



FROM TRENCHES TO MORAL ABYSS: WAR, TRAUMA, AND THE CRISIS OF MODERN CONSCIOUSNESS IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY ENGLISH LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Literature is the mirror of the society. It records several things as its exclusive themes and background. The World Wars occupy a concrete position in the pages of several literary texts. There are numerous texts in English Literature that deal with the subject of Wars. Both the World Wars have completely devastated and transformed the world and the lives of its poor victims. Not only the common people but also the soldiers are mercilessly tormented in the warfare. The concept of War is not at all heroic rather it is horrific. Human existence and peace are ruthlessly snatched by the devastation and destruction of the violent wars. War can never bring any productive outcome in the world. It can only bring sorrow, desolation, hopelessness and pessimism. In reality War is only the victory over the dead. It is the man made devastation and destruction which can bring only voids emptiness, violence, trauma and faithlessness. The World War I is a frightening experience for the world. It leaves its horrific consequences even after the cease of this gigantic War. Just after the World War I human existence becomes aimless, meaningless, and empty and there is faithlessness in the human hearts. People are dubious to connect with each other. They cannot communicate among themselves properly. There is no concrete relationship. Every relation is superficial. People are engaged in multiple relations without any genuine passion. They are trying their utmost to hide their loneliness and isolation. There is no target, ambition or magnificence in human lives. They are leading and living mechanical life style to spend the days only. These alienated, agitated people are entirely directionless and are completely lost in the after war chaotic world. These people are famously termed as the Lost Generation by Gertrude Stein. Earnest Hemingway first used the term in his debut novel *The Sun Also Rises* (1926). World War II also causes such devastating and destructive impact on the modern civilization. The aftermath of this War is also very pathetic. It not only causes massive slaughter and genocide but also pushes the human civilization in utter darkness. The people after this terrible warfare feel alienated, fragmented; they have no individual identity and individual firmness of voice. After this massive war people share a collective self and lack of an individual identity. These people are engaged in monotonous, repetitive and circular action which is never ending process without any genuine progress. They may have no purpose in their lives but they carry on working and are habituated in this monotonous toil. Absurdism is a unique genre of English Literature and the Theatre which portray the absurd and awkward existences and activities of the modern generation people in the devastated and decayed world after the horrific World War II. Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) and Romanian-French dramatist Eugene Ionesco *Rhinoceros* (1959) are some of the elementary absurdist literary works which project the existential crisis and the emptiness of alienated people who are living in the collective identity just as the rhinoceros and carrying on the persistent toil like Sisyphus and experiencing a defiant happiness like him in this repetitive and endless loop.

KEY WORDS: Destruction, Trench, Repetitive, Slaughter, Devastation, Alienated, Lost, Purposeless, Meaningless, Aimless, Trauma, Repression, Trench-Poets, Frontline, Shell Shock, Heroic, Terrific, Depression, Anti-War, Faithlessness, Void

METHODOLOGY

This paper uses qualitative, descriptive and interpretative research methodology for the better understanding of the subject matter and brutality of wars and their direct and gruesome impact on humanity. It goes through close textual analysis and descriptive- analytical approach which help to comprehend the unique features of the modern people after the devastating wars. This paper uses Existential, Modernism, Trauma theory, Psychoanalytic theory, Feminist Theory, Marxism and New Historicism theoretical approaches which help in the deeper analysis of the topic. The secondary sources like critical essays and scholarly writings on the World Wars add more enrichment and profundity of this research work.

• Some Major Post World War I and World War II Literary Works:

Trench poets are the poets who have enriched English Literature and worldwide readers about the reality of World War I with their firsthand experiences in the warfare. They express their disillusionment about the war and rupturing of the romantic notion of heroism in the warfare. Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, Siegfried Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg, Robert Graves, Edward Thomas, David Jones et. al. are the prominent soldier- poets or trench poets witnessing the atrocious and true nature of the devastating World War I.

