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Trapped Humans and Disabled Language in the Frenzy of War: A Study in Search of Home
and Meaning

Abstract

Trapped in the frenzy of war the whole humanity, transfixed at the bewildering catastrophic situation in the wake of wars, is not only unable to join dots and find the foothold on the ever shaky grounds but the overpowering war situations make it distrust the power of long established traditions and other means of existence in their incapacity to hold it safe and secure. The present paper drives home a point that the historical reality of immeasurable suffering of soldiers at the war frontlines and that of civilians under the grip of fear for being bombarded and rendered homeless gets further accentuated when the language finds itself helpless and fails to sustain the enormity of this calamity in the literary representations through its alphabets of pain and fear. In order to represent a reality that shatters the existing frames of reference, one has to strain against the boundaries of sayable. The paper shows some of the powerful testimonies of the concentration camps as literary artifices challenging the conventional limits of language, form and genre. This research paper shows civilian on the one hand and the language on as the creative faculty on the other hand in a stranded state, both in search of home and meaning respectively. Eventually cinema and

the responsibility of the readers as a witness to survivors' testimony are brought to the rescue of language to redeem it of its incapacity to and portray reality in its entirety, just as the nuanced renderings promise some success to humans in their pursuit to connect dots of past, present and future on the canvas of life

Terms- catastrophe, frenzy of war, literary representation, language, implied meanings

Notwithstanding the temptation of the powers that be to mythologize wars as an epic struggle of good against evil and being perpetuated so in the cultural memory of masses, any well intentioned attempt to look at war, beyond this trans-historical simplification of good vs. bad, will offer us essential insights into the real experiences of the real people. The fact remains that the insidious infiltration of war into almost all the spheres of life both at war frontlines and the protected areas leaves among inhabitants a feeling of being trapped in the frenzy of war where human beings, and everything associated with them, are in the downside, disabled and at the wit's end.

The ultimate human experience of war finding humanity paradoxically both at its best and the worst as encapsulated in line- composition in the decomposition- is so all encompassing that it hardly leaves anyone untouched and unaffected. As said by Tadeusz Borowski, a Polish war time political prisoner, about the WW II- how many men can you find in Europe who have never killed or whom somebody does not wish to kill? When taken with a pinch of salt and shifting the sites of war at mindscape in the present contemporary global scenario, this statement evokes a sense of urgency for the present paper which undertakes to observe from a detached distance and with some amount of disdainment at the war and its repercussions. It analyses critically the war situations, wars and their aftermaths that render the humans homeless, displaced and their creative faculty of language diminished and inadequate to express the enormity of human war experience taking illustration from

across the genres like novel, poetry, documentaries, short stories, films etc. by writers of different nationalities.

In the frenzy of war, humans are rendered off-guard and caught up in the vortex of emotions. In its aftermath scenario they are stuck in nowhere land sitting shattered and alone on the debris and rubbles of ruined building having gone through the deafening cacophony of bullets, bombs and falling buildings. Hans Schnitzler, a German soldier in the Henrich Boll's post war II novel *The Silent Angel*, with his experience of seeing his home town burnt to the ground, made for a victim who almost did not have anything more to lose. He stumbles around in the surreal detritus of bombed out Cologne, his native place. He is aghast at seeing the horrendous scene of annihilated Cologne city where he is unable to trace his home or any other home, for that matter, as submitted by the noble laureate himself. The novel simply portrays the people of the time and their hunger, a generation that knows that there is no home for them on this earth. That the first casualty of war remains the civilized and settled life gets visible in the untold horrors represented by the destroyed landscape, gray-faced survivors who move through their days like shadow phantoms in the heavy and sour cold air and in the desperate drive of hunger. The motif of home as safe and secure place becomes so elusive and inaccessible in the aftermath of war that everybody requires no resources and energy but only slice and bread to stay alive. The basic needs of life – food, clothes and shelter – become luxuries as seen from the point of view of homeless and abandoned people in the novel. Every conversation is focused on bread-not even full meals, just slices of bread. The city is bleak and devastated; the characters are transient figures struggling, dazed and nauseous, into whatever the future may hold. Their pasts are briefly mentioned but the conditions in which they find themselves allow for almost total dislocation from their past lives. Each character is portrayed as exhausted, struggling, and nauseous in search of some foothold to make sense of the horrible surroundings marked by the breakdown of the

morality. In the broken social order there is neither trust nor complete anarchy just as a meandering from one slice of bread for the next. Fear, hunger and ultimate search for the home though remain the main motives of the characters in the novel but the need for the flowering love among people, the need for the emergence of social infrastructure led by the compassion of the church is there for every reader to see in order to provide comfort to the aggrieved souls and silent angels that now litter the streets and populate the graveyards. Such representation aspires to redeem the complexities of the individual lives and promises to retrieve the need for the collective consciousness about belongingness which the war's physical and symbolic violence dehumanizes, silences and obliterates.

