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GENDER CONFLICT AND FIRST WORLD WAR POETRY

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Abstract

The corpus of the First World War poetry is predominantly masculine in its extent, being preoccupied with the experiences of the participants in war, namely the male soldiers, and limited to poems by canonical war poets like Siegfried Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg, Wilfred Owen and others. The First World War, however, has been one of the most transmogrifying experiences for the entire human civilisation in general. It marked the end of an era of optimism and aspiration and ushered an age of overt cynicism and desperation for all members of the society, irrespective of their age, class, or gender. Following this, the paper intends to consider women war poets of the First World War of the likes of Helen Hamilton, Alexandra Grantham, Ruth Comfort Mitchell among other, with an intention to contend that the testimonies of women's perceptions of war are as socially pertinent as the narratives produced by their male counterparts, provides a more nuanced picture of the war experiences and plays a prominent role in contradicting the misogynistic approach of the male poets whose poems often relegated women to the position of passive and at times imprudent beings who were unable to apprehend the magnanimity and atrociousness of war.

Key words: War poetry, First World War, Women poets, Gender.

The First World War, also known as the Great War (1914-1918), was an unprecedented event witnessed by the human civilisation. It marked an end to the preceding era of hope and aspiration and paved the way for a tenebrous age, marked with overt cynicism, desperation and mistrust. The First World War not only occasioned the world to witness the inhuman power and atrocity of technological advancements in the form of machinery and weapons, it transformed the prevailing ways in which the society perceived war and the associated cultural significations and expressions for all members of the society, irrespective of their age, class, or gender.

Nevertheless, war is a predominantly gendered discourse that is essentially preoccupied with the experiences of the male subjects, more particularly, the male soldiers who were permitted to and actively participated in the war front. In relation to these male soldiers, women have been ostensibly reduced to passive victims of war, who suffered vicariously through their male counterparts. The mainstream history of the First World War, for instance, is often implicated for underscoring and at times, misrepresenting the

experiences of women relating to the War. France Hallowes aptly notes that narratives of war “almost invariably omit to mention the damage done to one half of the human race”(qtd. in Khan 2). This standardisation is evident in the corpus of war poetry as well, that is predominantly masculine in its extent, being preoccupied with the experiences of the participants in war, namely the male soldiers, and limited to poems by canonical war poets of the likes of Siegfried Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg, Wilfred Owen and others.

Furthermore, the handfuls of war poems that comprise the experiences of women are often biased and misogynistic in their approach. In the poem of First World War soldier and poet Isaac Rosenberg titled “Daughters of War”, for instance, the narrator illustrates women as “mighty” daughters who “force their males/ From the doomed earth” and sigh “in sleepless passion for the sons of valour” (Rosenberg). In “Returning, We Hear the Larks” again, women are represented as merciless sexual predators who lure the soldiers to war “for she dreams no harm lies there” (Rosenberg 15). Wilfred Owen’s “Disabled” depict women as merciless and insensitive beings who look down upon war casualties as “some queer disease” (Owen 24) and like Rosenberg, he presents women as “giddy jilts” (Owen 24) who goad young men to war fronts merely for their love of military uniforms and because they thought that men looked like “a god in kilts” (Owen 25). In a tone contrasting to May Herschel Clarke’s melancholic reverie about the fatal fate of her soldier-son in “The Mother”, Owen’s “S. I.W” presents the image of an indifferent mother whose heart does not break for the price that her son has offered England with his life, but would rather be glad to see his son getting a “nice safe wound to nurse” and “truthfully” write “Tim died smiling”(Owen). Siegfried Sassoon follows a similar approach in “Glory of Women” and while blatantly accusing women to “love us when we’re heroes...Or wounded in a mentionable place” (Sassoon), exclaims,

O German mother dreaming by the fire,
While you are knitting socks to send your son
His face is trodden deeper in the mud. (Sassoon)

Such an opinionated perception is engendered from the fact that “war poetry emerges from direct experience of fighting” (Featherstone 95) and, because such experience was unavailable to women in the First World War, they have been relegated to the position of a homogeneous group of imprudent and ignorant beings, who were unable to comprehend the magnanimity and atrociousness of war. Nevertheless, the First World War caused a rupture to the established notions of the society, proved to be an epochal event in redefining gender relations and provided women a unique space to voice their concerns on and about war.

