

SUBLIMITY OF HORROR: WAR POETS AND THE SUBLIME TERROR

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Abstract

Premier philosophers and activists like Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant stated that ‘sublimity’ lies not only in beauty, but also in fear that takes this concept to a higher psychological sphere. In human history, there were phases of immense disgust, fear, mass hatred, and abnormal socio-economic pandemonium, the era of the World Wars. Poetry, by its own nature and analytical power, claims to be the spectator of different human activities and becomes the seer of human civilization, from its growth to its achievements and degradation. My aim, in this paper, is to portray the function of poetry as the most potent critic of life, especially in the war poems by noted war poets and riot witnesses.

Keywords: World War, soldier-poets, women poets, Indian partition, polarity, death, destruction, riot, horror.

Methodology: Compare-Contrast.

Introduction:

During the World Wars, a period of huge turmoil and mass destruction, it became the responsibility of men of poetry and thinking, including those who were directly involved in military actions, to expose the futility and destructive nothingness of war campaigns and sieges to individuals to ensure that such exterminations were not repeated in futurity. Such activists, especially those who wrote during the First and Second World Wars, are also widely read for sure as they wrote subjective experiences of human miseries during wars. It is known that the women of the First World War gained the right to vote; in the Second World War, women were extensively organised within the auxiliary services and in agriculture and industry. Hence, the Second World War was a challenging era for war poetry as a genre. However, the nature of the Second World War was new and strange in many ways. Most importantly, women were vastly involved in the Second World War in a wide range of occupations like civil defence and necessary industrial employment. Although, in not that way ‘fighting’, the works performed by the females were arduous and dangerous as the massiveness of the Second World War was greater than the First World War. Inevitably, there is a huge quantity of poetry written by women regarding their experiences of their occupations in the war. Cathrine Reilly wrote a lot but little is well known. For Reilly, this reluctance is the outcome of the prominently military orientation of many post-1945 war poetry anthologies.

Keith Douglas, the soldier-poet:

Keith Douglas willingly enlisted himself in the British armed force, participated voluntarily in some of the intense military activities against the Axis forces in North Africa and was enthralled to be engaged in the Normandy landings, and yet wrote realistically about the ruthlessness and humiliations of belligerence. Among Douglas's poems written as a soldier, one can take "The Prisoner", "Cairo Jag", "Enfidaville", "How to Kill", "Christodoulos", "Egypt", "Simply Me When I'm Dead", "The Knife" and "Aristocrats". These poems evoke the sense of sublimity in relation to immense fear and misery faced by humanity during the war era. In "The Prisoner", the young student forebodes his own death to his Chinese beloved Ying Cheng. "Simplify Me When I'm Dead" was written in May, 1941. It is also a meditation upon a perceptible early-annihilation. This poem states:

"Of my skeleton perhaps
so stripped, a learned man will say
He was of such a type and intelligence, No more."1

It is a common comprehension that poetry satires human life and this can be noticed in Douglas's "Egypt" which is a satirical portrayal of the world the soldier-poet hoped to leave behind—a country of poverty embodied in a female beggar who is diseased and partially blind. In "Christodoulos", a war-profiteering businessman is portrayed controlling the soldier as if he were God, whereas in "The Knife", Douglas addresses both his beloved Ying Cheng and Milena. Unlike these poems, "Cairo Jag", contrasts between war zone strewn with corpses and pleasure-smear base towns. "Enfidaville" talks of a captured Egyptian town that waits for a recovery of the Allied soldiers. Douglas almost turns leftist in "Aristocrats" where he satirizes the blue-blooded officers of the Allied forces, while in "How to Kill", written in 1943, the poet re-examines his own combatant role as a sorcerer-executioner. However, Douglas's most famous poem is "Vergissmeinnicht" and we shall try to discuss on this in detail.

