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RAY OF HOPE AMIDST THE SCOURGE OF WAR: A STUDY OF EDITH SITWELL'S WAR POEMS

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ABSTRACT

The lyrics about war have a long history. Since time immemorial fierce wars have been the crux of celebrated ancient epics, lays and ballads in all countries like *The Odyssey*, *The Mahabharatha*, and *The Ramayana*. Matthew Arnold's *Sohrab and Rustum* in English and Thiruthakkadevar's *Seevaka Chinthamoni* in Tamil Literature also deal with war. But war poetry as a literary genre emerged only in the twentieth century as a result of the two world wars. Ancient poetry celebrated great heroes and their heroic deeds in defense of their lands or the helpless. Today's war poetry has turned away from heroes and hero worship. It is as new as the aeroplane and the tanker, and is about the world wars fought by armies of nations with terrible weapons. Edith Sitwell stands out as a prominent war poetess. What is remarkable about her is that as Sitwell approaches the awe-inspiring manifestations of evil and destruction of war, her instinct is not to despair, but to call upon the most powerful symbols of love, the symbols of Christianity: "He walks again on the seas of the Blood/He comes in the terrible rain" (9). What is striking in her war poetry is the fact that in spite of the agony involved in war she does not turn to be a pessimist. In times of such disasters, it is her unshakeable faith in God that served as anchorage for her. She reminds us of the five nuns in Hopkins' poem "The Wreck of the Deutschland." When the ship was sinking all passengers were crying for help, but the five nuns were praying to God. Their firm faith is revealed in their cry "O Christ, come quickly."

Key Words: war, heroic deeds, love, unshakable faith in God

The lyrics about war have a long history. Since time immemorial fierce wars have been the crux of celebrated ancient epics, lays and ballads in all countries like *The Odyssey*, *The Mahabharatha*, and *The Ramayana*. Matthew Arnold's *Sohrab and Rustum* in English and Thiruthakkadevar's *Seevaka Chinthamoni* in Tamil Literature also deal with war. But war poetry as a literary genre emerged only in the twentieth century as a result of the two world wars. Ancient poetry celebrated great heroes and their heroic deeds in defense of their lands or the helpless. Today's war poetry has turned away from heroes and hero worship. It is as new as the aeroplane and the tanker, and is about the world wars fought by armies of nations with terrible weapons.

Banerjee defines war poetry as "a body of verse whose poetical content has been identified and extended by war experiences" (100). War poetry of the twentieth century can be classified under two heads – the poetry that came into existence as a result of World War I and that which were created by World War II. The poets of the First World War – Rupert Brooke, Julian Grenfell, Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg and

Siegfried Sassoon had created public expectations of what war poetry should be. According too Linda Shires: “Immediately upon the outbreak of war in 1914, Rupert Brooke had issued trumpet call declaring that a new spirit of heroism could now replace the sickness of the pre-1914 world” (53). No such outburst of spirit was evident in 1940. The Second World War did not immediately produce outstanding war poets for which the nature of the war is also partly responsible. In the autumn and winter of 1939, England and Germany were officially at war, but no actual fighting began until spring 1940, when Hitler’s armies marched on into the territories of Belgium and Holland. Until then, the “phoney war” created a strained and unreal atmosphere in England. The tension caused by the very idea of war shook the nerves of the people and the Second World War “stunned the imagination of artists instead of liberating it” (53). There was no development from initial optimism about war to the rejection of it, a development clearly evident in the poetry of the First World War. Before the outbreak of the First World War, especially under monarchical rule in ancient and medieval periods, people had a positive attitude towards war. They regarded war as something heroic and adventurous, and either remained ignorant, or did not pay any serious attention to the terrors of war. But with the outbreak of the First World War, the optimism about war began to disappear slowly and people began to realise the folly and sufferings caused by war. Hence, they began to reject war. Such a kind of development is not seen during the Second World War, for people already know about the reality of war.