The first phase of the war was marked by patriotic zeal and glorification of one’s own nation coupled with noble generalizations and national pieties evident in the words of John Freeman in “Happy is England now” for,

There is not anything more wonderful
Than a great people move towards the deep
Of an unguessed and unfeared future. (Freeman)

Such a traditional and sentimental perception of war is evident in Anna Bunston de Barry's passionate call to war in "Youth Calls to Youth":

"Youth calls to youth:
Come, see a pageant,
Death and hell blended,
Red blood a-flowing,-
Youth loves to be splendid,-
Come, come and die. (qtd. in Khan 11)

In a similar vein, Ethel Talbot Scheffauer's "The Four Ages", perceives war as a saviour in the form of a surgeon, engaged in curing "the sick world" (Khan 11).

Jessie Pope is perhaps the most well-known woman war poet in the present time owing to Wilfred Owen's intended dedication to her as "a certain Poetess" and "To Jessie Pope" in two (cancelled) inscriptions of his poem "Dulce et Decorum est", where he paints a vicious picture of the War as a means to chastise those who sing of the glory of war. According to W. G. Bebbington, Pope's "The Call" might have been the chief prompter of "Dulce et Decorum est" (qtd. in Khan 19) which she had used to incite men to enrol in the War. She constructs the poem with a series of rhetorical questions by suggesting that the trenches and the procession does not await women, but men, "who's going out to win",

Who's keen on getting fit -
.....
Who'll win the Empire's thanks -
.....
Who'll swell the victor's ranks - (Pope)

Such noble generalisations, however, were soon overtaken by the desolate picture of war, as by 1917, the illusions of the first months had faded leading to voices like Helen Hamilton who condemned the sentimental and romanticised picture of war and sought to denounce the war for all its morbidity. In "The Romancing Poet", Hamilton exclaims:

I wish you would refrain
From making glad romance
Of this most hideous war... (Hamilton)

She asks the war poets to substitute their "casual stock-in-trade,/ Of tags and clichés" with "fit words" appropriate for portraying a true picture of the war front. She underlines that that the only "glamour" of "this most hideous war" is

...man's courage,
His indomitable spirit
.....
...to be crucified each day (Hamilton)

Helen Hamilton's vehement opposition to the propaganda of war also becomes evident in "The Jingo-Woman", where she chastises the war supporters exclaiming

Oh! Exasperating woman,
I'd like to wring your neck,
I really would!
You make all women seem such duffers!" (Hamilton)

She addresses such pro-war women poets to abstain from eulogising the war and cries out:

You shame us women.
Can't you see it isn't decent,
To flout and goad men into doing,
What is not asked of you? (Hamilton)

Hamilton's poems, therefore, comments on the same grounds on which women were condemned, namely for their confinement in their domestic space, while the male members of the society were compelled to partake in the war. Besides, she obliquely urges women to understand their exceptional position in the war-torn society, to use their position in condemning the war, instead of glorifying it and in doing so she exhibits the fact that in contrast to common apprehension, not all women were imperceptive of the horrors of war. In "The Ghouls" again, Hamilton launches an attack on the old moribund men

Who gloat with dulled old eyes,
Over those lists,
Those dreadful lists,
Of young men dead.(Hamilton)

A fine testament of women's protest poetry is also evident in the poems of Ruth Comfort Mitchell, who contests the illusory picture of soldiers adorning death like fearless heroes. In her "He Went for a Soldier" for instance, she traces the narrative of a young boy's initiation into war. The poem illustrates how the apparent glamour and pomp of war stimulated young boys like Billy to enrol as soldiers in war and though they initially relished the applause, he was

Not very clear in the kind young heart of him
What the fuss was about,
But the flowers and the flags seemed part of him –
The music drowned his doubt. (Mitchell)

More importantly, the distinctiveness of the poems lies, unlike many, in the poet's rendition of identity to the subject of her poem as "Billy, the Soldier Boy". This serves the dual purpose of subverting the homogeneous anonymous identity thrust upon the soldiers while driving home the fact that the participants of the war are not distant and fabled Arthurian figures, but ordinary men of flesh and blood who while fighting

...like a rat in a corner

.....
[Is] Left on the field for dead:

.....
...he lies – or a ghastly part of him –
While life is oozing out:(Mitchell)

By drawing an analogy between Billy and a rat, Mitchell blatantly satirizes the glorification of soldiers and draws attention to the despicable conditions of war that ultimately results in dehumanisation of the soldiers who partake in the war, apparently for the betterment of the society.

In this context, May Herschel-Clarke's "Nothing to Report" paints a poignant picture of how the soldiers and the event of the war was perceived by the world at large- the innumerable deaths of the war front had become too familiar for the newspapers to report and the sense of individual loss felt on the death of their loved relations was obliterated:

One minute we was laughin, me an' Ted,
The next, he lay beside me grinnin' - dead.

