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## “A CHRONICLE OF THE PEACOCKS” – AN ALLEGORY AGAINST WAR

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**Abstract:** The paper deals with the popular short story “A Chronicle of the Peacocks” by Intizar Husain as an allegory against war. Husain uses a combination of parable and fable to explain the senselessness of war. The war of Kurukshetra is juxtaposed with India-Pakistan Nuclear Warfare because of which the peacocks of Jaipur have flown away. Through the use of the great war of the *Mahabharata* and the destruction it brought about even to the victorious army, Husain brings to the fore the aftermaths of destructive war and the futility of war. The people of India and Pakistan must learn a lesson that modern nuclear warfare brings total destruction for all and should understand the need to live in peace, brotherhood and harmony. The paper shall also bring out the use of the story of King Manu and the story of the expulsion of the peacock from the Eden Garden to give an allegorical dimension to the short story.

**Key Words :** Parable, Allegory, Nuclear Explosion, Brahmastra, Chronicle, Peacocks.

“Yes; quaint and curious the war is!”

– Thomas Hardy

The above lines are from the popular poem “The Man he Killed” written by Thomas Hardy. In this poem Hardy presents an argument that war is senseless, tragic, and brutal, and that it ignores the common humanity between people on different sides of a battlefield. In a similar manner, Intizar Husain’s story “A Chronicle of the Peacocks” (1999) is concerned with destruction that war brings in its wake. The story is a plea against war wherein the idea is presented through the use of legends, myths and allusions. It is an anti-war narrative in which the author makes his point by mixing fable and parable.

Originally the story is written in Urdu under the title “Morenama.” The word *more* stands for the peacocks and *nama* means chronicle. The word “Morenama” is of special significance in Urdu literature as it describes the life of a well-known person for instance, *Akbarnama*. The use of the word chronicle in Husain’s story has ironic connotations, as he is writing the chronicle of peacocks (*more*) and not of a famous person. “Morenama” was translated into English by Alok Bhalla and Vishwamitter Adil. The story is part of the volume entitled *A Chronicle of the Peacocks: Stories of Partition, Exile and Lost Memories* that is a collection of fifteen stories. Husain freely draws on rich narrative traditions of Hindu and Buddhist mythologies to reflect upon the historical truth and moral delusions, power and the endless failure of reason. Commenting on Husain’s use of parable and fable Keki N. Daruwalla wrote in *The Hindu*:

Intizar Husain’s stories often tread that twilight zone between fable and parable. And the narrative is spun on an oriental loom — reminiscent of *A Thousand and One Nights* or the *Jataka* tales, each story becoming an offshoot of the previous one and an embryo of the next tale. And his command over the narrative lies in the fact that never once does the reader feel let down.

Intizar Husain believed that to understand the present or the future one must have a meaningful understanding of the past. “A Chronicle of the Peacocks” juxtaposes tradition and modernity to bring out the anti-war theme. It is a brilliant story of the lost memories, exile and the futility of war. Husain probes into mythical and historical roots of the culture of India where he was born and brought up. Being well versed in the great epics of India, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, Husain makes a liberal use of various images in the myths. In order to bring forth the senselessness of war he gives an example from the modern times. He refers to the nuclear test of the atom bomb done by India in Jaipur, Rajasthan in the year 1998. The narrator of the story states that “the explosion had so frightened the peacocks of Rajasthan that they had flown up screaming into the sky and scattered in all directions” (199). Husain draws a parallel from the great classic the *Mahabharata* to show the destructive aftermaths of war. It was the power struggle between the Pandavas and the Kauravas that led to the Kurukshetra war, which killed thousands of innocent people.

In the epic *Mahabharata*, the fierce Kurukshetra war was fought between Pandavas and Kauravas, the children of the two brothers Pandu and Dhritrashtra respectively. Dronacharya was their teacher and he taught Arjuna the use of the Brahmastra – the most dreaded of weapons. In the Kurukshetra war the teacher and his disciple, Arjuna were in opposing camps fighting against each other. The narrator in “A Chronicle of the Peacocks” remarks that “War is so awful that in Kurukshetra, the teacher and his disciple found themselves in opposing camps fighting each other” (204).