The First World War precipitated the writing of poetry, vast in range and rich in variety. Three well-known poets illustrate in essence, the different attitudes to the common theme, war. Rupert Brooke describes the romantic stance and like Hotspur, his attitude is to glorify war as an institution and praise death in battle as martyrdom. In his sonnet “The Dead,” Brooke pays great tribute to the dead soldiers, who by their death and sacrifice conferred immortal renown upon their native land. He describes how holiness, love, pain, honour and nobleness which had vanished from the land have come back to live as English men had done of old—good and brave and noble, ready to die for their country and its honour, “Honour has come back, as a king, to earth,/And paid his subjects with a royal wage;/And nobleness walks in our ways again/And we have come into our heritage”(11-14). It looks as though the noble values of life exist and continue to exist only because of war. Brooke’s poems ignore the harsh realities of human suffering and decimation.

Siegfried Sassoon unlike Brooke is able to perceive the reality, but the future of war is too valuable to make one speak against war. In his poem “Absolution” he describes the good and bad effects of war, but emphasizes the good effects, “War is our scourge, yet war has made us wise/And, fighting for our freedom, we are free”(3-4). Sassoon’s poetry exhibits his attraction to war, due to the freedom it brings to a nation. He regards war as a whip, which makes men wise and their nation free.

Wilfred Owen’s poetry, unlike that of Brooke and Sassoon’s presents the pity of war with extreme honesty. Owen himself proclaimed his poetic purpose in simple terms: “My subject is war and the pity of war. The poetry is in the pity.” The emotion is more important for him than the effects of war. With vivid details of human agony, Owen compels the reader to realise the folly of war. In his touching poem “Anthem for Doom’d Youth,” the poet speaks about the burial of the soldiers who die as cattle in the battlefield. The “monstrous anger” of the guns and the “stuttering rifles” serve as the “orisons for the soldiers.” He laments that the brave soldiers are buried from their homeland. The poet describes how these soldiers have to die without a tear shed nor a prayer said for their soul, as they breathe their last far away from their native land and all alone, “No mockeries for them from prayers or bells/Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs-/The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;/And bugles calling for them from sad shrines”(5-8). He expresses the extreme sorrow that the braveries are sung not by the choirs and church bells but by the sound of the cannon balls and war cries.

Such kind of approaches to war was not found in the poetry of World War II. Furthest, the contrast between the trench warfare and of the Edenic countryside at home was not pronounced. No myths of pastoral retreats gathered around the Second World War. Like infectious diseases, war gradually spread to a series of fronts. As Stephen Spender has said “it had no stage setting that could be easily visualized”(8). Yet the British public continued to associate poetry with war. An article entitled “To the Poets of 1940” called upon the poets in war time to rise to the occasion once again by glorifying war inspite of the horrors it produced, “Here we are faced with an undeniable repetition of history, with nothing original, nothing unique about it. Clearly war

and revolutions are destroying the old social order of the world. But we need not despair of the birth of a new and finer order. It is for the poets to sound the trumpet call”(755).

Such pleas were made with the hope that wars create a new order that will remove all vices of the old worn-out order. Answering such calls, the poets began “to sound” and there were hundreds of them in military and government services. They wrote poetry out of the extreme conditions of exile, fear, isolation and danger which were published in Forces Magazines, which are not remembered anymore. Many of their productions were immature, hastily written and sentimental. But the work of a few creative poets have been able to stand the test of time and have found their place in the realm of literature such as Keith Douglas, Sidney Keyes, Alun Lewis, Roy Fuller, Allan Ross, G.S. Fraser and others. Very few women have made their name as poets. This is true of war poetry also. However, Edith Sitwell stands out as a prominent war poetess.