This very helpless existential condition of human beings before the reckless violence and warfare fatalities in the war of the Indo-Pak division is conveyed by the Gopi Gauba in his short story 'Two Parrots in a Cage'. The story is a severe attack on the war and the war tendencies which wreak havoc on the humanity and leave people bare naked in disarray, facing the onslaughts of uncertainty and unpredictability about the future, in search of a foothold while leaving behind ironically the very living place called 'home', a comfort zone of safe and secure place. The war-perpetrated strange situation reduces man to Learean nothingness where his self and identity are at stake. He becomes even less than a dot on the face of this earth where his search for home continues and the home itself keeps on shifting, postponing and deferring and hardly ever becomes a tangible reality just as the connotation of the word 'home' keeps deferring without any sense of finality in the world of meanings. A soldier languishing in a trench for months together might consider it his home away from the real home 'because this trench, which is as transient as the real home, provides him some free minutes or hours enough to connect to his family and its memories. Just as the parrots of the story 'Two Parrots in a Cage' mistake the cage their final home and are a bit dazed when exposed to their so called real home of free air and sky. They get so much accustomed to this

restricted space of a cage and become so much comfortable in it that the newly found freedom of fresh open air, which they might have missed when they were caged for the first time, made them recoil in self-doubt and cynicism. It is a matter of conjecture as to how long they are fated to enjoy this new freedom in the new home before they get caged again as per the larger scheme of things beyond the control and comprehension of them and their ilk. This sort of alienation and absurdity in the wake of social and political chaos in the war-fraught situations, manmade or divinely ordained, create the slippery existential conditions where the whole humanity is under seize rendering almost every aspect of it uprooted, displaced, incapacitated and disabled.

Life and its literary representations are apparently in flux and language as a natural and creative human faculty look frail and inadequate before the enormity of such a mess. It tends to lose its autonomy and definitiveness on such turbulent grounds of war because it is made to serve vested interests and ideological goals. Just as the search for home for the trapped humans is never complete and the final desired destination is always invariably made to shift, so is with language sometimes because of its own limitations and sometimes it is made to be perceived in some fashioned way that the trapped writers are in the grip of some fear that their search for the representation of actual reality remains a far cry. In the post WW II scenario, the writer in the totalitarian regime of USSR found themselves and their creativity in captivity and so the language and its handlers were made to represent the war as they were dictated i.e. in the plain and accessible style which educated their readers in the 'spirit of socialism'. The censors and the critics enforced strict controls over what could be published and failure to conform could bring about serious consequences. The writers were made to float the concept of heroism about the soldiers who were dedicated, fearless and free to sacrifice at the dictates of Stalin and his party line. But the real war efforts of the soldiers gradually became people centric bidding adieu to the hollow rhetoric of the politicians and as

a result the literary representations of the war experiences were no more rooted in the political patriotism, and the soldiers' stubborn endurances, their desire to protect homes and families were foregrounded. The poets took to writing lyrical poetry about the emotional experiences and the undeniable hardships of the individuals at war which was earlier seen with suspicion. Language was able to redeem itself from the bondages of the party line and able to convey the immediacy of war experiences with personal details and emotional authenticity through the genre of poetry. Semyon Gudzenko concluded his poem *Before the Attack*, written in 1942 as follows:

Afterwards,
 We swilled down icy vodka,
 And I used a knife to scrape
 From under my fingernails
 Another man's blood.

But it was not always that poetry saved language and its masters. Rather we find it gasping for breath before the avowed objectives of blinkered patriotism and pseudo - nationalism as in the poem 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' by Alfred Tennyson-

Forward the Light Brigade!
 Charge for the guns, he said:
 Into the valley of Death
 Rode the six hundred.

The British poet Cecil Day Lewis in the poem 'Where are the War Poets?' points towards the very difficulty of expressing truth and falling prey and succumbing to the uncritical, exclusionary and blinkered forms of patriotism when he writes that it was no subject for immortal verse that we lived by honest dreams and defend the bad against the worse.

