

THE SHADOW OF DISILLUSIONMENT AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DILEMMA IN POST- WAR LITERATURE: A CRITICAL STUDY OF ALL QUIET ON THE WESTERN FRONT AND BRAVE NEW WORLD

Abhijit Seal

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Cotton University

Guwahati, Assam, India

Abstract

The objective of this paper is to scrutinize the psychological implications of the First World War upon individual life in particular and society in general. The first decades of the twentieth century, following the aftermath of the First World War have provided us with the best of the times and the worst of the times. The accursed period which brought about heinous atrocities of the war and the inconceivably calamitous repercussions of the same and pushed human lives and values into a dark dismal abyss of gloom and terror, is also the same period that acted as a catalyst in producing some of the finest and the most remarkable literature in the history of Europe. Study of war-literature cannot be limited to the confines of war victims alone who had to directly endure the gruesome brutalities of the war, but it should also extend its outlook to include civilians who had to suffer massive psychological dilemma and post-war trauma which left a lasting impact upon their very sense of being throughout the rest of their lives. This paper therefore attempts to explicate into the mental state and existence of an individual who had been a miserable witness to the atrocities of the war and an anchorage that society began to seek in Science and technology with a vain hope for a better life but which in the long run proved to be a disillusionment. The main texts chosen for this paper are Erich Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*.

Keywords: Post-War, Disillusionment, Psychological dilemma, Science and technology, War-Literature

I

For great literature to take form, it is essential for a great event to take place which can act as a catalyst to create a world through words, so that we are able to embrace and preserve the memories of the event with its depth and intensity intact. Literature can be ordained greatness only when it is able to stir people with memories, keeping its intensity as fresh as it had happened only yesterday. Memories, no matter how excruciating they are, fall weak to the ravages of time and elude and it is then that great literature opens its Pandora's box of a million

memories to freshly forge in our minds, a massive impact of events of the distant past. The theme of war is not new in world literature. Since the ancient times, the heroic epics such as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* or Virgil's *Aeneid* or the *Mahabharata* for that matter have extensively and exclusively dealt with war. However, in all these great epics, wars have been highly valorised and considered an act of glory and honour both for the individual as well as for his country or clan. War was then a hallmark of masculinity and chivalry. However, gone are those days of the romantic and idealistic notions of war. The First World War of 1914-18, commonly known as The Great War has brutally hurled the reality of war at our face, which is a hideous one, such that Ernest Hemingway, keeping this curt reality in view, wrote in his "Notes on the Next War: A Serious Topical Letter" (1935), "They wrote in the old days that it is sweet and fitting to die for one's own country. But in the modern war, there is nothing sweet nor fitting in your dying. You will die like a dog for no good reason." Such is the reality of modern warfare.

Although poets and writers beginning from Shakespeare to Tennyson have always dealt with the theme of war in their writings, War Literature as a wholly separate genre of literature came into emergence only after the first World War which projected a horrific picture of the failure of the war as well as the failure of the authorities who pushed young soldiers to fight in the trenches and the excruciating wounds it rendered on both combats and non-combats. The Great War inarguably claimed uncountable lives, however, more gruesome than Death were the plights of the civilians who although did not directly take part in the war, had to suffer no less casualties. They were left with a hopeless present and an even uncertain and darker future with no anchorage of hope to cling on to. The psychological damages of the war were more than the physical ones. These fateful civilians who had been a witness and victim of the Great War were in the words of Remarque, "little flames inadequately sheltered by thin walls from the tempest of dissolution and insensibility in which we (they) flicker and are often all but extinguished." (187) Even the soldiers who managed to escape death became victims of "Shell Shock" which was but a timeless truth of the great war. The victims of "Shell Shock" would suffer a range of afflictions from abnormal behavioural changes to massive depression and over the following days, his state would worsen from crying and an inability to walk or do anything, to acute mania, leading to physical and mental cripples and spasmodic fits of nightmare. This generation of war victims became commonly known as "The Lost Generation". To quote Remarque again, they were "like children who have been abandoned and we (they) are as experienced as old men, we (they) are coarse, unhappy and superficial- I think that we (they) are lost." (85) This generation could never recover from the trauma of the war.