Sitwell’s brother Osbert Sitwell was attempting to avert his gaze from the war and live in his recreation of the past until peace and sanity returned to Europe. Edith had no such refuge and made no attempt to shut her mind to the human tragedy caused by war. She was very much aware of the desolation and destruction caused by war, with all the details of horror, misery and agony. She was all sympathy for the young men in the front and their young women at home, whose lives were to be broken, and aptly describes the vacuum left in the lives of the surviving mortals. Such experiences of war prompted Sitwell to write about its suffering, agony, cruelty. Her war poems also reveal her anger at the death and horror caused by war. War leaves people in a frustrated, lonely state. All these makes Sitwell contemplate on the meaninglessness of life, lack of love, no brotherhood feeling. At the same time what is unique about her war poetry is the message of love and hope that she conveys through them as each of her war poem ends with a note of hope.

According to Sitwell, the causes for war are primarily inherent in the evil nature of man. Evil has got a long ancestry beginning with Judas, a biblical character. The evil in him compelled Judas to betray Jesus Christ to his enemies for thirty pieces of silver. The evil in man makes him greedy, egoistic and brutal to the point of declaring war on his neighbouring country. The advancement of science and technology in the modern age in a way has turned out to be wreck of humanity. Each nation is secretly piling up armaments. They are quite unaware of the fact that these weapons have the power to kill even the maker. Science has multiplied the power of the war-makers. The weapons of the moment can kill several people more secretly than those of the past. Each weapon is so destructively powerful that it can stupefy people into numbness. Grapeshot, TNT, hydrogen bomb are destructive to the core because of their capacity to convert fertile earth to barren land and disfigure humans physically, mentally and emotionally. Evil in man penetrates so deep into his psyche that he becomes all evil, the easiest field for expression of which is war even though it causes innumerable sufferings to human beings such as displacement, separation, loss. The so-called, lucky alive have no hope of a better future as neither the land yields fruits nor do they have enough energy and resources left in them to reap the harvest.

The evil in man in its diverse forms is powerfully portrayed in all its details in Sitwell’s poems. “Still Falls the Rain” begins with a description of the rain of bombs which is dark and black like the evil world of men. Christ died for the sake of sinners, to remove the evil from the hearts of people. But the death of Christ has not helped to remove the evil in man. Hence Sitwell feels that ever since the crucifixion of Christ two thousand years ago, a fresh nail is driven into the body of Christ each day, by the unending savagery of the human beings. ‘Man’s inhumanity to man’ of which the crucifixion of Christ is the supreme type continues in the twentieth century also. Thus crucifixion is a continuing and ever present dimension of human thoughts and action arising out of the wickedness of men. The poetess describes how bombs affect all people and all places, the innocent as well as the guilty, the Potter’s Field as well as the Holy Sepulchre.

The evil destructive rain of bombs suggests that the human heart continues to nourish its wickedness. It is ready to sell away divinity for a cheap amount like Judas did it for thirty pieces of silver. In ‘A Song of the Cold,’ Sitwell portrays evil as “the ultimate cold within the heart of man”(188). Wickedness in man produces murderous instincts like it did in the case of Cain, who killed his brother Abel. The same kind of jealousy, lack of brotherhood feeling and murderous instinct is seen in the human beings of today. The rain of bombs in “Still Falls the Rain” indicates that such heinous desires continue to grow in the heart of man.

Sitwell describes greed as a 'devouring worm' with the face of Cain because it drives man to kill his own blood, as Cain slew his brother Abel.

In her poems Sitwell also writes about the suffering involved in war. But she does not write much about the physical suffering of the soldiers in the battlefield as Owen does in his war poems. Edith focusses her attention on the emotional suffering involved in the death of the soldiers. "Street Song" is one of the saddest of her war poems in which she imagines a barrel organ playing in the street. A young woman passing it hears through it the voice of her dead love killed in battle and buried. When she hears the noise of children playing in the streets or people buying and selling, again she is reminded of the voice of her dead love. The poetess also points out the emotional suffering of the man who is about to face death in the battlefield. The suffering and sadness involved in death is poignantly revealed in the lines:

Love my heart for an hour, but my bone for a day –
Atleast the skeleton smiles, for it has a morrow:
But the hearts of the young are now the dark treasures of Death
And summer is lonely. (169)

The lover in the battle front appeals to his lady love who is far away in her house, to love him for the last time as in the case of Robert Browning's lover inviting his lady love for a last ride together. He also points out that his mortal remains, that is his bones might remain for a few days in the grave. It is agonizing to notice that the hearts of all young men are cruelly torn away from their beloveds and entrusted into the hands of death. They might become martyrs, the great sons of the soil, but they are denied the minimum joys of life – to get united with their beloveds.

