

“Contravening the glory of war” War and Women

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Abstract— Sean O’Casey (1880-1964) is a playwright who is renowned for championing the cause of victims. His writings exhibit his empathy towards the woes and agonies of the sufferers. In all his plays he has never supported any violent action as the solution to the ailments of the society. He is against the war, violence and bloodshed. Through his realistic as well as anti-heroic play, *The Plough and the Stars*, he has tried to draw attention of the masses to the miserable plight of women who are wives of the war martyrs. This article focuses on the loneliness of women and their pitiable conditions once their men leave for the war in the name of patriotism. The playwright questions the loyalty of these soldiers who neglect their familial duties and forsakes their wives and children to save the honour of their motherland. They fail to value the concrete and run after the abstract.

Keywords— Violence, Easter Rising, Woes, Patriotism, negligence, obligations, turbulence, turmoil.

I. INTRODUCTION

The world has witnessed many tumultuous changes and coercions during the two world wars, the mad race for nuclear armament and finally the abhorrent terror attacks have created insecurity of the existence of human life in this increasingly globalised world. This erratic violence continues to pose threat on the modern world, thereby toppling the very concept of nationalism, which consequently sabotages individuals, families and especially women. Many women have lost their lives, physical and mental health and possessions. One of the bitter truth that one encounters during the wars is miserable plight of women. They are not the active participants of war, yet they suffer a lot. They are the passive victims of war and violence. MacPherson realizes this in *Women and the Irish Nation*: “During the War of Independence (1919–21) women were depicted as passive victims of the conflict...”¹

The play *The Plough and the Stars* expresses Sean O’Casey’s repugnance towards the obsession of war and violence during the Easter Rising and “exposes the human costs of political revolution” (Atkinson 42). The anguishes of women serve the backdrop of the play in order to impel the political doyens to cease fighting during the Easter Rising. Though O’Casey was an ardent supporter of freedom of Ireland and served in various capacities, he hated blood-shedding and killing because it instigated the agonies of women. Whatever had been the political or the economic pretexts of war; women writhed and underwent all the despondent afflictions that war inflicted on them.

The aftermaths of war such as carnage of innocents, destruction of livestock, trapping women inside their homes is stirringly dramatized by O’Casey in the play.

This article points out the cannibalistic acts of war during the Easter Rising and viciousness related to it; Sufferings of individuals, especially the women, the atrocities and mindlessness of the war mongers in Ireland initiated by the nationalists are all evident in the play. It portrays how The Rising had adversely afflicted women who suffered deeply because of the irrationalities of their men. Man are depicted as callous who pays no heed to the women’s emotions and feelings. What matters most for men is their personal goals such as promotion to a higher rank. The despairs of women in the *Plough and the Stars* during the Easter Rising in Dublin are contrasted with the imprudence and conceit of the nationalistic leaders of the Easter Rising.

O’Casey poignantly depicts the gruesome images of Uprising. Gory images of violence in form of gun shots, blood shedding, corpses in streets, smoke, flames, fires, devastations and obliteration of private and public assets, and looting are the heart wrenching scenes of war represented throughout the play. He did not eulogize the soldiers or martyrs of the Rising but instead focused on the impact of war on the non-combatants and innocents and portrayed them as real victims of war. The play is about Easter Rising that devours the society and its men and women who start the war with the sacred motive of restoring their rights rebutted by the colonial masters. The Radical movements or Rising can never be a time being