"Vergissmeinnicht" is composed in between May and June, 1944 at Hams, Tunisia and the poem's German title means 'Forget me not'. It appears to testify the soldier's poetic credo—men must fight whenever needed, despite the fact that war destroys both fighters and their loved ones. This poem is of twenty four lines and is divided into six irregularly rhyming Stanzas and describes a deserts cape where an immense battle had been being fought between the Britishmen and Nazis. While revisiting the war spot with a group of soldiers after three weeks, the armyman finds an annihilated German soldier lying under the desert Sun. The fighter-poet represents both Douglas himself and those countless Allied soldiers upon whom the war has been thrust, those who know that at any time they too may suffer the same fate of the dead German. In the next stanza, the British poet introduces the dead man as someone with whom he is familiar to. He writes on:

"The frowning barrel of his gun
Overshadowing.
As we came on
That day, he hit my tank with one
Like the entry of the demon."2

Every line, every stanza goes on to criticise the futility of war, the meaninglessness of fighting between man and man, between life and life, resulting in death.

Alun Lewis and his war poems:

Like Douglas's "The Prisoner", Alun Lewis's "The Sentry" reflects the desolation of his spirit, as he writes:

"I have begun to die
For now at last I know
That there is no escape
From night."³

In "To Edward Thomas", Lewis identifies himself, though in a polite intellectual position, with the poet killed in the First World War at Arras in 1917. While admitted at hospital in Pune due to a jaw fracture, Lewis wrote "Burma Casualty" after witnessing the general unreality of life in army hospitals where soldiers shot by the Japanese were being brought in. His poem "Goodbye" hit the extreme note of pathos while writing a soldier's leave-taking testament. It is addressed to Gweno Ellis, his wife since 1941. He feels that he is going to die in the war, and in 'Postscripts : for Gweno' he unfolds this, whereas he has had just given a hint at it at the ending of "Goodbye". That is why, probably, he remembers his family history for the last time in his poem "Bequest" that contrasts with the serene mood he exhibits in the pre-war poem, "The Mountain Over Aberdare". Another poem of Lewis, "Shadows" is identifiably about the earth on the verge of the Second World War, whereas another poem "Raider's Dawn" focuses on human experience after an air raid. Thus, both Douglas and Lewis, again and again, focuses on immense destructive power of war and at the end, on the futility of all these destroying moments.

Furtherly, Lewis is often identical with his most widely read poem "All Day it has Rained". It has been noticed and admitted that there are some basic differences in approaches in Douglas's "Vergissmeinnicht" and Lewis's "All Day it has Rained". Douglas shows that the Allied soldier is reviewing the effect of his action on the battle field whereas Lewis's fighter is resting and becomes nostalgic about his home. A vital note must be taken at this point that Douglas was killed in the thickest of the D-Day actions near St. Pierre in France on 9th June, 1944, Lewis committed suicide on 5th March, 1944 at his own barrack near Goppa Pass in the Mayu Range, Burma. Unlike Douglas, Lewis remained a pacifist through out his life, although, he, too, volunteered his nation's army. Interestingly Rawlinson derides him as soldier-poet who 'was never to see combat'.

If Douglas's perceptions of war are pathological and straight forward, critics like Adam Piette and Lyon have focused on the psychological and regionalistic aspects of Lewis's war poems. "All Day it has Rained" is a thirty-line poem which perceptively completes the depiction of horrors militarism and confrontation initiated in Douglas's "Vergissmeinnicht". Symbols are unparallel in Lewis's writing to sketch the sublime picture of heavy military activities. The symbol of rain highlights the misery of the common soldiers, similar to what Earnest Hemmingway did in his 1929 novel, *A Farewell to Arms*. However, "All Day it has Rained" was written when Lewis was having a training at Longmoor, Hampshire. The first seven lines of the poem focuses on the massiveness of helplessness of the soldier-narrator as he and his co-fighters wait encamped in heavy rain. Sanders writes that the poem 'evokes the tedium of life in an encampment' during a downpour. It not only makes the soldiers immobilised, but also makes them immensely bored. The speaker sounds frustrated that the rain is light but prevents the soldiers from advancing to their enemies. The tone of sublimity in this poem is much like that of Vladimir and Estragon in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* where it is a preoccupied fate of the common soldiers to wait and suffer in silence, and to die.