This kind of suffering is also expressed in the poem "Serenade: Any Man to Any Woman." This poem is more pathetic in tone, though at the end the lover resigns to his fate and accept the inevitable. The man expresses his heart's longing to love his woman till the last moment of his life. At the same time a guilty feeling envelops him. He knows the reality of the position in which he is placed. At any time his body will serve as food for cannon and in that respect he feels that he is unfaithful to his lady love. He asks forgiveness of her for his inability to love her for a longer period. The only alternative left for him is to accept the inevitable. Shakespeare in his sonnets dwells at length on the transience of human body. In the same manner, Sitwell contemplates on the flesh of man which is bound to get destroyed someday or the other. The only consolation for the lover is the fact that the death will destroy all the passions of the world:

And so I love you till I die –
(Unfaithful I, the cannon's mate)
Forgive my love of such brief span,
But fickle is the flesh of man
And death's cold puts the passion out. (6-9)

The agony of war is nowhere better expressed than in the poems of Sitwell. In "Street Song" which is meant to be a love song from a dead man to a living woman or from a man who is about to die seeing the world and it is now and seeing the woman who had been his peace and his night of rest; the poetess expresses the agony of the soldier. It is possible that the cry is really from the depths of human heart as some brutal tyranny pursues. Cruelty and agony of war is expressed in "Lullaby" which expresses the profoundest emotions of the time of darkness, agony and endurance.

The disappointment, frustration, loneliness and meaninglessness of life are revealed in the letter Sitwell wrote to John Lehmann in the middle of June 1944. The young girl whose husband got killed in the Air Force got compassionate leave for a few weeks. Most of the leave time she spent in Sitwell's room, not speaking at all except from saying time to time: "oh! Miss. Edith, Miss. Edith." The inability of the young girl to express her sorrow and shock is an indication of the disappointment, frustration and loneliness experienced by her. This has been the condition of many a young woman during the war. Mothers loose their husbands and sons, sisters their brothers, children their fathers, all because of the madness of a few evil persons. All these lead to neurosis and anxiety in the case of many women.

Sitwell, at about the same time witnessed news of another death in action, of the twenty-two-year-old son David, of her favourite cousin Veronica Gilliat. At that time she was writing the poem "A Song of the Cold." The death of David affected her terribly. She could not continue to write the poem, until the first shock of the horror had left her mind. She has stated that such terrible effects of grief shrivel one's emotions and one's language. Anyway this life experience prompted her to complete the poem "A Song of the Cold." It is her greatest testamentary poem of suffering and death. She sent the poem off to Lehmann along with a note about how she wrote the poem: "Now I am satisfied with the poem. I hurled myself on it, like a maniac biting, tearing, kneading, kicking it into shape and doing what I can describe as a blood transfusion act. I think it is all right now. I like it" (378). Reading the poem one can understand the violence, just as one hears the raging of the elemental winds across the fells and shivers at the cold of the approaching Derbyshire winter. For there is a close connection now between the fury which disfigures so much of Sitwell's private life and the extraordinary rage and passion which she can pour into her poetry.