Dulce Et Decorum Est is a ground-breaking poem written by Wilfred Owen written during the World War I. The title is a direct extraction of the classical Roman poet Horace which means "it is



sweet and proper to die for one's country". The title is used in a satirical way. The poem is a severe condemnation of war. The poem is a poignant portrait of the wretched circumstances of the frontline soldiers. It exposes the brutality of warfare where the innocent soldiers are mercilessly assaulted and their lives are devastated ruthlessly. The poem describes a vivid experience in the warfare. There is sudden explosion of the Chlorine gas artillery and the panicked and puzzled British soldiers being terrified start to unmask themselves. One of them is so horrified in this abrupt outbreak that he takes much time to open the helmet and has to experience the vicious consequence of this hellish accident.

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling,
 Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,
 But someone still was yelling out and stumbling,
 And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime.

Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,
 As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams before my helpless sight,
 He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

Dulce ET Decorum EST Pro patria mori is a romantic notion only. War is not at all a romantic concept and the notion of heroism in the battlefield is a veritable falsehood. Children should be restrained from such societal fabrication and not be enchanted with such false perception of warfare. The title is used by the poet in a sarcastic way to shoe the complete contrast of the romantic notion and the crude reality in the war front.

- **Parade's End (1924–1928): Ford Madox Ford** – is an exclusive tetralogy of Ford Madox Ford. In this tetralogy the British novelist depicts the life experiences of the British officer Christopher Tietjens, "the last Tory" during the World War I. His wife is disloyal to him and is a lustful woman. She is now engaged with Valentine Wannop. Though Wannop is a Pacifist but ironically he has snatched the peacefulness from Tietjens' life and causes him to live on utter despair. The novel contains these four stories: *Some Do Not ...* (1924), *No More Parades* (1925), *A Man Could Stand Up* — (1926) and *Last Post* (1928). The novel shows the society and its values before and after the war, the malicious effect of the World War I and the psychological torment after the devastation. It also exposes the moral degradation of the post war generation and sexual promiscuousness of people. His personal life is also a disaster due to his unfaithful wife.
- **Death of a Hero (1929): Richard Aldington**- This is an anti-war novel. George Winterbourne is the protagonist of this novel. The narrator is one of his friends. The novel exposes the brutality of the trench warfare. It condemns the hypocritical standards of the Edwardian society. George Winterbourne is an artist and is raised in a bohemian ambience. He is involved in multiple relations and there is no genuine passion in the relations. He is enlisted in the

trenches. The condition of the trench soldiers is extremely pathetic and intolerable. There is no specific military advice and the soldiers are not treated and trained properly. He dies of illness. His death is not the matter of grave grief and mourning. It has become an object of showmanship. Even his mother also shows off her son's heroic death. The war not only devastates the society but it also exposes the double-standard mentality of the Edwardian society which lacks genuine feeling or empathy. The trench soldiers do not receive proper medication, treatment even are deprived of proper military training. George dies in the final days of war. British class discrimination is condemned in the novel.

- **Goodbye to All That (1929): Robert Graves**- This autobiographical literary work describes the gruesome war and life experiences of Robert Graves. The poet is completely disenchanted with the notion of war. He has condemned the corruption and tremendous inadequacies of the higher military authority. He has suffered from profound and lifelong trauma for his horrible experiences in the warfare as frontline soldier. Due to participating actively in the warfare and having firsthand experience he can assert and condemn that war as it is just the victory over motionless corpses of the innocent warriors and the grim sight can only provide others with tremendous and permanent trauma, anxiety, and panic and death-in-life situation. The actual reality of war is that it is hellish, terrific, pessimistic, genocide and parade of the dead bodies and of complete devastation. The outside world demonstrates the completely different picture of the actual truth. The notions of romantic war, heroism are absolutely false. The glorification and celebrations of war must be stopped for the welfare of the humanity. The writer is absolutely against the rigid class systems and the inhumane class discriminations of British society and the culture of the private schools. He is severely terrified by the shell shocks and has suffered the intolerable and long lasting trauma. In the Battle of Loos and during the World War I the soldiers used to reside in pathetic condition "squalor, suffering, and pain". After his return from the warfare as a trench soldier he cannot connect with the expectation and false glorification of war and heroism of the soldiers. He becomes completely isolated and traumatized. He has left and cut all his previous ties with his childhood, his friends and family and has deserted the British culture and ultimately left his own country England bidding Good Bye. He is completely disgusted and exhausted with the notion of War. His existence like other soldiers is devastated, ruined. His experience of World War I is horrific not at all heroic or grandeur rather it is utter failure. Massacre and annihilation cannot be peaceful at all. It can only bring sorrow, angst, agony and despair.
- **Break Day in the Trenches (1916): Isaac Rosenberg**- This is another anti-war poem written during the World War I. The poet is completely against the futile and destructive war. He is an active participant in the battlefield. Isaac Rosenberg is enlisted as a British trench soldier fighting against the Germans. The poem portrays a fresh new day. It describes