'There's nothin' to report, ' the papers said. (Clarke)

One of the most recurring themes of women's war poetry comprised the helpless passivity to which the war-time women were subjected to. While the sense of glory was inevitably attached to the war, the feeling of being left behind as inert spectators with a lurking anxiety of losing their relations to the war has been deftly captured by poets like Winifred Letts, Gabrielle Elliot, Alexandra Ethelreda Grantham and others. In "Sonnet XIX", Grantham notes ruefully,

War is a time of death and long good-bye
To home and all its peaceful blessedness;
A time when our travail's dear children lie
Killed or maimed on alien soil;... (Grantham)

In a similar vein, Helen Mackay's "Train" offers an earnest illustration of the anguish of family members while parting with the men, who enrolled in the war,

He takes the boy's chin in his hand,
leaning out through the window,
and lifts the face that is so young, to his.
They look and look,
and know that they may never look again.
Will the train never start?
God, make the train start! (Mackay)

Margaret Postgate Cole's "The Falling Leaves" attests to the inevitable yet dismal fate of the soldiers who participate in the war either wilfully, or as a result of the pressing social circumstances of the day or as Mitchell shows, quite unconsciously being glared into it by its ostensible grandness. Nevertheless, as Cole demonstrates, the soldiers, who once comprised "a gallant multitude", meet a fate of obliteration and obscurity when they perish "Like snowflakes falling on the Flemish clay" (Cole). The entire poem poses a juxtaposition of the tumult and commotion of the war-time with that of the post-war hours when the battlefields are consumed with the calmness of deadly silence and are strewn with dead bodies of the soldiers like "the brown leaves dropping from their tree" (Cole).

The use of nature imagery in order to explicate the horrors of war is also evident in Charlotte Mew's "May 1915" where the speaker tries to uphold an optimistic attitude, somewhat forcefully, amidst a dismal and war-torn society by exclaiming:

Let us remember Spring will come again
To the scorched, blackened woods... (Mew)

The poet-speaker tries to assure the world wounded by the war that with patience and endurance, the "healing breeze" of the sea would restore the world. Shortly after, however, her tone changes, as if in a way to affirm the impossibility of the initially proposed hopefulness when she observes that the living are too engrossed in their grief of the "Great Dead" and "blind to the scattered things and changing skies" to harbour aspiration for the positive changes that might transpire "when God shall please". The poem, therefore, draws a picture of the post-war world, where the battles might end and the world restored to its natural beauty and normalcy, but the destruction effectuated by the war is too extensive and colossal to find perpetual harmony, especially to those who had lost their loved ones in the Great War that was meant to "end all wars" and in doing so anticipates the World War II which would be 'greater' both in terms of atrocity and destruction.

The apprehension of the aftermath of war is also evident in May Cannan's "Women Demobilized" where the poet depicts an "empty world" that is dwelt on by women, that although is devoid of their loved ones, is

Full of grey ghosts and voices of men dying
.....
And Lovers' crying- (Cannan)

Not unlike Mew, Cannan is sensitive to the dreadful end of war, the cost paid by women through the lives of their kith and kin in order to accomplish a world where "the Fallen [are] happy and sleep sound" and the crippling psychological influence of the war on its survivors. The speaker is aware that although the war has concluded,

Now in our hearts abides always our war,
Time brings, to us, no day for our forgetting,
Never for us is folded War away,
Dawn or sun setting,
Now in our hearts abides always our war. (Cannan)

As evident, therefore, that woman failed to grasp the reality of and assumed a passive role during the war, is an erroneous belief. The women poets not only comprehended the brutality of the war, but also served to use their poetry as a means to caution the society of its ghastly actuality. Moreover, the celebration or criticism of war as represented in war poetry by both male and female poets could be understood appropriately from the fact that when the Great War broke out in 1914, it was deemed as “the war to end all wars”. Therefore, the initial zealous sentiments attached to it could not be entitled as something thoroughly negative as it was only with time that it took its ghastly shape against general conviction and the society, in general, recognised its barbarity. At the very outset, “the world still associated warfare with glorious pursuit of heroic ideals. People were wholly unprepared for the horrors of modern trench warfare...” (Mahmud 25). Therefore, it is important to consider and assess women war poets and their narratives to acquire a fuller understanding of the War because women poets assumed a wide range of roles through their war poetry, such as “reporters, propagandists, interpreters, advocates, satirists, elegists, healers and visionaries, and their verse correspondingly express a comprehensive range of emotions: pity, revulsion, horror, disgust, hate, anger, togetherness, isolation, love and compassion...” (Khan 4).

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