, Polymestor. We, the audience, know better because Polydorus' ghost speaks a prologue, adumbrating what horrors are to come. First Hecuba's beloved daughter Polyxena is condemned to death by the ghost of Achilles (killed by Hector) as a ritual sacrifice to

obtain a wind to carry the becalmed Greek fleet home, then her servant will find Polydorus' mutilated body washed up on the shore, murdered by Polymestor for the gold of Troy sent with him. Tony Harrison's new verse translation has Hecuba say when she sees her son's body:

'Every day I'll ever know
Will have its hours crammed with
woe.'

As the play unfolds, all the now powerless queen in her overwhelming grief can think of, all she feels left to her, is revenge. So horror is piled on horror as she entices the Thracian king, together with his young sons to her tent with the lure of more hidden gold and, with the help of the Trojan women, first blinds the king with brooch pins and then slays the two little boys. The revenge is sweet but short, and the play ends as Hecuba boards a ship to sail to Greece into slavery.

As one commentator says, 'What Hecuba demonstrates most clearly is the snuffing out of decencies' brought about by war. The men are full of ugly self-justification for their murderous acts: sacrificing Polyxena to get a wind; killing Polydorus, Polymestor says, to prevent the Greeks from coming back to 'plunder the plains of Thrace for provender'. Euripides, through Hecuba, dismisses this last mealy-mouthed excuse with scorn. Revenge elates but also diminishes Hecuba as well as the Greeks and leaves the audience, as Euripides intends, feeling the full horror of how war diminishes the humanity of us all. Have we learned anything in the intervening 2,500 years? ●

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