The fact that the semantics and the syntax of language get subverted when faced with ultra nationalist considerations but its very descriptive power is made to sacrifice at the altar of war in order to dilute the gravity of situation in the public domain is something that cast aspersions on the intentions of the power that be and should be construed as a criminal act. George Orwell protested the euphemism, deceptions and falsifications of public speech singling out new phrasings formulated in order to avoid 'calling up mental pictures' of the violent acts to which they refer and which could be provocative to the general public. The wartime Europe provided a historical basis for Orwell's invention of 'newspeak' in his novel *Nineteen Eighty Four* - a totalitarian language that aims to reduce the possibilities of thought by minimizing and homogenizing the vocabulary to its speakers. So to say, during the times of political turmoil, the refined language is used as a scapegoat to justify the unjustifiable through a vocabulary that renders invisible the brutally violent phenomenon it purports to name. The politicization of language through phrases like 'causalities', collateral damage, strategic withdrawal, displaced persons and other notorious euphemism like - final solution, liquidation, used to conceal the unbearable is an eyewash for the general public.

But the possibility of question remains - if language is left free without any constraints and its masters are allowed to have ample breathing space, can both of these put together represent and convey magnitude of what it records? 'Less said the better' seems to the panacea as substantiated in the diffident opening lines of John Pudney's wartime elegy 'Missing': words fail to fill the post of Smith, the ghost. What is found to be missing is not simply the much missed Smith, but also the writer's faith in the poetic language to describe and acknowledge that loss adequately. In other words, despite the redeeming and the compensatory power of language and literary art, the claims for its adequacy to represent a war that spanned the globe, destroyed the continent and killed 60 million people has to be humble and realistic as said by the American war correspondent Martha Gellhorn - "these

articles are in no way adequate representation of the indescribable misery of war. War was always worse than I knew how to say - always.”

In the similar vein, the Japanese and German writers found that their war experiences of WWII were both literally and figuratively unspeakable not in a familiar and colloquial sense, that there seemed no words to describe destruction on such an unprecedented scale in the cities of Dresden, Hamburg, Berlin, Tokyo, Hiroshima, Nagasaki. While making honest efforts to ingratiate or represent a reality that shatters existing frames of reference, as the horrendous experience of concentration camps in Paris during WWII, one has to strain against the boundaries of the sayable. That is why some of the most powerful testimonies of the camps challenge the conventional limits of language, form and genre. Delbo's Auschwitz trilogy is the striking illustration of the complexity of testimony as a literary genre. Her memoirs convey the shock of the traumatic experience by interweaving poetry, prosepoetry, narrative and dramatic elements. In 'None of the Us will return' Delbo declares, 'Today i am not sure that what i wrote is true [historically] but i am sure it is truthful filtered through the fluidity of memory and imagination'. The problem with the trauma's transmission into collective memory is not the language and its capacity to communicate. Rather at stake is the responsibility of those who did not suffer the camps to see, imagine and in turn bear witness to survivor's testimony. Reader's responsibility obviously cannot be undermined to evaluate the capacity of language, adequacy of literary art and its representation of the unspeakable and the unbearable hazards of war through his power of imaginative visualization.

But it should be candidly confessed that the inadequacy of the literary art stares us on the face and so other three dimensional modes of representation like cinema has to be resorted to in the efforts to convey those horrendous experiences of apocalypse or unimaginable devastation which literature struggles to voice. The physical, political and moral devastation at the chaotic end of war seem most naturally expressed in the

incomprehensively altered cityscapes that defied all familiar human meaning and seemed beyond the reach of human speech. The weight of the ruins and mountains of rubble that were the dead cities was so overpowering to be invoked in speech or writing. Film rather than literature best conveys the magnitude of total destruction and beyond that the painfully ambiguous burden of guilt, retribution and remorse. The first post war German film 'The Murderers among Us' directed by Wolfgang Staudte in 1946 made the rubble and ruins of Berlin his film's protagonist. The film's beginnings reveals a huge mountain of rubble and some small children clambering across those ruins in search of something they will most probably never find.

Coming towards the conclusion, it can be inferred that the wars generated apocalyptic chaos leaves the whole social, political paraphernalia in quandary overturning all collective and humanistic hopes and values. Any attempt to make any sense of this topsy turvy situation in any form of artistic representation is bound to be inadequate but the eclectic mixture of inter- generic representations might do justice to the horrific catastrophe of wars . Reader's response and role as a testimony to the traumatic experience of war and their validation to these through empathetic and imaginative visualization of holocausts can salvage the language and literature from its real inadequacies where the cinema and its third eye can step in to plug the holes and fill the blind spots left by human eye in black and white. The trapped humans can be bailed out from their search for 'permanent home' by taking homelessness a necessity and condition for the enrichment of pan- cultural imagination as said by Guru Nanak Dev ji to his disciples- Disperse and be homeless to spread the lofty ideals of life which tend to deteriorate at the altar of the complacency and self containment as represented by the protagonist Julia Davenant from Elizabeth Taylor's book 'At Mrs. Leppincotes' who is more at home in the settings of English Literature than the house she

lives in which is owned by the absent Mrs. Lappincote . We are similarly tenants in the house of god who is present in absentia everywhere.

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