

First World War in Literature: Reflections across the Genres

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War is a major theme in literature from ancient times to the contemporary world. Lyrics, ballads, tales, stories, all kinds of poetry and fictions, philosophical reflections and intellectual analyses have been composed and written about war all over the world in all periods of history. War is the result of conflicting human action and desire, too often it results out of atrocities and inhumanities and wrongful action or desire of one person or group of persons against others. War on many occasions in the long history of mankind has been the only option to salvage one's dignity and enforce right order and values in society and community of nations and organized groups. In this sense war has proved the most important redress for restoring values, justice and dignity among right-minded people. The First World War that began raging in summer a century ago across the frontiers of Europe to cause havoc to much of the world in subsequent four years bears many features of this characterization.

The breakdown of established values and order due to conflicting interpretation of the same between the opposing groups or patently unjust claim of one group against the very dignity and self-respect of the others inevitably leads to war, no matter whatever the cost to the aggrieved party. The war narrated in the truly epic form in the Mahabharata is one such example. The war of Mahabharata everyone concerned knew in advance would be devastating to both sides, still could not be forestalled and the wisdom of rival groups came to nothing to prevent colossal loss of life and miseries to those who survived the mayhem. In this sense diplomacy can be no substitute for war. The Mahabharata is a monument of how humans can be misled by their follies and a wonderful work of war literature to keep us thinking on war for ages to come. Among every known serious literature of war, the Bhagavadgita remains the singular work to extol the virtue of fighting a war unequivocally.

The war of ancient Greece-- the subject of Homer's enduring epics *Aenid* and *Odyssey*--was brought about by the uncontrolled lust and betrayal of universal sanctity of marriage on the part of two aberrant royals—prince Paris and queen Helen--and the need for restoring dignity of a nation state – the Greek kingdom of Ithaca ruled by Menelaus—in the face of flagrant disregard of respect due to a sovereign state. Ithaca could not just ignore the atrocious misconduct of Paris which was not only against moral order and age-old Greek customs but also a heinous act against a sovereign that must be punished. For Ithaca not to wage a decisive war against Troy would be worse than death. With heavy heart Menelaus the king of Ithaca mobilized most of the Hellenic kingdoms against the kingdom of Troy to enforce the shared Greek values and order bringing back Helen to Menelaus and restoring the Greek faith and moral principles.

The war lasted for ten years, claimed lives of tens of thousands of warriors and devastated the lives of countless civilians including women and children away from the battle lines. The Trojan War also gave two immortal epics of Homer and dozens of Greek plays that reflect on war and hardship and sufferings and dwell on how war cannot be avoided in human affairs. Like the Mahabharata, the Greek literary tradition expresses horror and pain at the prospect of total war; at the same time it also reminds the reader that there is no running away from it when war is imposed by the dark forces of evil.

The First World War—1914-18-- has been literally the source of hundreds of serious works of literature. A substantial body of poetry has come out from the war trenches of Europe in English, German, Russian and French and later in American works which express the raw and poignant feeling and experiences of young men trapped in trenches for weeks without food, water and sleep, let alone normal leisurely life of the happy youth who thought their life was at the threshold of new golden age.

From the war trenches between the dropping of bombs and firing of machine guns, young spirited young men who were barely eighteen years of age and fresh out of school wrote poems reflecting on the need for fighting for the honour of one's country and self-respect. This sense of duty to one's country, patriotism and willing devotion to lay one's life is conveyed in Rupert Brooke's sonnets series titled 'The soldier'. One of his widely anthologized pieces reads:

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign
field That is forever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
A body of England's, breathing English air,
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

The reality of war soon took over. As the relentless loss of young lives in thousands in initial months continued to mount, poets in the trenches began expressing shock and despair in the futility of the unfolding war. Wilfred Owen gave powerful expression to the cruel conditions in the battle field and inhuman suffering of the young soldiers; in his celebrated piece 'Dulce Et Decorum Est,' he writes:

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the hunting flares we turned our backs,
And toward our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame, all blind:
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of gas-shells dropping softly behind. . . .

The poem concludes in raging anger:

My friend you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory, The
old lie: Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori
(sweet and proper it is to die for one's country)

Initial phase of enthusiasm, courage and bravery and a sense of duty to serve the country led to the realization of meaningless loss of young soldiers on the opposing side of the trenches, who were not enemies to each other and they had nothing to settle as a matter of values and principles. Giving voice to a soldier in the battle front who ponders on why he was fighting and killing the enemy soldiers on the opposite side of the trenches, a non-combatant poet Thomas Hardy observes in the piece 'The Man He Killed':

"Had he and I but met
By some old ancient inn,
We should have sat us down to wet
Right many a nipperkin!

