



The Achievers Journal

Volume 3, No.1

ISSN (ONLINE): 2395-0897 / ISSN (PRINT): 2454-2296 January-March, 2017

War a Social Evil: Reflections in the Poetry of Judith Wright and Oodgeroo Noonuccal

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Abstract

Judith Wright and Oodgeroo Noonuccal, the two well-known Australian poets, have dealt with war and its effect on humanity in their poetry. Both the poets were a witness to the Second World War and the political and social ramifications of the times inspired their thoughts and feelings. Wickedness of wars, destruction and countless killings of innocent human beings take an intellectual and rational poetic expression in their poems. The cruelty of war and transformation of a peaceful world into an inhumane one has influenced their sensory art. Both the poets consider war as an evil on earth and suggest various solutions to this problem. One finds a note of pacifism in their poetry that appeal to humanity to have no more war as it will only lead to bloodshed, dejection and hostility. They advocate an end to war that will be an attempt towards harmony and peace.

Keywords: poetry, war, humanity, pacifism, harmony

Universally war has been the major concern affecting the writing of all ages. It affects the sensibility and receptivity of poets. Poetry on war technically and substantially comes down from ancient times. On the surface, war and poetry are actually inimical. War destroys what poetry would make; poetry combats the elements from which war springs. Yet reaction to war is such that its very violence stimulates more poetry. Poetry has little significance if it is not written in response to experience and war lends objects open on which the poets can exercise their perceptions. The poems on war by Judith Wright and Oodgeroo Noonuccal are potentiated by their experiences of war and its suffering. They



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both were a witness to the Second World War and the political and social ramifications of the times inspired their thoughts and feelings. Man's progressive advancement towards barbarism and bloodshed is one of the themes of their war-poetry. Wickedness of wars, destruction and countless killings of innocent human beings take an intellectual and rational poetic expression in their poems. The cruelty of war and transformation of a peaceful world into an inhumane one has influenced their sensory art. They have translated their experiences and overview of war in their poetry. Just as the experience of war years strongly affected the world-view of many, the horrors and happenings of that period had a strong impact upon Wright and Noonuccal's sensibility.

A substantial corpus of Wright's war-poetry is devoted to a series of threatening wars like World War I, World War II, Vietnam War, Korean War, Germany's invasion over Japan, Spanish Civil War and Napalm War. Judith Wright was born during the First World War, lived through and was greatly influenced by many wars that Australia had involved herself in. At the beginning of Second World War she returned to her father's station to help him during the shortage of labour and it was during this that she developed her attachment to the land and its people. She felt great empathy for those who went to war and for those who were left behind. In an interview in 1979, she recalls growing up through two world wars and describes her most vivid childhood memory as being the burning of an effigy of the Kaiser after World War I- an enormous and terrible white clad figure toppling into a bonfire. For Wright, violence towards our fellow human beings is inextricably linked to violence towards the land. A substantial corpus of Wright's war-poetry is devoted to such cruelty of war that demeans human life. Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker then) also had her own experience of war. She volunteered for war service in 1940 and spent four years as a member of Australian Women Army Service. She was trained as a telephonist and later promoted to corporal and was given the responsibility of training some new recruits. To her surprise and her expectation, she did not experience any racial discrimination and made some firm friends in the Army. During her war service, "Oodgeroo noticed a big difference in the way she was treated once she had enlisted. She experienced



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social equality” (Dolphin 45). Her persistent middle ear infections ended her services in war and she was invalidated out. Later she participated in the Army’s rehabilitation scheme by training in secretarial work and book-keeping. Her parents, too did their bit for the war effort by throwing their home open to soldiers and construction workers. Both the poets played their part during the war time and realized that war is an evil which increases the suffering and leads humanity to a whirlpool of mess. They comprehend that there are three things one can do about war- fight in it, ignore it or protest it- and they strongly protest it.