Arjun and Dronacharya had taken a vow that they would never use the Brahmastra because it would destroy the whole world. Before his death Dronacharya taught his son Ashwatthama the use of the Brahmastra, but warned him never to use it. Ashwatthama had inherited many of his father’s qualities, but he did not possess his father’s wisdom. After his father was killed in the war, Ashwatthama released the Brahmastra. Shri Krishna remarked to Arjuna:

O Janardhan, Dronacharya's foolish son has released Brahmastra. Now, all living things will be destroyed. Only you can counter that weapon. Act quickly before everything is reduced to ashes. (205)

Then Arjuna released his Brahmastra to neutralize Ashwatthama's weapon. The fire was so intense that the flames burned all the three worlds. Vyasa Rishi who was in meditation was terrified. He went to Kurukshetra and shouted at Arjuna and Ashwatthama, "O evil ones, what a great injustice is this! The entire world will be destroyed. Recall your weapons" (205). Arjuna at once obeyed the order and recalled his weapon. Ashwatthama was unrepentant and said that he would change the path of his weapon so that it falls on the Pandava's women folk and destroy their wombs and fetuses. So Shri Krishna cursed Ashwatthama and said angrily:

O son of Dronacharya, you are a great sinner. By killing the children you have committed a great crime. I curse you to wander alone in the forests for three thousand years. May your wounds never heal, may pus and blood flow from them always, may they stink so much that people everywhere run away from you in disgust. (205)

The last days of Kurukshetra war were the most fearful ones. Women of Pandavas wept. There was mourning in every home. In every family a child had died. Subhadra, the wife of Arjuna wept bitterly because the Kauravas killed her son Abhimanyu. Subhadra had thought that Abhimanyu's wife Uttara would give birth to a son and ensure the survival of the Pandava lineage but Uttara fell unconscious after giving birth to a stillborn child. However, Shri Krishna kept his promise to his sister Subhadra and gave life to the stillborn child who became Parikshit, the King of Hastinapur.

At the time of his coronation ceremony, Parikshit asked Vyasa Rishi: "Maharaj, all the elders of our family were present at Kurukshetra. There were wise and knowledgeable men amongst the Pandavas and the Kauravas. Why didn't they understand that in war everyone has to pay a heavy price? That war destroys everything? Annihilates everything?" (206). Vyasa Rishi evaded the question and refused to answer it. However, he indirectly said that "during times of war even the best of men lose their heads. Besides, that which is fated must come to pass" (206). He meant that the whole atmosphere during war time is such that even wise men do not speak against war. "War transforms man utterly" (204).

The central theme of futility of war in Intizar Husain's story "A Chronicle of the Peacocks" is stated in the form of the question that Parikshit asks from Vyasji. According to the author, the evil spirit of Ashwatthama who wanted to use the Brahmastra and destroy everyone and everything is looming large in the subcontinent as both India and Pakistan possess the modern equivalent of the Brahmastra, the deadly nuclear weapon of destruction. The story is thus allegorical and the past events are given allegorical dimension to comment on the present. The narrator of the story says that the question of Parikshit is still relevant for India and Pakistan. The people of both these countries are brothers just like the Pandavas and Kauravas in the Kurukshetra war. Both of them possess the nuclear weapon which is the modern version of the Brahmastra.

Husain makes Ashwatthama a perpetual symbol of evil and destructiveness. The narrator of the story is haunted by the spirit of Ashwatthama in India as well as in Pakistan. He remarks "Allah only knows why this evil spirit is after me!" (199). The evil spirit of Ashwatthama is the symbol of destructive activities of human beings. Through this powerful image the author effectively shows the futility and horror of war. This implies that India as well as Pakistan possess nuclear weapons, the modern versions of Brahmastra. If both the countries are guided by the evil spirit symbolized by Ashwatthama there will be massive destruction in both the countries. Through this story the author tells us that the modern people of India and Pakistan must learn a lesson from the Kurukshetra war that modern nuclear warfare brings total destruction for all and therefore we should live in peace, brotherhood and love.

In his story, Husain refers to the troubled times of the past and the present to drive home the point that war only leads to destruction, environmental degradation and dislocation. The destructive nature of the war has been presented through the reference to the destructive war of Kurukshetra. In order to show the powerful moving indictment of all forms of violence, Husain uses the image of the scared peacocks and the oil-covered duck to show environmental degradation.