In her poems, Sitwell expresses her anger at the slaughter caused during war. She uses her passion to cry out against the sufferings of man, in her poem "A Song of Cold." The poem in particular reveals a powerful fusion of her feelings – her sense of suffering and grief, her bitterness at ageing, her horror at the slaughter of the war. It is her rage and passion that gives the woman artist, the unquestioned strength to speak for the suffering humanity as her resounding rhetoric proclaims:

. . . But the great sins and fires break out of me
 Like the terrible leaves from the bough in the violent spring. . .
 I am a walking fire, I am all leaves
 I will cry to the spring to give me the birds' and serpents' speech
 That I may weep for those who die of cold
 The ultimate cold within the heart of Man. (188)

The horrors and evil of war have led to the non-acceptance of man by man. Such a situation is effectively presented by Eugene O'Neill in his plays especially in *The Hairy Ape*. The hero of *The Hairy Ape* Yank is frustrated because he is not accepted by any section of the society. Yank begins his life as an embodiment of power and strength. He feels that he is the force behind the whole world, but when he soon understands his insignificance and helplessness against the rich industrialists, his faith is shaken. In his efforts to analyse the crime he has committed, he realizes that he was born and that is the charge against him, being born a human being which is the root of the human problem. Yank's problem is repeated by the destroyers, who not accepting the brotherhood of man, take singular pleasure in destroying the finest creation of God, Man.

"The Shadow of Cain" another significant war poem directly deals with the theme of non-acceptance of one human by another. The poem is about the fission of the world into warring particles. Fission means the splitting of the nucleus of an atom into two roughly equal parts. The world is shattered because of the atom bombs, which destroys humanity while being self-destructive as well. The poem presents how the man is divided against man which eventually leads to the non-acceptance of man. The poem also stresses another aspect, that is the non-recognition of the brother. The conclusion of the poem presents the change from the warmth of love that makes all men brothers to the state in which men call their fellow men brother only to act the part of Cain's.

In order to present her themes, Sitwell resorts to the technique of contrast. "The Shadow of Cain" begins with the physical image of yellow heavens of the extreme cold- where people undergo spiritual migration but all-around them there is only the desert of the cold. Cold stands for evil as the sun stands for warmth, love and life: . . . "the cold is Zero -/The Nothing from which arose/ All being and all variation . . . the point that flows/Till it becomes the line of Time . . . an endless positing"(255).

The poet points out the fact that the absolute nothingness is frightening and terrible. "Zero" stands for absolute nothingness as in the case of Emily Dickinson's poem "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass" in which Emily establishes her relationship with the creations of God. A narrow fellow refers to the snake and in explaining the movements of the snake she observes how the grass divides as the snake crawls, and is seen as "spotted shaft." She states that she has felt "a transport of cordiality" with several of "nature's people." But she has never met the snake "without a tighter breathing" "a zero at the bone." This final image in the poem causes absolute dread paralysing man's spirit, and pushing him closer to a frightening reaction.

Lack of love is another prominent trait of the war period. The scriptures exhort man to “love thy neighbour as thyself.” But human beings have ignored these scriptural advices and treat their neighbours with envy. Men do not love other men, states and nations do not love their neighbouring states and nations. Hatred is at the root cause of world wars. “The Dirge for the New Sunrise” speaks about the lack of love among human beings:

Bound to my heart as Ixion to the wheel,
 Nailed to my heart as the Thief upon the Cross
 I hang between our Christ and gap where the world was lost.
 And watch the phantom Sun in Famine street
 - The ghost of the heart of Man . . . red Cain
 And the more murderous brain.
 Of Man, still redder Nero that conceived the death
 Of his mother Earth, and tore
 Her womb, to know the place where he was conceived. (1-9)

The protagonist of the poem has firm faith in Christ. But at the same time, she fears she will fall a victim to the world which is “fallen” due to the murderous brains of modern age, which make her contemplate on the lack of affection among human beings.

Many poets portray the sufferings involved in life from an optimistic angle. T.S Eliot, for instance in his poem “The Waste Land” points out that inspite of the sexual and spiritual sterility of the inhabitants of the twentieth century, especially the post-war world, there is a chance for the redemption of their souls if they follow the message of the thunder, “Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata” which means give, sympathise and self-control. In the same way after speaking about the cruelties and agony involved in the battle, Sitwell imparts a ray of hope for the readers. She speaks about the message of love and hope even for the evil men.