Dealing with the trauma of war, Judith Wright in her poetry captures the astounding reality of life. She depicts the grim and sombre picture of war that leads to merciless killings, chaos of human values, summoning human cries which spoil the social atmosphere. In the poem *The Trains* she portrays the dark side of war:

Strange primitive piece of flesh, the heart laid quite
hearing their cry pierce through its thin-walled cave
recalls the forgotten tiger
and leaps awake in its old panic riot;
and how shall mind be sober,
since blood’s red thread still binds us fast in history? (CP12)

The Trains is a meditation on a world at war; war being a symptom and symbol of a broader human crisis which displays nakedness of evil in the form of terror, pain, grief and loss. Horrifying wars also give birth to social riots and cities become streams of blood and torn flesh. Life seized with ceaseless turmoil “rattles” the “bones” in the poem *Spring After War* where wailings and mourning of mortal beings reflect the pain brought by the wars. “The years of death rattle their bones / The



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ewe cries in the pitiless rain/ the mortal cry of anguished love” (CP 33). Wright has captured her knowledge of life and death and the effects of war and successfully translated them into her poems. She writes: “My generation is dying, after long lives / swung from war to depression to war to fatness” (CP 419). She reflects on the pain associated with separation, “We meet and part now over all the world” (CP 7). An air of bitterness prevailing in the social environment due to instability of life gets a projection in the poem *The Old Prison* where man cries out his grief through the “flute of stone”: “Each in his cell alone / cried as the wind now cries / through this flute of stone” (CP53) Wars resulting in brutal killings and countless deaths tear away the emotional bond which human beings share with the land. She utters with deep regret “we should have trained you / in using weapons” (CP285) Wright in her autobiography reflects the violent strokes of incessant wars and its wickedness which cause terror, pain and paralyse the smooth stream of life. Depiction of war and its aftermaths bring pain when the poetess confesses:

“Meredith was just two month old when on 25 June 1950 the Korean war erupted. We watched developments in horror as Jack tried to persuade himself that surely Australia would refuse to enter a war in which for the first time it would not be under British pressure to do so. As the war and the menace of the atomic bomb pressed down, we saw little discussion of the basic causes of the malaise in western thought.” (Clark 261)

Oodgeroo Noonuccal sees war as a fundamental tragedy. She feels shocked to see the inhumanity of man, his brutal denial of human values and extinctions of human potentialities. In the poem *Dead Life* she talks of the dead people who sacrificed their life worthlessly roaming on the “The streets / Screaming obscenities, / Cursing, damning” (MP 52) the effects of war. War, she regards as an evil fiend which destroys others. It overpowers the devilish mind and leads to the death of millions of lives:

In a span of life



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Ten millions lives are lost

And few found. (MP52)

War, an evil committed against humanity is what Noonuccal highlights in her poetry. She distresses over the fact that the West has brought such a debacle discarding the principles of values and engaging in a senseless and fratricidal conflict. In her speech *Custodians of the Land* she expresses her concern regarding the “war games” played by “war lords” which in turn have wasted youth as so many young men rush to senseless deaths: “We have lost too many sons and daughters to the war games their war lords play” (MP107). Such loss brings pain and tears “Pain there must be and tears, / Sorrow and death” (MP74). The poet feels that man can bear discomfort in life but not at the cost of “intolerance, unkindness, cruelty” that he chooses from “the mean and base, which Nature never made / But we alone” (MP74). This idea is depicted in the poem *God’s One Mistake* which makes an appeal to “Save man”:

I who am ignorant and know so little,

So little of life and less of God,

This I do know

That happiness is intended and could be,

That all wild simple things have life fulfilled

Save man,

That all on earth have natural happiness

Save man. (MP 74)



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Judith Wright also writes about the barbarous nature of man and his unquenchable thirst for bloodshed which germinates in him a deadly beast; thus trapping him in the “foul” game of killings. Her poem *Lament for Passenger Pigeons* is a lamentation over the warring nations:

Trapped in the fouling nests of time and space,

...

and it is man who lends a deafening ear.

