


## Peace as an Event and Peace as Utopia: An Analysis on Mary Collins' *Ten Bells Street at War*

<sup>1</sup>Badri Prasad Pokharel, Ph.D.

<sup>1</sup>Associate Professor of English, Saraswati Multiple Campus, Lekhnath Marg, Kathmandu, Nepal

[Email: [bpokhrel1980@gmail.com](mailto:bpokhrel1980@gmail.com), ORCID: <https://ORCID.org/0009-0003-4356-6274>]

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### Abstract

*This paper analyses the plight and predicament of local residents of one locality in the East End of London's Ten Bells Street where people are scared during the World War II. Mary Collins' novel Ten Bells Street at War is an account of three childhood friends who have been scattered due to the consequences of the war which had completely devastated the whole of Europe. People like Rose, Becky and Bernie have been living a terrific life under the shadow of Adolf Hilter's tyranny and everyone is found to have been looking for an ultimate solution to regain the possibility of peace and solidarity in which all European and non-European, Christians and Jews etc. can live together as brothers and sisters. In this paper, I analyse the problems of scattered people due to the terrific consequences of the war based on different grounds: What consequences led the people to live away from their own family, friends and relatives? What is the cause behind their separation? Why have they been encountering unspeakable suffering while the war was in utmost peak? How can the issue of peace and solidarity be prevailed in the war-torn society? Can they live their life peacefully hereafter? Such questions are discussed using relevant peace and war theories.*

**Keywords:** conflict, destruction, humanitarian crisis, peace, World War II

### Introduction

In this paper, I am concerned about the terrific and pathetic atmosphere of a locality in East End of London – Ten Bells Streets and the trauma of the inhabitants living there under the terror of being bombed at any time during the World War II. The moment when the whole of the world was to solve basic to life-threatening problems, particularly during the war when the security and simple livelihood was the only demand to remain survived until the end of the war was very challenging to all human being. The denizen were compelled to accept the daily upheavals like chaos, poverty, insecurity, and even death threats from every corner. As such, they are seen longing for the end of the war and peace to be prevailed in the locality so that each of them could live their lives easily. Coming to the point, to put forward my argument further, I have divided this write up into four different sections: first, the anarchy created in the world due to the war which compels the people to live their lives very miserably

under terror; second, the deadly situation and grave suffering of the people; third, how peace and solidarity would become important for each of them; and fourth the outburst of freedom and important of peace in their life. I will conclude my paper with a discussion of ways forward. To substantiate my ideas, I am using theories based on peace theory as a methodological tool.

*Ten Bells Street at War*, a novel written by British novelist Mary Collins, a resident of the East End of London and psychiatric by profession known to have written crime fiction novels under the name of Barbara Nadel, recites the horrific life of the East End of London in the early forties during the World War II. Life is tough for Ten Bells Street girls – Bernie, Rose and Becky who were best friends from their childhood, but due to terrible situation they get scattered across London, still surviving the war apart. The war has taken Rose, a raped girl during the insurgency away from the East End, from her friends and society and forced her to dance in a club in Soho to entertain people to let them forget the pathos of the war. But still, she has created a new life for herself following the perilous path seeking a solace for herself, her mother, her husband and her child. In the same way, Rebecca has undertaken her job as a nurse to serve the wounded people during the war which has caused a devastation in the life of commoners each day, however, she struggles to cope with damage that surrounds her. Unlike Rose and Becky, Bernie, a professional photographer of the events of the war visiting different places and publicizing the horrific images of the war, has tried to disillusion the fact of the war how much it has devastated the world to the people. Though living away from her friends, family and locality, she never feels distanced from them and her life in the East End. The World War II stands here as an antagonistic force which has separated them from each other, however, their friendship stands strong in the face of hardship as they fight for their place in a frightening new world. Still, one way or another, love pulls them together and hope for better peace in their life.

*Ten Bells Street at War* has evoked an emotion and voices from different corners of the East End of London. It fundamentally appeals to war affected people to think about the problems during the war. The issues of the war victims and other people have been taken into consideration in academia. Emiko Noma in her essay, “Women Cannot Cry Anymore: Global Voices Transforming Violent Conflict” proclaims that women’s narratives are very valuable tools to identify the needs of women during and after the war and conflict and to transform the conflict itself. The narratives written about the wars “serve as alternatives to filtered media portrayals and expose the gender-specific ways violence affects women” (9). Women who are not only victims of conflict but are also the means of building peace amid the ruins of their war-torn societies. To enhance the certainty of peace and solidarity among the people during the war and conflict, there must be an address to women’s empowerment such as giving attention to rape and sexual enslavement, assisting in restoring status, and providing material support to victims who face ostracism. Hence, women should be “empowered when included in participatory process of dispute resolution, peace negotiation and law reform as well as gender-specific components to reparation and rehabilitation programs” (Sewell 23-24). John Mueller, on behalf of war and its bitter consequences, points out that war and war-like condition facilitates deadly activities and sometimes “civilians are massacred as part of a military strategy to defeat an insurgency by eliminating its support network” (299). Either combatants fight and try to kill as many as they can, the actual victims would be civilians.