The enormous sublimity of the soldiers' turmoil can be seen between the thirteenth and nineteenth lines of "All Day it has Rained" where Lewis develops how the soldiers, long detached from home, gradually forget their loved ones and grow hedonistic, as he writes on :

“And we stretched out, unbuttoning our braces,
 Smoking a Woodbine, darning dirty socks,
 Reading the Sunday papers—I saw a fox,
 And mentioned it in the note I scribbled home;—
 And we talked of girls and dropping bombs on Rome,
 And thought of the quiet dead and the loud celebrities
 Exhorting us to slaughter, and the herded refugees :”⁴

The poet, here, mentions that the soldiers killed in war do not appear inspiring enough to those who are alive and combating, while politicians encourage them to do more massacres. The turmoil and grey meaninglessness come out with sublimity here. In the last eleven lines, Lewis becomes more realistic and desperate. He seems to be absorbed with sublime darkness of hollowness as he is unknown to the fact whether he is ever going to reunite with his loved ones. Lewis writes, as he concludes :

“To the Shoulder o’ Mutton where Edward Thomas broode long
 On death and beauty– till a bullet stopped his song.”⁵

It indicates that the sensitive soldier-poet is condemned to silence.

Thus, it may be said that though war poetry clinches an important position in twentieth century English literature, it shows itself in pain, horror and poignancy. A sublime note of fear and destruction remains everywhere at war-zones, battlefields, in the hearts of the combatants and humanity throughout the globe.

War accounts: Vera Brittain and Eva Dobell:

The sublime horror and massiveness of destruction can be depicted in the writings of the women poets, but only as witnesses of the situation. This point is noticed in many poems where the women write as if they are men. Vera Brittain writes in "The Lament of The Demobilised", from this point of view —

“And we came home and found
 They had achieved...”⁶

Thus, she is placing herself in role of the returning soldiers, imagining and commenting on how she imagined it would be. Same approach can be noticed in Lucy Whitmell's "Christ in Flanders" where she writes :

“But we were ordinary men.
 And there were always other things to think of—”⁷

Such statements advocate the fact that female, during the Second World War were not in the mode of active participation and they only imagined what this would be like.

As far as this polarity is concerned, women did not take part in actual bloody combat, but it is also recognised that they lived in a social attitude that accepted that women had a place in the home, away from battlefield. On the contrary, regarding men, this polarity existed in expectations to take part in nasty warfare as they are expected to be the breadwinners for the females and families. They are expected to be strong and impervious to much pain and hardships. Both these polarities, though unconscious, are implicit in most of the poems. They

showed the sublime feeling of horror and destruction of the war from an altogether different point of view. Eva Dobell in her poem “Pluck” clearly indicates to this while writing :

“A child—so wasted and so white,/He told a lie to get his way,/To march, a man with men, and fight,/While other boys are still at play.”⁸ In a male’s poem, Siegfried Sassoon’s “Lamentations”, almost identical attitude about how a man should be is described. He writes on in grief :

“I found him in the guard-room at the Base.
From the blind darkness I had heard his crying
And blundered in. With puzzled, patient face
A sergeant watched him; it was no good trying
To stop it; for he howled and beat his chest.
And, all because his brother had gone west
Raved at the bleeding war; his rampant grief.”⁹

Women polarity and Mary Gabrielle:

Regarding the women polarity, an extreme example can be traced in Mary Gabrielle’s poem ‘Women at Munition Making’ where she writes about women and the war :

“Their hands should minister unto the flame of life,
Their fingers guide
The rosy teat, swelling with milk,
To the eager mouth or the suckling babe.”¹⁰

Alternative approaches upon women’s concerns in wartime and their perspectives to poetry can be found in a vast variety of anthologies and periodicals and in several personal journals.

Partition of India and Stephen Gill:

In the accounts of Indian poets, writing on overseas soil, sublimity comes with the sense of terror and enormous agony. The partition of British-ruled-India is perhaps one of the most notable separations on nation that has ever been made in the history of modern civilization. This gave birth to a new nation, Pakistan. The terrorized situation of the time of partition was one of the worst documents in history. Indo-Canadian author Stephen Gill expresses his experiences of this era of sublime darkness in painstaking mood in many of his works. Gill was born in Sialkot, the Punjab region of undivided India, a place now situated in Pakistan. Remorseless brutality on both sides of the border hardened the hearts of both the Hindus and Muslims, resulting in an intensely gloomy atmosphere for minorities. Being a Christian, Gill witnessed the holocaust and wrote in the preface of his collection of poems *Songs Before Shrine* :

During those riots, we did not know if there would be another dawn and when there was, it brought tales of more brutalities. I saw old people running for help and being pelted with bricks and then burnt alive while patrolling police ignored the clusters of misguided zealots who were in the streets in spite of curfews. I perceived death dancing in the eyes of the minorities, heard the cries of infants and read about the butchery of the innocents as if that was happening in front of my eyes.