And it is man we eat and man we drink

and man who thickens round like a stain. (CP 319)

Growth of destructive values in human heart strengthens the brutality, hatred and ill-will which take him towards the path of destruction and downfall. He falls from the false platform of evil and easily “brittles” away. Nothing saves the evil doer from the heavy tide as in *The Moving Image*:

Looking from so high the world is evil and small

like a dried head from the islands with a grin of shell,

brittle and easy to break. But there is no end to the

breaking—

...

nothing but the tick of the clock and a world sucked dry;

nothing-till the tide of time come back to the full

and drown a man too sane, who climbed too high. (CP 15)



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Judith Wright and Oodgeroo Noonuccal's poems written in wartime not only speak of society's exploitation at the cruel hands of demoralized human race but also the wrath, annoyance and grief on one hand and a self fighting the brutal act of mankind on the other. The plight of those who have become dehumanised and who are too selfish and callous to understand the tragedy is denounced by them. The shadows of innumerable deaths of children, women, men, warriors and the suffering of the people in the Spanish Civil War against the fascist Franco and a horrifying presentation of a picture of peaceful world being blown to pieces by the malign, wild and mechanical actions describe a society's uproar, as depicted by Wright in the poem *Habitat*:

Guns level and bombs drop,

evil's come to come,

eyes cock in the world's dark

...

Chaos incentres order. (CP 307)

Ruthless and ceaseless deaths because of the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki exhibit the devilish nature of man and the dreariness it caused. And also the allure of violence penetrates deep into the mind and thoughts like a stain that could never be washed away, neither by a mother's tears of wailing nor by her logics, as in *The Precipice*:

behaving like any woman, but she was no longer living.

To blame her would mean little; she had her logic,

the contained logic of a bomb, not even tragic,

to which each day had made its small addition



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ending at last in this, which was completion. (CP 120)

In the same poem, over possessed with the anxiety of atomic bombs, the wailing mother flees away with her children and with a “certain” mind jumps off the edged rock:

she fled along the path, the children with her.

So reaching the edge at last and no less certain

she took the children in her arms because she loved them

and jumped (CP 120-21)

Similar vein of painful feelings and emotions takes its flow in *The Idler* where man gets trapped in a mad, horrifying race of deadly atomic wars “the map ruled off in square of black and white, / and all his islands vanished with their palms/ under the hostile despotism of night” (CP13). Bitterness arising due to man’s evildoing, his intrigued motives towards his kinsmen and the ultimate spread of violence transform the social environment into one of a “galaxy” blazing with “visible destruction” and sabotage of human values at the hands of nuclear weapons and atomic powers. *Patterns* is a poetic piece, flashing light on man’s ignorance giving birth to his immoral and wrong doings:

Round earth’s circumference and atmosphere

bombs and warheads crouch waiting their time.

...

“Twisted are the hearts of men- dark powers possess them.

Burn the distant evildoer, the unseen sinner.” (CP 426)



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Oodgeroo Noonuccal like Judith Wright wanted to let others see the destructive reality of war. Through their poetry they warned others about what men were doing to each other in the name of scientific advancements. These advancements were destroying the universal bond of sympathy and brotherhood. “Man only, the books tell, knows evil and wrong” (MP5) writes Noonuccal. In her poem *No More Boomerang* Noonuccal makes ironic statement on the civilization which has made man more barbaric. Man no longer believes in sharing. He is “now all civilised”. She caustically remarks that the progress exposes man towards destruction:

Lay down the woomera,

Lay down the waddy.