However, the critics like John W. Lango have different perspectives for the solution of the armed conflict in the war ridden societies. He says, “Our real-world moral judgements about particular cases of armed conflict can be complicated and controversial” (222). But there would be a middle path solution for such cases when everyone would consider all of the things that are morally relevant and

some prospective moral assumptions should be made on a case-by-case basis. However, Jessica Senehi has different views on conflict and its resolution, it is constructive storytelling. She means to say that stories have power which operate in the world and get results. She further states, “Stories operate within a context of ideological, economic, and power constraints. We must examine how we can facilitate cultural spaces where people faced with social upheaval and conflicts or in the aftermath of violence” (57). Sometimes, tragic anecdotes can participate in building communities and inter-communal relationships characterized by shared power, mutual recognition, and awareness in order to work together to shape the future. Johan Galtung has further elaborated the concept, “A more pragmatic and dynamic conceptualization of peace would be: peace is the condition for conflicts to be transformed creatively and non-violently” (“Cultural...”77). Many stories can have the purpose of transformation, conversion, or change. Each of the critics has different views on the causes of conflict and its resolution that would last for a long time in the society.

### **War an Anarchy to People and to the State**

The wars normally happen in situations in which state revenues decline because of the decline of the economy as well as the spread of criminality, corruption and inefficiency. Galtung explains the term, “Expressions like 'violence', 'strife', 'exploitation' or at least 'conflict', 'revolution' and war should gain much higher frequency to mirror semantically a basically non-harmonious world” (“Violence...”167). Violence would be increased unexpectedly both as a result of growing organized crime and the emergence of paramilitary groups, as a result, political legitimacy would be disappearing and the distinction between external barbarity and domestic civility, between the combatants and the non-combatants, between the soldier or policeman and the criminal or even civilians, would be prevalent everywhere. The wars can be “contrasted with earlier wars in terms of their goals, the methods of warfare and how they are financed” (Fresard 35). The goals of the wars would normally be about identity politics in contrast to the geo-political or ideological goals of earlier wars. When the violent conflict is on the rise, “it is likely to affect different segments of society to varying degrees and it would raise a question about the distributional effects of conflict and how persistent these effects would be” (Bircan and et al 3). The impacts would be on the role of inequality in promoting violent conflicts, consequently results would be mixed: while vertical income inequality would not found to increase the risk of war onset and the horizontal inequalities, i.e. social and economic disparities between societal groups, seem to be positively related with the outbreak of conflict. In the same way, the inhabitants of Ten Bells Street have been badly panicked. Collins points out one bomb blast like this, “The sirens went off and people fled down the stairs to the unused station. ...then the new anti-aircraft missiles fire and they sound like bombs dropping. People panic and just to make everything even worse (255-6). Mostly women and children were the victims of the outcome of the war. Either at home or in the battlefield, there was the shower of dead bodies. Besides, the criminality in the society i.e. rape and looting was common and the girls were the primary targets.

The foundation of the novel is the cruelty enloaded upon the European society. The society in the East End has been shown to have been “dangerous in all sorts of ways now. Not just because it was being carpet bombed, but also because of the risks it posed” (Collins 13). The terror can be seen on everyone’s face and panicked all the time. The anarchy of the war has made all terrorized as the novelist penetrates, “After who knew how many hours down in that damp-scented, blast-absorbing, uncomfortably full basement, everyone now seemed to be perfectly silent” (9). The East End was in the surge of the violence from which people have been longing for peace, but each of the residents has

been the victim of the war. They were habituated to live in the terror like this, “Already few people could actually remember what a night without a raid felt like. Babies had been born, old and young people had died, and future generations been conceived, to the background noise of explosion” (108). The anarchy created by the war has been a norm or pattern for those who are destined to live in terror.