"But ranged as infantry,
And staring face to face,
I shot at him as he at me,
And killed him in his place.

"I shot him dead because —
Because he was my foe,
Just so: my foe of course he was;
That's clear enough; although

"He thought he'd 'list, perhaps,
Off-hand like — just as I —
Was out of work — had sold his traps —
No other reason why.

"Yes; quaint and curious war is!
You shoot a fellow down
You'd treat if met where any bar is,
Or help to half-a-crown."

Then came the feeling that the war leaders at home in the government and generals at war room and in field commands were not only not waging the war honestly and sincerely; they the politicians, war planners, war materiel suppliers and senior generals were actually playing the war games, seeking huge private gains and engaged in sordid profiteering completely unconcerned about the needless suffering of the young soldiers. The bitter expression of anger and accusation of betrayal can be felt in this another celebrated piece 'The General' by Siegfried Sassoon who survived the bitter

end of the first World War and spoke for his slain comrades of the trenches from the western front in France:

“Good-morning, good-morning!” the General said
When we met him last week on our way to the line.
Now the soldiers he smiled at are most of them dead,
And we are cursing his staff for the incompetent
swine. “He’s a cheery old card,” grunted Harry to
Jack As they slugged up to Arras with rifle and pack.
But he did for them both by his plan of attack.

Thus the enthusiasm for war at the initial phase, the brave work to see the speedy end of war through all kinds of personal sacrifices--fighting in the trenches, firing guns non-stop for days and weeks without food, water and sleep—and gradual dawning of the cruel power game of the leaders away from the battlefield makes the war poetry full of disillusion and complete anger. This heralds a new powerful surge of betrayal and anti-war expression —the futility of war in the changed context.

The First World War also drove thousands of young men from countries allied to Britain such as Australia and New Zealand, Nepal and Ireland and in the final years the USA and from British colonies across the world from India to Egypt and South Africa. For non-committed soldiers the war was an accident of history and they had hardly any stake in its outcome. But fight they must and live through the anxieties and calamities of the modern total war. W.B. Yeats’ ‘An Irish Airman Foresees His Death’ captures the ambivalence of many a warrior caught in the whirlwind of war:

I know that I shall meet my fate
Somewhere among the clouds above;
Those that I fight I do not hate
Those that I guard I do not love;
My country is Kiltartan Cross,
My countrymen Kiltartan’s poor,
No likely end could bring them loss
Or leave them happier than before.
Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,
Nor public man, nor cheering crowds,
A lonely impulse of delight
Drove to this tumult in the clouds;
I balanced all, brought all to mind,
The years to come seemed waste of breath,
A waste of breath the years behind
In balance with this life, this death.

The First World War continued to drag on for over four long dreadful years; British politicians had promised the young soldiers that they were likely to be home for Christmas and the German Kaiser had expressed the hope that his boys would be home before the leaves fell from the trees. It means both the opposing sides thought the war would come to a speedy

conclusion with their side's victory. But the war only intensified and many young men abhorred the needless slaughter of the innocent youth as reported in thousands of casualties in each of several campaigns. Thousands of sensible youth did not wish to enlist for the war to face the endless inevitable slaughter.

But there was an enormous pressure from all around for young men to join the army and render one's patriotic duty or face ignominious charge of being called coward. Even for the family honour, to avoid being given names many young men signed up for the war. Quite often such reluctant soldiers were the first to lose life in early deployment. German writer Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet in the Western Front* speaks of the life of one Josef Behm who died on the very first day of the frontline assignment. To quote Remarque:

In fact, one of our class was reluctant, and did not really want to go with us. That was Josef Behm, a tubby, cheerful chap. But in the end he let himself be persuaded, because he would have made things impossible for himself by not going. Maybe others felt the same way as he did; but it wasn't easy to stay out of it because at that time even our parents used the word 'coward' at the drop of a hat. People simply didn't have the slightest idea of what was coming.

. . . Oddly enough, Behm was one of the first to be killed.