In “Still Falls the Rain” she speaks about how the brow of Christ converted with blood looks like the crown worn by victor:

Still falls the rain
 Then – O Ile leape upto my God: who pulles me doune –
 See, see where Christ’s blood streams in the firmament:
 It flows from the brow we nailed upon the tree
 Deep to the dying, to the thirsting heart
 That holds the fires of the world – dark- smirched with pain
 As Ceaser’s laurel crown. (26-32)

The birth of Christ in a cattle shed with animals around Him signifies love that binds all creation. Sitwell concludes the poem on a note of hope. In spite of the diabolical human savagery, callousness and indifference inherent in life, Christ still assures mercy and love to those who realise and repent. In the last line Christ speaks, “still do i love, still shed my innocent light, my blood, for thee”(32).

In the same way in “The Shadow of Cain” there is a dialogue between Dives and Lazarus. Kenneth Clarke finds in the dialogue the poet’s deepest and most passionate statement of her concern with original sin. But what is remarkable is that as Sitwell approaches the awe-inspiring manifestations of evil and destruction, her instinct is not to despair, but to call upon the most powerful symbols of love, the symbols of Christianity: “He walks again on the seas of the Blood/He comes in the terrible rain” (9). What is striking in her war poetry is the fact that inspite of the agony involved in war she does not turn to be a pessimist. In times of such disasters, it is her unshakeable faith in God that served as anchorage for her. She reminds us of the five nuns in Hopkins’ poem “The Wreck of the Deutschland.” When the ship was sinking all passengers were crying for help, but the five nuns were praying to God. Their firm faith is revealed in their cry “O Christ, come quickly.”

Thus Sitwell has become famous for her war poetry. What is prominent in her approach to war is the religious undertone that runs throughout the lines. In the celebrated poem “Still Falls the Nation” written while the air raids in 1940 were pounding on London, the rain of fire is equated with the redeeming blood from the suffering Christ. The poem ends on a note of Christian faith suggesting salvation to all – sinners and saints. “The Three Poems of the Atomic Bomb” powerfully declare the defilement of earth and lust for gold, but yet

again find hope through Christ's coming. All these poems abound in religious imagery. Dives and Lazarus, Blood of Christ, Potter's Field, Cain and Abel, life giving Wheat are all terms that recur again and again in her poems. Her religious attitude stands out prominently so much that Stephen Spender has called her war poems "prodigious hymns and their recurring rhythms, rhymes, resolutions are like the psalms or passages from the Old Testament, incantatory, secure in their base, locked in a system of symbol and reference for which there is no more adequate word than religion"(22). But Sitwell does not consider her approach as religious – she calls them "hymns of praise, to the glory of life."

Another aspect that stands out prominently in her war poems is her prophetic quality. "The Gold Coast Customs" is a poem written as early as 1929, but here too she takes the role of a prophetess of the world war. Sassoon regretted that the gifted fantastical writer should have assumed the robes of a prophetess and oracle more fitting an Eliot or Yeats.

There is a considerable difference between the poets of the First World War and those of the Second World War. Sassoon and Owen, poets of the First World War, had felt that if only people at home be convinced that war was not glorious but wicked and futile, then it would never be allowed to happen again. The educated, young men of 1939 recognised the horror and futility of war, but could no longer believe that war was anything but inevitable. The failures to prevent it proved this. The poets of 1939 war started where Sassoon and Owen had left off. The 1939 generation accepted what Owen said about the horrors of war, but saw it as too deeply embedded into the heart of the individual man, for there to be any hope of preventing it. It is this inevitability of war, the life-giving sun being replaced by the sun of destruction, separation of brother and brother, nation and nation, the rich and the poor that we find in the poems of Sitwell.

Sitwell disapproves of poets divided into poets and women poets. She questions, "Why can't woman be more like a man rather than arguing for an androgynous sensibility?"(Glendinning 23). Hence there is essentially no feminine approach to war. She desires to be placed in the same position as other war poets.

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