### **Truce and Peace: Only Way Out in the East End**

Every work begins with a profound transformation of the existing issues, leading to the elimination of causes of conflict and violence to establish a peaceful society, which is itself a very difficult work. The replacement of the existing culture of violence or event, here, the World War II which only causes destruction by a culture of peace, human rights and democracy which can would only be experienced after a longer toiling efforts by the individuals from different corners of the society. It is “so widespread and so generally acknowledged that it possibly presents some kind of substitute in this secular age for feelings of devotion and community” (Galtung, “Peace...” 185). Hence, the past experiences drawn from various sources related to political and economic changes, shows cultural changes which, in particular, make the changes in behavioural patterns of individuals, groups and nations, which can help one experience peace for a long lasting time. A culture of peace can be achieved only when all potential partners are fully engaged in its realization.

The existing scenario seen in the world is the culture of violence based on distrust, suspicion, intolerance and hatred among the people living together in the society. The world either in past or present needs peace, “on the inability to interact constructively with all those who are different, must be replaced by a new culture based on non-violence, tolerance, mutual understanding and solidarity”(Symonides and Sings 10), that can lead to the way solve the conflict or disputes peacefully. The world has seen many such issues earlier, now needs solidarity among the denizen,, so forgetting all kinds of feuds, everyone can live harmoniously. The world is in need of such a new culture and of a common system of values and new behavioural patterns for individuals, groups and nations, for, without them, the major problems of international and internal peace and security cannot be solved.

Peace and solidarity, very crucial aspect in the warring community would be boon to inhale and exhale in the disturbing world. Heinrich Simpson, the protagonist from the novel, “a Jew of Germanic origin, had broken the story of how Hilter planned to replace Christmas with a Winter Festival, celebrating old Germanic gods and goddess and of course the Fuhrer himself” (Collins 3) has run away from Germany from the terror of Hitler and had taken refuge in London and working there for a newspaper by writing about the truth how Hitler was propagating hatred among the people either Christians or Jews who were ultimately longing for peace and solidarity among all of them. He, a fifty year old married man with children was living with Berine, “a girl approaching eighteen hadn’t matured and still didn’t” (3). His main concern was to make people aware by writing articles for *Jewish Chronicle* by “providing the context for stories about the raids of Germany ... giving people some hope. Because everything was about that now” (209). Being a Jew, he was also concerned about the peace and solidarity in Palestine where the Jews were taking refuge from the terror of Hitler and his Nazi Gestapo. He explains their situation like this, “But these refugees, these ... Bernie, the Jews of Europe are not just running from the Nazis because they are threatening to shoot them – they are running away from force labour camps from their women being raped” (153). But still he is optimist and is longing for good like this, “people walking to church, neighbors greeting neighbors, old people taking the Christmas morning air” (153). Finally, he decides to leave Britain for Palestine work for his people

and live together. Before that, he arranges something for Bernie too by giving her his mother's diamond ring. Here, one can see the "culture of peace cannot be imported or imposed from outside, but must develop from the culture of the people concerned" (Groff and Smoker 103). A true sense of penetrating the solidarity always remains within himself or herself, otherwise it cannot be achieved totally.

In the same way, the condition of Rebecca Shapiro aka Becky, who belongs to another religion, socio-economic condition and has come from out of Britain and working as a nurse during the World War II at a hospital and always inclined to the service of her patients. The narrator has described her inclination to her job, "Two explosions rocked the building then and Becky hung onto Mrs. Palmer's trolley as the blast punched its way through the hospital and down into the shelter below" (8). Doing her job by nursing terrified patients is not easy, but she "leaned down to listen to her (her patient, Gladys) breathing. Becky closed the old woman's eyes. The only consolation was that the last thing she'd said to the old Gladys had been hopeful" (9). The novel has clearly penetrated the importance of solidarity and reconciliation as "external recognition for positive behaviour which contributes to peace" (Groff and Smoker 125) among the people belonging from different corners of the society from the following lines,

Even with a war on there were people everywhere – barkers and bookies' runners, rabbis and good wives, and children, children, children. Many had come to the city after being evacuated to the country in 1939, some with their parents' knowledge and others without. The ones who'd come without were known as the 'Dead End Kids' but, in spite of the rather rude name, they were neither criminally minded nor idle. Dead End Kids helped the fire brigade pull people out of collapsed buildings, they watched for fires and they helped bombed-out families move house. (191)

Out in the whole Europe, the war was going on between Allies and Axis, but the inhabitants of the war-ridden society were inclined to help each other either the Nazis or Allies forces were killing the people or even the bombings were going on.