The Lost Generation shattered all the idealistic notions of war and human lives were overcast with the bleak shadow of gloom, despair and disillusionment. The war that had promised honour and glory to the land, was in fact a terrible doom to mankind. The loss of human lives and the traumatic shock which crippled them for their entire life was indeed insurmountable. As the Western Front settled into a condition of bloody stalemate, the conditions under which men were made to dwell and fight was in stark contrast of how civilization was supposed to be. The

ensuing disillusionment which came about swiftly and catastrophically called into question the basic ideals upon which western societies had been functioning and such a disillusionment was already envisaged by poets and litterateurs of the previous century like Thomas Hardy, who wrote exclusively about the futility of war in his poems. Although Seamus Heaney, in his 1991 poem, "Cure at Troy" wrote,

song,

Inflicted and endured."

*"No poem or play or
Can fully right a wrong*

according to Literary critic, Paul Fussell, literature embodies an essential and timeless truth about the nature of not just this war, but the destructiveness futility and waste of all modern wars. Words can barely right the wrong, but they help to preserve for posterity the dear sacrifices that mankind had made so that these sacrifices are not consigned to oblivion. The twentieth century was an age of massive industrialization and advancement in Sciences which were thought to bring significant desirable changes into human lives. The war however shattered even the hopes on Sciences and debunked the whole concept of a scientific Utopia.

II

All discussions on war literature will be incomplete without talking of Erich Maria Remarque's most stirring and heart-wrenching novel, *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) where he portrays in desolate details the unyielding realities of the war and the excruciating physical and mental trauma that accompanied these. Remarque coherently expresses the frustration and anger of the young soldiers who were sent into the battlefield by the government for the sole reasons of politics and power. The novel is written from the point of view of Paul Baumer, an eighteen-year old school student who along with his friends, who were supposed to have promising days ahead of them full of dreams and aspirations, were sent to fight the war on the western front thereby depriving them of the happiness and prospects of youth and amputating the wings of their dreams. This novel certainly replaces the romantic notions of war with a gory picture of fear, meaninglessness, death and butchery. What the soldiers did were, "Attack, "counter-attack, charge, counter-strike- they are all words, but what is contained in them?" (Remarque 93) "Continuous fire, defensive fire, curtain fire, trench mortar gas, tanks, machine guns, hand grenades- words, words but they embrace all the horrors of the world." (Remarque 96). The reality of the war was seen only in the battlefield and Remarque in fact paints an accurately gory picture of war.

"We see men go on living with the top of their skull missing; we see soldiers go on running when both their feet have been shot away – they stumble on their splintering stumps to the next shell hole. One lance-corporal crawls for a full half mile on his hands, dragging his legs behind him, with both knees shattered. Another man makes it to a dressing station with his guts spilling out over his hands as he holds them. we see soldiers with their mouths missing; we find someone who has gripped the main

artery in his arm between his teeth for two hours so that he doesn't bleed to death. The sun goes down, night fall, the shells whistle, life comes to an end". (Remarque 97)

Remarque expresses his view of a huge emotional disconnection and a mental and emotional damage that the war has left. Paul for instance becomes unable to imagine a future without war and was unable to remember how he felt in the past. When Paul was given a short leave to pay a visit to his family, he comes home, however, home was no longer the same to him as when he had left. He was enveloped by a strong sense of alienation that engulfed him. He felt so much lost that he could no longer connect to his family members. The war had made these promising youngsters like Paul, emotionally sterile. Paul confesses in the seventh chapter of the novel,