the activity and free spirit of a rat in the Poppy field. The 'cosmopolitan' rat has touched his hands and can effortlessly move to the opponent side without any restrain and hesitation and can touch the enemy soldiers. While these anthropocentric activities are going on callously, the nature remains in a complete and cold indifference with all these unjust practices. The poet is a devout Jew. He is pathetically assassinated in the 1918 warfare while fighting as a British soldier.

The darkness crumbles away.
 It is the same old druid Time as ever,
 Only a live thing leaps my hand,
 A queer sardonic rat,
 As I pull the parapet's poppy
 To stick behind my ear.
 Droll rat, they would shoot you if they knew
 Your cosmopolitan sympathies.
 Now you have touched this English hand
 You will do the same to a German
 Soon, no doubt, if it be your pleasure
 To cross the sleeping green between.

- **Testament of Youth (1933): Vera Brittain-** This literary non-fiction memoir is a "cry of outrage and agony," of a woman who has left her studies from Oxford and is compelled to join as the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) VAD nurse during World War I in London, France, Malta to acquire the firsthand experience as a nurse. In the warfare she has lost her fiancé Roland Leighton, brother Edward and others. After the war, she becomes gravely depressed and purposeless. She starts writing and actively works as a Pacifist and a feminist advocate.
- **Catch-22 (1961): Joseph Heller** – The novel depicts the life experiences of the U. S. Army Air Forces B-25 bombardier John Yossarian. The backdrop is World War II during 1942-44. The pilot is disenchanted by the violence, futility and purposelessness of the war. He has enlisted in almost seventy one wars of which he has participated in forty-four wars and run away from the rest. The disillusioned and traumatized pilot is now escaping the wars and is now admitted in a military hospital as a Chronic liver patient. He exposes the inefficiencies of the higher military authorities. The officers are searching him frantically. They enforce the subordinate soldiers to fight several battles and remain totally indifferent about the wellbeing of the soldiers. Colonel Cathcart is one of the military officers who participate in the war for their excessive lust for power and money. Yossarian is a competent flyer and an honest man. He is being plotted by the higher military authorities and the doctors. The direct participation, the violence, the mass killings have created trauma, anxiety, fear and a sense of disgust and disenchantment in him. The warfront is full of Paranoid activities where the rational attitude is rejected and insane, selfish, madness is celebrated. The people in the higher

rank are exercising power for their own profit and are completely indifferent to the decay and harm they causes to the masses and to the civilization. For the rigid bureaucratic rules the soldiers especially the pilots cannot escape dangerous missions and threatening warfronts. They are the mere puppets in the hands of commanding officers and suffer from angst, depression and existential crisis.