As an alternative way to observe one's way of analysis for life is a more permanent modification of behaviour in a positive direction which "requires that people should be recognized and positively rewarded when they do things which contribute positively to world peace" (Groff and Smoker 125). It is of course also desirable and ultimately necessary that people should "develop internalized peaceful values to which they are willing to commit their lives" (125). This can be seen in the context of Rose or Rosie who is very miserable in her own life when she cannot do anything better even at the attempt of doing something better. Her mother was a call woman and spent almost her life in this profession. Rose's life was ruined when she was badly raped, she was "being evicted from her flat for non-payment of rent" (6). She, later became thief by "stealing fifty pounds from a local Jewish matchmaker for whom she'd worked as a servant. Later, a good hearted lady Tilly offered a shelter at her room for her. But her sojourn was not easy because of the war and "the earth trembled and a deep thrumming sound told the shelterers that a bomb had dropped somewhere nearby. A trickle of rubble and dust pitter-pattered down from the ceiling" (6). Later, her meeting with Bernie's brother Dermot and his propose for marriage with her changed her life. The bold decision made by Dermot inspite the rough upbringing of Rose and his orthodox mother revolutionized the contemporary society. Her husband's recruit in the Allies force for fight in Germany was another event for the possibility of this death, but his meeting with some Jews in the concentration camp reveals the foundation of

disillusioning the fact that everyone wants to live their life in peace and reconciliation. These lines clearly show the fact,

Hundreds, thousand had died where they had dropped, innocent, brutalized victims of the Nazi war machine. For days, Dermot had wanted to kill every Germans he came across. He hadn't. Instead he'd simply beaten, smashed teeth and lying jaws and spat at their pitiful, terrified women in the street. There was nothing that was ever going to make this better. But he hadn't come to hut five to sit with Leon and the only other person who could speak, a woman called Berta, to relive the horror of Belsen. He had come to tell them something good. (275/6)

Peace cannot be prevailed in its own way, rather should be experienced either one is Christian or Jew or British or German. Reconciliation among them would be important.

Sometimes aggressive behavior which people knowingly or unknowingly accomplish in their life to achieve something as part of their destination does not stem from human nature but is either a result of a process of perception or a response to a painful stimulus they must be through. They normally become ready to adapt to their environment and, "under normal circumstances, prefer co-operation to aggressiveness" (Symonides and Singh 14). Some people like the characters in this novel – Solly Adler and Bernie have been capable of self-control, of love, friendship and tolerance as well as their responsibility towards their family, religion and ultimately society "in the process of their upbringing, these dispositions can be developed" (14) to unfold many possibilities. This can be seen in the context of Bernie and her childhood love interest with Solly Adler which can be another part of the novel which would elaborate a silent love though they could not live together. Solly as "a very honoured member of the Jewish community" (282) had gone to fight in the Spanish Civil war in the support of democratic movement but badly injured and his one leg was amputated. But Bernie's mother, Kitty being an orthodox Catholic didn't like her daughter being close to a Jew. Undermining the facts mentioned above, it can be said that everyone want to celebrate in his or her life in any condition forgetting all the past pathos. This can be demonstrated that violence should neither be part of one's evolutionary legacy nor in one's genes, rather "it is in our sociological and cultural roots" (Symonides and Singh 14) which must be discarded and life must go ahead with better hope and new aspiration. All individuals who were enemy or divided in the name of nationalities, religions, regions or any such barriers or boundaries must remain as friends forever. The long awaited peace, solidarity and reconciliation can be seen towards the end of the novel like this.

Music came from all directions at once. Big bands, jazz, even Vera Lynn's pure tones rising above the chatter, the shouting and the whoops of joy. There would be bluebirds over the White Cliffs of Dover now that there were no more Spitfires and Messerschmitts continually flying across the Channel. To be safe from the threat of invasion was a strange and unsettling notion. Strange because that fear had been with them all for five years. (280)

The World War II was a big event that caused a huge destruction all over the world. It not only destroyed the physical structure, but also the emotional attachment, spirituality, trust in each other had also been lost which even until today's time has not been repelled. It is again the World War II that became the cause to rejoice in their life. It began with destruction, but ended with a hope to feel utopia. The world has seen many wars and conflict, now needs peace and reconciliation for all to live together.

## **Conclusion**

Collins' *Ten Bells Street at War* begins with a great event like World War II and its terrific consequences in the life of the people all around the world specially the people living in the East End, here mentioned as Ten Bells Street like Bernie, Rose, Rebecca, Dermot, Solly Adler, Henrich etc. who had been badly impacted with the surroundings of the war, still they are seen doing their duty as per their need and passion. The families, friendship, marital relationship etc. have been broken up, but still the inhabitants were longing for peace and solidarity among them with a hope that one day would come when all the people can come together and rejoice once again as in the past. Utopia, a much more anticipated concept of human life in the earth which seems to be impossible to have and see, but in one sense, it can be possible if all the people come together forgetting their past feud.

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