The peacocks symbolize beauty, grace, dignity, peace and love. The duck is a beautiful innocent bird. Intizar Husain mentions peacocks in the context of the Indian explosion of atom bomb in Rajasthan. As the peacock heard the sound they screamed and flew away in terror. The narrator says "I have a vision of a lonely peacock on a distant hill. He seems battered and bruised. I walk quickly toward him but, before I can reach the hill, he rises into the sky screaming with terror and disappears" (200). They found the environment too risky for them to stay there. The narrator remarks at the missing peacock "Where has he gone? Where are his companions, those countless peacocks? Why is he sitting alone on that hill, the very picture of desolation? Why is he so despondent, so terrified?" (200).

The mention of the "forlorn duck covered with foul effluents" (200) is a reference to the war between the USA and Iraq. The oil and mud covered duck could hardly fly because the wings of the duck are so heavy with slime. The weary bird is a symbol of the horrors of the war. Both the peacocks and ducks are thus against war. They cannot remain in an atmosphere in which lakes have dried up, rivers are polluted, and the air is polluted with smoke and dust because of explosion of bombs. The writer also refers to the "royal swan" (201) that have flown away in search of clean air and pure water. The writer suggests that modern war not only kills people and destroys cities but also destroys the environment. Thus, the whole story in general and the reference to the predicament of the peacocks, ducks and royal swan is a strong condemnation of war and violence in all forms.

Husain is rightly concerned with the degradation of the environment, war and exile. In fact he sees all the three as one. The aftermaths of the war are not only faced by the humanity but entire cities and villages are wiped out. Destructive nuclear weapons like bombs and missiles let loose poisonous smoke in the air. Harmful chemicals fall into rivers and lakes and pollute them. During the Iraqi war, a great quantity of oil was spilt in the rivers and the sea and millions of fish perished. War also forces people to leave their homes in search of safety so they go to other places, sometimes other countries and thus live in exile there. The writer uses peacocks and ducks as symbols of peace and harmony with environment but they suffer when war begins. Thus, war is the main villain which is responsible for the degradation of environment and the exile of people from their own homes.

To highlight how war leads to exile, Husain adroitly uses the legend of the "bird of paradise." The narrator of the story was once reprimanded by his grandmother for scaring the peacock. She said "You should never trouble a peacock, son. He is the bird of Paradise" (202). According to the ancient lore, the peacock lived in the paradise. It was innocent and got enticed by the wretch, Satan. He disguised himself as a

blind old man and tried to enter the paradise. The peacock felt sympathy for the old man and took him inside the garden of paradise. When God found out that Adam and Eve committed sin, He banished Adam, Eve and also the Peacock from the Garden of Eden. The narrator is upset after hearing the story and he feels sad for the peacock. He finds it strange that the bird that lived in the paradise once now lived on their terrace. At this, his Grandma remarks "...that is what happens when we are exiled from our own courtyards" (202). Her words pertain to all those who face the aftermath of wars between countries.

The grandmother's remark brings back memories of the Partition days when thousands of people were exiled from the land of their birth simply because they belonged to a particular community or religion. Being exiled from one's homeland, from one's familiar surroundings is one of the many outcomes of war and violence. The exiled peacocks of Rajasthan and the exiled peacock of the legend assume symbolic proportions to highlight the plight of all those who face a similar outcome of the ravages of war. In this way the myth of the fall of the peacock from the paradise draws attention to various aspects of war and the way it affects the world.

Another fable that Husain employs in "A Chronicle of the Peacocks" is the story of King Manu who was assigned the duty to save humanity by Lord Vishnu. The narrator of the story begins by lamenting that an evil spirit is after him and then recounts the events that led to his encounter with the cursed shadow. It all began when the narrator read in a news report about the nuclear test done by India in May 1998 in Pokhran, Rajasthan. After that explosion, the peacocks of Rajasthan had screamed and flown up in fear. The narrator felt very sorry for the peacocks and wrote an article expressing his regret and sympathy. He thought that he had done his duty by merely sympathizing with the bird by writing a column and was free to forget it. But the notion of the frightened peacocks that took a flight and vanished grew in his mind and disturbed him endlessly like the growing fish disturbed King Manu in the folklore.