- **Atonement (2001): Ian McEwan-** This is a unique literary work. The setting is England during 1935. The protagonist is a 13-year-old Briony Tallis, who misinterprets the adult actions and falsely accuses Robie Turner, her sister Cecilia's lover for rape. When her cousin Lola is raped Briony mistakenly accuses Robie and therefore separating and devastating the lives of Robie and Cecilia. Robie is imprisoned and later has participated in the horrific World War II and has gathered firsthand experience of war in the Dunkirk evacuation. Cecilia leaves her family and starts working as a nurse in London. She has retained unflinching faith on her lover and his innocence. Realizing her guilt and false allegation to Robie, Briony chooses the profession of nursing for atonement and to seek redemption for her horrible mistake which has shattered and devastated lives. Her guilt is permanent and fatal. During the year 1999, the elderly Briony suffering from Dementia discloses that the happy ending and reconciliation she has written in her book is never happened in the reality. Robie and Cecilia never reconcile rather both of them have accepted their tragic doom during the World War II. Both are died during the war. Briony has attempted to give them peace and happiness in the fictionalized world of literature though the reality is completely different and tragic.
- **Slaughterhouse-Five, or, The Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death (1969): Kurt Vonnegut** - This is a celebrated anti-war novel. The protagonist Billy Pilgrim is an explosive firebombing survivor in Dresden during the World War II. He has survived due to his imprisonment in an underground slaughterhouse-five or Schlachthof-fünf. The novel uses the phrase 'so it goes' repeatedly after mentioning death and war. Tralfamadorean Philosophy and science fictional elements are mentioned here. Billy shares his Optometrist and POW experiences and recalls his abduction by the aliens. It is an anti-war novel. The novel uses satire, dark humor and autobiographical elements. The novel also condemns the futility of war. The novel follows the non-linear wavering narrative to show the psychological unrest and traumatic effect of the massacre and violence of World War II.
- **The Hollow Men (1925): T.S. Eliot-** The poem depicts the crude reality of the post war human civilization. The human existence has become hollow and there is no grandeur in it. Human beings are leading a purposeless, superficial existence without any definite goal. They are unable to communicate properly and fail to establish a genuine bonding. Life is full of void and meaninglessness.



Throughout the poem 'we' is used which refers to the collective identity of people and they are experiencing existential crisis and suffers from the lack of individual identity. The existence is hollow; they have no motivation and aim in their lives. These people are indecisive, living scattered, fragmented and disillusioned lives. They cannot pray and have no belief in religion. They are suffering from faithlessness. They are living amidst extreme hopelessness.

We are the hollow men
 We are the stuffed men
 Leaning together
 Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!
 Our dried voices, when
 We whisper together
 Are quiet and meaningless
 As wind in dry grass
 Or rats' feet over broken glass
 In our dry cellar

Shape without form, shade without colour,
 Paralysed force, gesture without motion;

Those who have crossed
 With direct eyes, to death's other Kingdom
 Remember us-if at all-not as lost
 Violent souls, but only
 As the hollow men
 The stuffed men.

Mrs. Dalloway (1925): Virginia Woolf: This fundamental literary text set after World War I in London where Mrs. Dalloway is preparing for party. On the contrary Septimus Smith is suffering from the deadly shell shock, trauma of war and tremendous psychological and physical anguish. He is receiving insufficient treatment for his ailment. The author also feels the anxiety and trauma as she herself has experienced this severe agony. Later Smith commits self-assassination after the unbearable ordeal. Big Ben is talked about in the text. The novel contrasts high societal standards and the post war isolated, alienated and traumatized situation of the soldiers.

Theoretical Approaches

- **Modernism-** The isolated, disillusioned, purposeless and fragmented human existence is shown in the texts.
- **Trauma Theory-** Post-war trauma, shell shock, unexpressed trauma, anxiety are pervaded in the texts.
- **Feminist theory-** Women marginalization and subjugation are demonstrated.
- **Existentialism:** Existential crisis and lack of individual identity are the immediate after effect of the Wars.
- **Marxism:** Capitalism, class struggle, ideology are the recurrent theme of these literary texts.
- **Psychoanalytic:** Repression, anxiety, death drive and depression are the common mental states of the post-war generation. Mental unrest pervaded their psyches.
- **New Historicism:** The historical contexts, prominent discourses help in the better understanding of the texts.

CONCLUSION

The paper shows the horrific nature of the World Wars. The wars can never bring any fruitful and productive outcome to human civilization. The ruthless devastation, destruction, genocide and massacre caused by wars can only destroy the human civilization with social decay and moral degradation. Both these gigantic wars have produced human beings who are purposeless, aimless. They have no faith, they cannot communicate properly. Instead of nurturing sanity and producing healthy human beings, the devastating wars have produced people with psychological sufferings like anxiety, angst, trauma, faithlessness. These isolated and alienated people cannot communicate properly with each other. They are suffering from essential existential crisis and share a collective identity. They are lost in the chaotic world after World War I. The people after World War II are continuously engaged in circular, repetitive, and labyrinthine world toiling incessantly and purposelessly in a cyclical loop from where they cannot leave and live properly.

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