Then there were groups who created a movement CO—Conscientious Objectors to oppose mindless war mongering by those in power and position to bring a speedy conclusion of the conflict. Many young people sought ways to register their opposition to mindless killing cycle in the notorious battle front of the French-Belgium frontiers but they were outnumbered and outpowered. The fate of such objectors is well expressed in e.e. cummings' 'I sing of Olaf':

i sing of Olaf glad and big
whose warmest heart recoiled at war:
a conscientious object-or

his wellbelovéd colonel(trig
westpointer most succinctly bred)
took erring Olaf soon in hand;
but--though an host of overjoyed
noncoms(first knocking on the head
him)do through icy waters roll
that helplessness which others stroke
with brushes recently employed
anent this muddy toiletbowl,
while kindred intellects evoke
allegiance per blunt instruments--
Olaf(being to all intents
a corpse. . . .

Unlike poetry, novels took longer to be written and brought out for the reading public. By 1930, almost 700 novels were published in Britain alone on and about the effects of the First World War. Many young writers who spent months and years in war front came home wounded, shell-shocked, severely traumatized, partially or totally incapacitated of the limbs, and wrote about their war experiences in vivid realistic terms.

Ford Madox Ford faced two years in the front and was sent home severely wounded and wrote several novels about the war and his experiences both in and out of the battlefield; his tetralogy--four linked novels published between 1924-28—*Parede's End* contains volumes with the titles: *Some Do Not . . .*; *No More Parades*; *A Man Could Stand Up . . .*; and *The Last Post*.

Some writers who never faced war front also reflected on the war experiences of tens of thousands of young men in the European battlefields and their family members and girl friends at home in towns and countryside and miserable factory setting. D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* (1921) and *Kangaroo* (1923) specifically deal with violence, cruelty and nightmarish life of the war years. Frederic Manning's *Her Privates We* (1929) uses the colloquial language of the common soldier to write a documentary novel exploring the futility of war. Here's a sampler from Manning:

“ ‘Them poor bloody Jocks,’ he said in a slow pitiful whisper.”

What the casualties were they did not know, though various rumours gave precise, and different details; one shell did all the damage, the other exploding in an empty field. The sympathy they felt with the Scotsmen was very real; the same thing might so easily have happened to themselves; and as they talked about it, the feeling turned gradually into resentment against an authority, which regulated, so strictly every detail of their daily lives. The shell falling where it did, at that particular time, would probably have caused a certain number of casualties; even if the men had been moving about freely; but his kind of discipline excusable enough when men have to be kept under control, as with a carrying party lined up at a dump, was unnecessary on this moment; and, for that reason alone, it was wiser to avoid assembling a large number of men at any point. They remembered their own experience at Philosophe.”

Two works one autobiography and one German novel in English translation that appeared in 1929 have remained the major literary documents of the first-hand records of the First World War: Englishman Robert (von Ranke) Graves' *Goodbye to All That* and Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Robert Graves went straight from school to serve in the Great War where he shared exciting, excruciating, ennobling and damning times with many young soldiers who undergo experiences of high idealism, shattering of faith in the institutions of political and military leadership, petty-mindedness of civil and military officials—indeed of all authority figures. The war created so much of jingoism among the rank and files of the British public that Graves had to be very careful not to reveal his German middle name.

Many of the vignettes brought to focus by Graves in his autobiography are also found in the Remarque's German novel. Both writers present the grim realities of the trenches--lack of food, water, rest and above all sleep for days without end—and not feeling any enmity to the soldiers to the other side of the trenches. They also write about the insensitivity of the officers to the humanity of the common soldiers when the latter are unjustly accused of insubordination if the soldiers even in off duty moments are perceived as not showing enough professional respect denoting respective ranks.

George Bernard Shaw has written quite a few plays on the theme of war and he represents anti-war ideas and his theater of ideas portrays how war dehumanizes both combatants and non-combatants alike. His *Arms and the Man* (1894) though written in another context debunks the myth of military valour and heroism. His short play *O'Flaherty V. C.* (1919) has the protagonist declare 'how the divil do I know the war is about'. Though awarded the highest British honour for bravery the Victoria Cross (V.C.), this Irish soldier disclaims any bravery on his deeds; he says he didn't get the V.C. ' for having killed God knows how many Germans'; 'I know quite well why I killt them. I kilt them because I was afeared that, if I didn', theyd kill me'.

Gilbert Murray's 'How Can War Ever Be right?' and William James' 'The Moral Equivalent of War' are two notable discussions of dilemma of defending war in the light of military and technological advances of our times.

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