



Women and the Great War: A Gendered Reading

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Abstract— Warfare has taken a great to strengthen the man-woman binary. It's time to realize that this gender binary is no more than a myth just like the myths of 'glory of war' or 'patriotic death'. Women not only played the role of a bereaved mother, wife or daughter in this war. A number of them were actively involved in it-be it as a disguised male soldier, a nurse or a worker of munitions factories. They have seen the wounds, the deaths, horror of the war and conveyed it through their writings. Their letters, reports, diaries are based on their real life experience of war. Their poems, novels and stories of war are no less passionate than those of their male counterparts. This present paper aims to bring some light to the willing forgetfulness about the women of WWI because if one has to get an unbiased and clear concept of the war he must pay the right dues to those neglected women folk of First World War.



Keywords— World War, Women, Gendered, Narrative.

Introduction:

There are a few things so much 'gendered' as warfare is. It has been considered to be a 'man's job' from time immemorial. Therefore traditionally women were denied access to the warzone-a completely homo-social periphery. The scenario has changed to a considerable amount during the First World War. The Great War involving almost all the continents of the world had brought this change. It was proved to be not only a watershed for women's social, political and economic rights but also an event to break the age-old binary of gender roles attached to the concepts of warfare.

Women in the battlefield:

Some women, though a handful, were there to experience the war from a first-hand position. For example, Dorothy Lawrence, an English reporter took the disguise of a male and fought the WWI in 1914. She is the only known English women soldier on the frontline during WWI. Maria Bochkareva not only fought herself in WWI but also formed her own battalion of women, namely, 'Women's Battalion of Death'. During her military career, this Russian woman had to undergo the ridicules and sexual harassment by the people of her own regiment, the Imperial Russian Army. Olena Stepaniv of Ukraine was the first woman in the world to receive officer rank in this WWI. Olga Krasilnikov and

Natalie Tychmini both from Russia received the Cross of St. George for their contribution in war front in WWI. There are more names in the line but numerically saying woman playing the roles of combatants at the war front is really 'a few, a few, too few for drums and yells'.

Women in Different Roles:

Actually, the question of direct participation or first-hand experience is a patriarchal conspiracy that aims at ignoring or belittling the role of women played in the warfare. But one must remember that war was not limited in the frontline and trenches. The army hospitals, the munitions factories and several charitable organizations to help and support the soldiers were well-nigh included in the war business. And women took the most important roles to run those institutions. A woman died of mercury poisoning in an explosive factory is no less a war victim than her male counterpart shot in the battlefield.

New Employment for Women:

It is very true that world war provided new employment opportunities for women. The male-workforce being engaged in war the state was in need of labourers and workers in different fields. Thus, they appointed women in dockyards, factories, arsenals, transport industries and many other places though with a lesser wages. A

considerable number of women came out of domestic life and joined the workforce replacing the men in nearly all kinds of routine and automatic works. Gradually, they formed their own unions and strengthen their socio-political movement like suffrage movement.

A relevant question may be raised here whether the Great War really broke the gender binary or reinforce it by exploiting women workforce. Women workers were paid awfully less than the men workers. Women mostly undertook the routine monotonous work which few men could tolerate psychologically. Most of them left the work after marriage and above all they faced the post war backlash against their employment as ex-servicemen returned from the battle and reclaimed their jobs. So, women have to return to their 'rightful' domestic places. Post war nations were no longer in need of them. Beatrice Webb, an English sociologist, economist, reformer and labour historian, was one of the few to argue that the war had not significantly altered the status of women.

Literature of War by Women (Non-Fiction):

If we consider the aspect of 'literature of war', we often see that the narrative of war is considered to be a man's business in terms of authenticity. Most of the war poets (Owen, Brook, Sassoon etc.) had the direct experience of the trench life and thus their narrative have been considered to be more practical and real than the narrative of a nurse who healed others' wound and did not have them in their own body. That is why Vietnam nurse Lynda Van Devanter had to face the struggle to validate her war-memoir *Home before Morning* (1983).

In spite of being largely ignored for ages, women's narratives of war are there and demands proper attention and recognition. Vera Brittain's WWI memoir *Testament of Youth* (1933) shows her moving between the homefront and warfront as a VAD nurse and serves the reality of both the fronts. The letters she exchanged with her fiancé Roland Leighton, a soldier on the warfront, are tinged with what may be called 'real vision of war'.

Not only letters, diaries also served as memoirs of war. Miss Esmee Sartorius, a nurse of Red cross in England writes how they were given 'breads' which were 'black' and 'hard' and beds mostly 'without mattresses' when went to serve in the frontline hospital '...food was getting beautifully less and less, meat very occasional...' or 'life was one continual series of shocks, strange noises made us think we were being shelled, the electric light going out one night made us vividly imagine we were going to be blown up'. (Sartorius in Purdom, 144)

There are diaries of nurse Taffy Evans who worked at several hospitals in England, France and Belgium during

WWI. That also contains the hard core realities about the war.

Literature of War by Women (Fiction):

Apart from non-fictional works like letters or diaries, there are works of fiction by women authors on WWI. Charlotte Mew's poem apostrophizing an empty tomb as the focus of private mourning 'The Cenotaph' was published in the second edition of her collection 'The Farmer's Bride' in 1921. When in 'May 1915' Mew utters, "Let us remember spring will come again/ to thus scorched, blackened wood", it sounds like she is hoping against hope standing amidst the ruins of humanity caused by the WWI. Her other poems like 'To a Child in Death', 'In Nun head Cemetery', 'The Farmer's Bride', 'Absence' etc. are all soaked with the agony of war. Margaret Postgate Cole was another name in the line. Her 'The Falling Leaves', 'The Veteran', 'Afterwards', 'Praematuri' recall war's futile waste of youth and innocence.

The role of women in the warfare being mostly unsung some women poets like Mary Gabrielle Collins had tried their voice to confer some recognition to them. In her poem, 'Women at Munition Making', she says, how "[t]heir hands, their fingers/ Are coarsened in munition factories". 'War girls' by J.C Pope portraits how the Great War left "...no time for love and kisses/ Till the khaki soldier boys come marching back". The girls who 'clips your ticket', 'speeds the lift' or 'drives a heavy van' are all war girls to the poet who as a woman subverts the idea of gender binary. Marian Allen, Madeline Ida Bedford, Sybil Bristowe, May Wedderburn Cannan, Alice Corbin etc are some more names who tried their hands in world war verse.

Besides verse, prose fiction was not an untouched genre by women authors. For instance, *The Return of the Soldier* (1918) by Rebecca West was a novel that examined war from a psychoanalytic point of view and showed its impact on the soldiers. Katherine Mansfield's the world famous short story 'The Fly' certainly has traces of her recollections of the world war I which snatched the life of her own brother.

Conclusion

To overcome the bias of gender binary of war, genuine efforts should be made on part of the researchers. One such researcher, Jean Gallagher, a professor of English in a university in USA wrote a book *World Wars through the Female Gaze* (1998) where she asserts that 'vision has ...played an important role in the development and gendering of cultural discourses about war' (Gallagher, 3) and the role of vision as a gendered activity has deprived women from their right of authenticity. In fine, breaking the

binaries is the first condition to get an accurate and clear picture of the world war. This present paper has only aimed to do that.

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