"I suppose I am the one who has changed in the meantime. A great gulf has opened up between then and now. I didn't know then what the war was really like...now I can see that I have become more brittle without realising it. I can't come to terms with things here anymore. It's another world." (Remarque 116)

The battlefield did not even allow the ground for humanity. Soldiers could no longer pause to mourn for their dead comrades. When Kemmerich was on his deathbed, the more pressing question among his friends was who would inherit his boots. Not that they did not feel for their friend, but the war had conditioned them to think about their present practical situation. Although the atrocities of the war compelled them to suppress all emotions and turned them into machines working on the commands of the authorities, at times, they on their own accord escaped from emotions and memories as this will enable them to escape the drudgeries of the war. Paul says, "...one thing has become clear to me: you can cope with all the horrors as long as you simply duck thinking about it- but it will kill you if you come to terms with it." (Remarque 97)

The novel ends with the death of almost every major character. Their days went by without food and sleep and without proper medical care. The soldiers were forced to live in awful conditions such as in filthy waterlogged ditches infested with rats and lice and decaying corpses. Towards the end of the novel, Paul states, "War is another cause of death, like cancer or tuberculosis or influenza or dysentery. The fatalities are just much more numerous and horrible." (Remarque 185). That war is futile and superficial and does no good to anyone is apparent when Paul finally says, "Those are the dangerous moments, the ones that show us that the way we have adopted is really artificial after all, that it isn't a simple calmness but rather a desperate attempt to *attain calmness*." (Remarque 187)

The cloud of utter gloom and disillusionment was prominent such that poets like Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, and even American novelists such as Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Sinclair Lewis who belonged to The Lost Generation began to extensively depict the drudgeries and meaninglessness of war in their writings. Such a scenario of acute hopelessness

led to the emergence of philosophies like Existentialism and Nihilism. Friedrich Nietzsche in his book, *The Will to Power*, while explaining Nihilism writes, "Everything lacks meaning". This statement highlights the nothingness of the universe. The shock of the war and the mental trauma left the soldiers without any belief. People felt lost. They found no meaning in either life or death. There was no more faith or hope left. Remarque himself was a war soldier who was sent to fight in the trenches at a very early age and he in his novel also points out the failure of the state authorities. State lies to its citizens about heroism, patriotism and duty and sends young people on the war front. When they find themselves in a state where they have no choice but to kill another human being to survive, they are shocked by their own crimes and feel lost like Paul and his comrades. Their beliefs are crushed, and their minds are disillusioned. Freud in his essay, "Thoughts for the times of war and death" reflects that when the sense of community of the nation fell off, citizens felt deceived and left alone by their government. Freud states that the state expects utmost loyalty from the citizens, whereas, it continuously lies and deceives the citizens.

All these lurid descriptions and a heart-rending account of the Great War through the point of view of an eighteen- year old youth who had been pushed into the mouth of death in the western front, makes *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929), an inevitable text in war literature. The quietness of the western front is not the quietness of peace but the quietness that is caused after a devastating catastrophe when nothing, but death alone remains.

When the Great War had devastated everything, and mankind was drowning in the sea of nothingness, Science and technology then came as a life boat to rescue mankind. It promised a better future, where disease, drudgery and poverty might no longer exist. Very few writers were brave enough to challenge this naïve optimism, Aldous Huxley however, through his path breaking novel, *Brave New World* (1931), certainly did. Aldous Huxley wrote his novel, *Brave New World* in the wake of the first World War and the devastating flu virus when Europe was in the grip of depression. Huxley was an advocate of Pacifism who believed that all modern warfare and violence was futile and that neither Science nor Politics can do away with the inhumanity and drudgery that human lives have been infested with. He was a stern cynic who had already realised the pointlessness that characterised the aftermath of the Great War and totally disagreed with H.G. Wells that Science would prove to be a saviour in the future. Huxley's *Brave New World* is in fact a parody of Well's *Men Like Gods* (1923) which shatters the illusion of a scientific Utopia.