Curfew used to be lifted for a couple of hours for citizens to buy the necessities of life. Items like sugar, rice, wheat flour and several other eatables had disappeared from the stores. If there were any, their prices

had shot up because those who could afford started hoarding them. Minorities suffered this way and also because of other fears. Both the Hindus and Muslims were engaged in this ugliness of religious reasons. Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated because he tried to end this drama of degradation to humanity.

I began to flutter my wings from the prison of suffocation in search of an El Dorado of peace.¹¹

While working on the concept of ‘sublimity’. Edmund Burke announced that sublimity belonged to the intense sense of horror and terror; and terrors happened during the partition time of India was never lesser than the brutality of the World Wars. Stephen Gill writes in the preface of another of his collections of poems, *Shrine* :

Every time there was a stir caused by the wind, a car on the street, the bark of a dog, or the mew of a cat, we froze inside our house. Every time there was anything unusual, unseen tragedy was expected. The nights were nightmares and the days did not bring any hope. Often, the mornings dawned with more lamentable events. It was not easy to sleep when night after night the ghosts of fear looked straight into our eyes. It turned into an obsession that afflicted me every minute of every hour that whom to trust and to take in confidence. Passers-by and neighbours appeared to be the possible killers. Apparently, the dark forces of religion roamed around freely to terrorize minorities.¹²

Stephen Gill began to find ways to run away from the murderous religious rage to grow in a fearless atmosphere. He, however, has painted some of the gruesome realities of this silent wrenching in the prefaces of his collections of poems, including *Songs Before Shrine* and *Shrine* as well as his modern epical novel on terrorism, *The Flame*. The silent pain of his early life in India has kept Stephen Gill as a prisoner of fear even when he came abroad. This has largely shaped his psyche. He writes about the ‘maniac messiahs’, a phrase he uses for terrorists in *The Flame* :

Fear became an unwelcoming guest in my life from an early age. As a potent biological presence of unpleasant danger, it took away a considerable joy from my life. It often led me to the heightened perception of being persecuted that destroyed the delicate fabrics of my trust. In the shape of fear of rejection, it led me often to make irrational decisions. The scars of this powerful emotion were not easy to wash from the psyche even after I came out of that fear abroad. To find hope... I traced riches, education, faiths and many other things. I tried to see the face of hope in political ideologies, including Marxism, Nazism and dictatorship... To take the root of fear out, I took long and painful journey of efforts. My life in Canada was my attempt to refuse to let fear be my master. But this is not that easy. Writing, particularly poetry, is one way to do that. Poetry is my refuge and my helper to help others to be aware of the enemies of peace.¹³

In many of his interviews, Dr. Gill advocates love as the supreme power over hatred. In his interview in *Poetry in the Arts* from Texas in January, 2001, he says:

I have seen the glass of peace being smashed into pieces when I was growing up in India. My family did not know if there would be another dawn and when there was, it brought horrific tales of more brutalities...¹⁴

He believes that peace is the legitimate child of peaceful means. In his interview with professor Dr. J. Sarangi in *Atlantic Literary Review* of July-September and October-December in 2004, he says : “I believe that home is where our feet are. I also believe that our feet are in a home that encompasses safety and happiness.”¹⁵

Conclusion:

Therefore, poetry, throughout ages, peeps into the deepest core of human belongings and social occupations and criticises even the aimless horror and futile nothingness of human existence and behaviours. It claims almost all the major areas of human psyche. Thus, our chapter, ‘Poetry : Criticism of Life’ aptly justifies the system how poetry operates as a tool of literature to criticise human activities as a whole. It does not even spare the holocaust of wars, futility of death and immense horror.

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