Now we got atom-bomb,

End *everybody*. (MP 31)

She sarcastically addresses the way the Whites created war on their land and overpowered them “Spears could not contend against guns and we were mastered” (MP83). Noonuccal believes that inventions like guns, ropes and spears were done for the benefit of human kind but man through his evil and selfish ways has brought disaster through them. The good has been turned to worst and then follows catastrophic events:

When someone invented the rope

It wasn't so long till some other

Improved its use by inventing the noose,

And we started to hang one another. (MP75)



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Wars not only cause physical and financial loss but the ugliness of this butchery lies in the psychological, mental, emotional, ethical and environmental loss too. A war-ridden society is a paralysed organ of a sick body which gradually decays and reaches its painful stage of destruction. The fuming smoke and raging flames of fire ruin the smooth course of life “Eva Callaghan whose boy died in the army / sat under the streamers like a house to let / and went alone, a black pot brimming with tears” (CP 64). The chaos among human ethical-values and lack of enlightenment, discipline and order becomes evident in Wright’s “Builders” where confusion arises as “How whatever we construct gets complicated,/ gets out of order and beyond control” (CP 361). *Dream* focuses on the fear arising out of arriving shadows of dark clouds of wars and turbulence causing due to total devastation. It also causes fear of a broken dream. Mourning over the loss of serene world brings out the knavery of evil. “Nothing retrieved,/ the known world lost, diced away/ among the inhuman powers.” (CP 191) Evil imposes threat and fear on human mind, giving birth to several notions which disturb the peace of life. Poetess confession of the threats of horrifying wars is evident in her autobiography:

“I had been born into the war, while the Gallipoli engagement was at its worst. Two of my mother’s brothers had gone overseas...I must have absorbed the idea of war from my beginning; it haunted my early childhood...and it became a grave for something..., and finally, as the bombing planes roared out of the mild New England skies, saving a crowd of thankful grown-ups from the raid.” (Clarke 31)

Oodgeroo Noonuccal also feels saddened to see the consequences of war and the toll it takes on individual life and community. In quest of such aimless goals we forget that “we were people before we were citizens” (MP 77). She reminds humanity that when God created the “good world” (MP 16) he was happy but later repented of giving “reason and free will” (MP74) to human mind. He had never expected that his “godless man” will make “barrier and ban” and rear “each frontier wall” (MP 16) with contempt and scorn. The effects of war engulf nature as well and hamper its



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balance. The “gum trees twist and turn, / Sadly shedding their eucalypt tears,/ Which merge with your split blood” (MP 95). The “wild flowers” are also trampled by the merciless soldiers as in the poem *China..... Woman*:

I hear the heavy tramps
Of the liberating army.
Shaking the mountains loose,
Of rolling stones.
Falling, crushing,
The weeping wild flowers
In their path. (MP 94)

Noonuccal strongly opposes such destruction of mankind and nature and appeals to begin with “the establishing of the armed neutrality of Australia” (MP 107). She says that “Man’s endless quest is to be happy” which cannot be achieved with the present “crime waves” and “A-bomb plans” (MP 76). Human beings have all their lives “fought for a just equality” but have never tried to understand the disastrous consequences of war. In her poem *All One Race* she gives a strong message to humanity:

Black tribe, yellow-tribe, red, white or brown,
From where the sun jumps up to where it goes down,
Heers and pukka-sahibs, demoiselles and squaws,
All one family, so why make wars? (MP 1)



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The poetry of Judith Wright and Oodgeroo Noonuccal on war depicts the torture, trauma and turbulence increased during war time. Wright is seen as a minute observer of wars and its aftermath. This is the reason why the volume of her poetry on war is bigger than Noonuccal. However, they both share the dehumanizing and poignant aspects of war and show that the after-effects of war are harrowing. They consider it as a way to human destruction. Although they both mitigate the feeling by calling it worthless Noonuccal attaches a philosophic touch in her poetry related to war. Like the oriental philosophy she has a cosmopolitan outlook and considers mankind as “one family”. Both the poets consider war as an evil on earth and suggest various solutions to this problem. Like Siegfried Sassoon they use their poetry to convey outrage at the continued prosecution of war. Like Wilfred Owen, they bring out the waste of war and irrevocability of death which grows into a consideration of how precious and vulnerable human life is. Like Thomas Hardy, their poetry can be seen as a moral response to war and a point of guidance at a time of national displacement. One finds a note of pacifism in their poetry that appeal to humanity to have no more war as it will only lead to bloodshed, dejection and hostility. The end to war will be an attempt towards harmony and peace.

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