Brave New World (1931) opens in Central London Hatchery and Conditioning Centre and the year is 632 A.F. (After Ford), six hundred years later in the future. The Centre provides a base for the stability in the Brave New World by carrying out all sorts of important biological, physiological, psychological experiments. Huxley gives a bit of fantasy - jump to these scientific experiments and brings into existence 'The Modern Fertilizing Process', 'Bokanovskification' 'the Conditioning', 'Hypnopaedia' and "The Social Predestination Process". Bokanovsky Process as

described in Huxley's novel, is a principle of mass-production applied to Biology. It is a new way of scientific growth where

“One egg, one embryo, one adult-normality. But a bokanovskified egg will bud, will proliferate, will divide. From eight to ninety-six buds, and every bud will grow into a perfectly formed embryo, and every embryo into a full-sized adult. Making ninety-six human beings grow where only one grew before. (Huxley 17).

Huxley introduces this scientific process to us in a somewhat realistic manner and then gradually turns it into a fantastic one. However, the Bokanovsky process is elaborated in such vividly minute details in the novel such that the pseudo-realistic details make the whole process seem a plausible one. The Director of the company and the World controllers consider this process as “one of the major instruments of social progress.” (Huxley 18).

One of the first stages is the “bottling” stage where the embryo has to go through a number of processes such as blood- surrogate, Oxygen supply, heat conditioning and so on. During this stage, the embryos developing into tropical workers will be inoculated against the tropical diseases like typhoid and sleeping sickness. The future generation of chemical workers will be immunised to lead, caustic soda, tar, and chlorine. Huxley then goes on to introduce another fantastic idea of Hypnopaedia or sleep- teaching technique where micro-speakers are hidden under the pillows of the children and certain lessons are repeated. Psychology says that repetition of an idea confirms it. The children are given lessons in sleep about moral education, elementary sex or class-consciousness.

“There was a pause; then the voice began again: 'Alpha children wear grey. They work much harder than we do# because they're so fright-fully clever. I'm really awfully glad I'm a Beta, because I don't work so hard. And then we are much better than the Gammas and Deltas. Gammas are stupid. They all wear green, and Delta children wear khaki. Oh no, I don't want to play with Delta children. And Epsilons are still worse. They're too stupid to be able ... (Huxley 33).

During the conditioning process the children are repeatedly taught in their unconsciousness, many catch-phrases as the rules of the Brave New World. They are, for example, 'ending is better than mending', 'everybody is happy now-a-days', 'when the individual feels the community reels, 'a gamma is better than damn', 'civilization is sterilization' and the like.

In this highly 'developed' society everyone is 'conditioned' to be free from emotions, pains, solitude and old age. Death, too, in this world, becomes a 'matter of course'. Here, death is taken as a normal activity without terror. Death conditioning begins at quite an early stage. Once we accept the technocratic world of A.F.632 as a logical extension of reality, naturally it follows that in this world of 'Conditioning', the concepts like 'mother', 'father', 'home', and 'family', have no place-they don't exist. As, children are produced in bottles, and shaped in the conditioning

rooms, there is no place for 'mother', 'father' or for 'family'. Here the word 'mother' is considered obscene. Such things belong to the past or history and according to Mustapha Mond, the World Controller "History is bunk", (Huxley 38) and "most historical facts are unpleasant". (Huxley 30). History had been chaotic indeed and the people of the Brave New World are of the notion that an escape from history and an escape from all emotions into the fantastical realm of Science will pave for them a new world of hope. Huxley however is cynical about such optimism and thus, he outright satirises such world view through this novel. *Brave New World* can therefore be called Huxley's masterpiece of Satire. In *Brave New World*, even the concepts of God, religion, home and parenthood-all lose their meaning. God has been replaced in the novel by Ford. One of the most famous slogans in the *Brave New World* is: "Ford helps those who help themselves". (Huxley 168).