Just like King Manu the writer was missing the real purpose. King Manu left the growing fish in the ocean but then the fish prophesied the devastation of humanity due to huge floods. It asked the King to make a big boat and save all the living organisms, the King obeyed the fish. It rained for seven days, there was water all over. After seven days only those creatures were saved who were on the king's boat. In this manner King Manu accomplished the duty assigned to him by Lord Vishnu - of saving the humanity. In a similar vein the writer feels that just by writing a column to express his sympathy towards the peacock does not end his duty. He must bring forth the cruel aspects of these explosives tests and pointlessness of war only then his duty to save the humanity, like King Manu, seems fulfilled. Therefore, the narrator decides to write a chronicle of the peacocks. But he fails to do so because the evil spirit of Ashwathama is still haunting him and there is no escape from the thoughts of war and the horror it brings. Thus he says, "When will I be able to write my *Morenama*, my chronicle of the peacocks" (208).

Husain presents a chronicle of his confrontation with the peacock to heighten the effect of destructiveness of war. During his first visit to Jaipur he had an amazing encounter with the beautiful peacocks. They turn out in such great numbers that they are seen on every tree, rock and hill. This is however a picture from peaceful times. After nuclear test explosion there are no peacocks to be seen anywhere. Husain's first vision of the peacocks was one of beauty and grace. This vision is contrary to the second vision of a "battered and bruised" (200) lonely peacock on a distant hill which rises into the sky screaming with terror when the author approaches it. There are no peacock songs to welcome him now. "Despondent, terrified, dejected and bewildered," (200) the peacock is the very picture of desolation.

The writer recalls another similar picture of devastation: "a forlorn duck covered with foul effluents watching the waves in disbelief" (200). The weary bird is a symbol of the horrors of war between the United States and Iraq. The two images become a powerful condemnation of all forms of violence. These natural creatures suffer for no fault of theirs. While we destroy their habitat and their world the needle of destruction is moving towards us at the same time. The royal swans exist only in legends now and the reference here is obviously to those species of the natural world that have become extinct now. Husain interestingly presents the contrary world of the ancient and the modern to highlight the difference between the two situations. There are no shimmering waters of the Mansarovar now. Instead "the lakes are dry, the rivers polluted and the air thick with the dust and smoke of bombs" (201). In this way Husain is successful in presenting the story as an allegory against war and its aftermaths. The image of the lonely peacock and the bewildered duck is an example of what we have done to our world by inducting unnecessary suffering into our surroundings. In an ironic manner we continue to destroy the natural world and we are destroying ourselves because we too are a part of it.

In the context of the story both birds also become symbolic of all those innocent victims of war who ultimately pay the price for man's greed for power. In Husain's own words "the rich and the powerful rarely ever pay for their sins: instead the poor and weak take upon themselves the burden of suffering so as to redeem their times" (201). Husain stretches the allegory and the symbolic significance a little further and likens the birds to "those prophets who, according to all religious texts, think of suffering as a sacred duty" (201).

Through the story "A Chronicle of the Peacocks," Intizar Husain heightens the fact that what is happening in the present has already happened in the past but we have not learnt any lessons from it. Lack of reasoning and logic continues to plunge the world into turmoil. The spirit of Ashvatthama which has by now assumed additional symbolic significance of highlighting not just the cause but also the consequences of war continues to pursue the author. This evil spirit and all that it symbolizes is not limited to particular geographical boundaries only. Husain thinks that he has escaped this devilish spirit in Pakistan and now in India he will be able to write his chronicle of the peacocks. He recalls all the peacocks he had met all along his journey through the past and the present and their songs crowd his brain.

The ultimate vision of the divine peacock that spreads its tail over the entire universe is again a symbolic image and hints at a situation when peace would prevail all over the world. The author imagines himself walking in the cool shade of this peace. At the next instant he is shocked to discover that he is still being pursued by the evil spirit of Ashvatthama. To his dismay he realizes that physical borders have no meaning for the apparition. The narrative ends with a cry of despair: "O my creator! O my Protector! When will this evil spirit complete his curse of three thousand years? When will I be able to write my *Morenama*, my chronicle of the peacocks?" (208).

It is evident that Husain's narrative has to be interpreted and understood vis-a-vis the parables and fables he has used to make his point. The idea that the spirit of Ashvatthama cannot be held within particular geographical boundaries means that in the legend and in his image there are lessons to be learnt for everybody. The testing of the atomic bomb is a clear hint that we have not learned from our mistakes. We still persist in our relentless race for destructive weapons and also ignore our own past experiences of contemporary history, regardless of such legends and myths that illustrate the evils of war. Husain concludes the narrative by showing himself being pursued by the evil spirit, implies that the spirit of Ashvatthama will continue to roam the world if man does not put an end to his destructive endeavours.

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