In *Brave New World* fantasy always co-exists with irony. The title of the novel, *Brave New World*, is itself ironic which is taken from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Miranda looking at Ferdinand and others utters, "O brave new world that has such people in it!" Ironically these are the people like Antonio who plot against Miranda's father, Prospero. Huxley attacks indirectly all those who consider scientific advancement as an unsullied good. Critic D.V. Jog says in this context:

"Shakespeare knew that the world Miranda was admiring has its Calibans as well as Prosperos, its drunkards as well as its handsome lovers. Here Huxley tells us that the scientific utopia for which we are heading, though it may constitute the material millennium, will certainly not be what scientists and industrialists imagine. Intellectually, spiritually and morally it will be far worse than the present age and yet we are unmistakably going forward to such a utopia". (147)

John, like Miranda, towards the end of the novel is disillusioned about the Brave New World. During his visit to the factory of the Electrical Equipment Corporation, he finds that each process is carried out by a single Bokanovsky Group. The Group consists of Deltas, Gammas, Gamma-Pluses, Delta-minuses and Epsilons. Looking at these wearied workers in their typical uniforms, John ironically exclaims: "O brave new world ... that has such people in it". (Huxley 129) John's dream of the Brave New World eventually gets shattered and turns into a "Waste Land".

When the war had obliterated all rays of hope from the face of the world, Human beings desperately sought the refuge of Science and technology with the hope of a better future. However, over-emphasis on Science and mass production as Huxley warns in the novel can lead to an even greater apocalypse, thereby driving mankind to a darker dystopia. Huxley might have reached the peak of his imagination in the writing of this novel, nevertheless, his imagination is not an unrestrained one. It is apparently controlled by logic and a sense of better judgement. Huxley had already predicted the doom that the over-evaluation of Science might bring, and which actually as predicted led to yet another more devastation World War.

III

Literature and the theme of war have always gone hand in hand for a long time. It is war and its gruesome consequences that led writers and poets to allow us to get a glimpse of the impact that war had on them, through their writings. Although History never fails to render us with elaborate accounts of wars, bloodshed and violence, History can never depict the psychological and emotional damages that wars cause. Public perceptions of the war still owe more to poets like Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon and novelists like Robert Graves, Ernest Hemingway and Erich Maria Remarque than the historians because it is in their works where we find depiction of mental fragility, breakdown and the pain of grief. War was never a solution to any of the political, cultural or economic problems endured by nations all over the world, however at the same time war is not the sole factor towards the disintegration of a nation. It rather triggers the process of disintegration and leads to the emergence of not only a divided nation but also a divided culture. Samuel Hynes in his *A War Imagined*, (1990) says in this regard, that the Great war has degenerated and destabilised the society is only an over-evaluation of facts prompted by myths and nostalgia.

The Great War which was idealised as an epitome of heroism and patriotism had proved to be enormously futile at the end causing irreparable damages to human lives and even worse, leading to another cataclysmic war which had far ruinous and fatal impact than the first Great War. People were wholly disillusioned with not even a flicker of hope for survival. Even Science which had promised a sort of Utopia and restore meaning to life, drastically failed to keep its promise by being aggrandized to a huge extent. Thus, the two novels of Remarque and Huxley discussed in this paper have evidently delineated a bleak picture of massive psychological trauma which both the war veterans and the civilians had to undergo, which was followed by an abominable disillusionment towards modern technology and scientific advancements. This paper through a critical study of both the texts have thrown light on the power of memory that at times by its ability to retain and recall traumatic experiences, leaves human beings crippled for life. More devastating than the innumerable deaths in the war is the abhorrent memories of the war that remained with those who survived, for these poignant memories alone would cause the victims to die a slow and more painful death little by little. This paper also leads to the conclusion that modern scientific technologies are not a bane in themselves rather it is only when we begin to over emphasise Science to our own gains thereby replacing basic human values and emotions with Science, that we turn it into a vile curse which leads mankind to the brink of destruction.

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