solution of any problem but it cannot be effective in the long- run. The play ultimately comes to the impact of war on women in particular and the society and humanity in general. Human relationship is the first thing which gets befuddled by wars and risings. Love is its prime prey, and women and children, the love incarnate are its victims. The significant women characters such as Nora, Bessie and Mrs Gogan; their importance is due to their dislike for war. The female consciousness is more interested in productivity and continuity than in killings and revolution. The idea of moving on is very close to the heart of woman. She has deep faith in marital and familial life which is crumbled by socio political and eco political divisions, mishaps and wars. It is woman's ingenuity in compelling and restoring what history tears apart... They, unswervingly or circuitously, refute the claims and beliefs of men. The actions of Men bring in violence and instability whereas women work for non-violence and stability, for culture and spirit. Women are the inconspicuous energy of the society. Men systematically destroy this basic, elemental energy and try to invent an illusionary world of energy of their own in their war machine. This war machine forcibly weans away men from their women and thereby destroys its own inventor. Woman intuitively knows this basic truth of life. Man feels it and wants to lose himself in sharing this creative energy with his woman but his cerebral part or element is so strong that it arouses his ego to go apart in order to enjoy his own creation – the illusionary world of destructive energy of war machine and get destroyed. Mrs. Gogan understands that the world of man is the world of death (The Plough 141). The dialogue between Fluther and Mrs. Gogan is symbolic. Fluther feels "It's only a little cold I have" (The Plough 141). He does not feel that something is seriously wrong with him; man underplays the reality of his world of death. So arrogant is he of his man's power. Only a woman understands where the reality lies. She makes man aware of the danger staring in his face but he will not take care of it as Fluther states saying: "A man in th' pink o' health should have a holy horror of allowin' thoughts o' death to be festerin' in his mind" (The Plough 141). The man might be faint and coughing but he cannot think of death – he must keep it at afar distance from himself. This is his ego speaking. The reality bursts out from the mouth of the woman who knows that the world of man is the world of death.

The woman, Nora is the creative life-force seeking to keep her partner to herself and away from his destructive war thoughts. Nora tries to save her man back from engaging himself in horrendous action.. To Nora, men are mere "babies" who "don't know th' danger o' them things" (The

Plough 148). Man has made the sword but he does not know how to wield it; while using it he has no sense of time and place and there comes his ego.

"a lemon-whiskered oul' Swine" (The Plough 148). So he will have his revenge with the sword. The war-contrivance is so handy that he jumps to it at the slenderest incitement without thinking about the priority of its use and the aptness of time and place. He is ready even to infringe the sacrosanctity of home. So for man nothing is important when overwhelmed by war thoughts – even house and family. His ego must not be touched. He needs to be sensible and only a woman can help him in putting his sword in a sheath so that there can be peace in the home and then in the world – Nora warning him, "If you attempt to wage that sword of yours at anybody again, it'll have to be taken off you an' put in a safe place away from babies that don't know th' danger o' them things" (The Plough 148). She has to remind him "of what's proper an' allowable in a respectable home" (The Plough 148).

O'Casey, in *The Plough*, also points out the Easter Rising as a cause of rift between a wife and a commandant husband and the feelings of wife they are left alone in their houses. Jim and Nora are a newlywed couple but their life is troubled because of the Easter Rising. The scene between Nora, the wife, Clitheroe, the recently promoted commandant, and the Captain reflects women's aversion towards war and the false notions behind it.

Nora conceals the promotion letter from her husband to keep his attention focused on their marital life and to evade him from falling prey to the war monster. She feels wretched because her husband cares only for the Citizen Army, forgetting his own responsibility towards his wife. On hearing the news of her husband's death, she has a miscarriage and she goes insane. she walks in her sleep due to her passionate emotions that bind her to her husband. Men are really like babies who make mess without thinking of consequence. She craves for a peaceful home for her family which in return will spread to the outside world:

"let it end at that, for God's sake; Jack'll be in any minute, an' allowable in a respectable home" (The Plough 148).

She thinks that peace starts at home first and then spreads in the universe. She endeavours to create an atmosphere of peace for her husband, but the atmosphere outside is so violent that it has eradicated peace of home. But Man assumes woman to be just a doll with which he can play as and when he likes without considering her gushes of emotions, without treating her as a sensitive human being. She is expected just to satisfy his urges at his sweet will. He comes home just for this. But still the woman understands her baby. Nora is that understanding woman.

There is this significant long talk between Clitheroe and Nora: “Ay, you gave it up – because you got th’ sulks when they didn’t make a Captain of you. It wasn’t for my sake, Jack” (The Plough 153).

The long talk between Nora and her husband explains the fickleness of relationship that both share. Man is made to understand the significance of love between them. For some time, he is lost in singing the tune of love. But the conceited world of man will not permit him to betray if it knocks at his door and encourages his ego with an allurements of worldly advancement. The man becomes dumbfounded and blinded and forgets her and his love for her. The requests of the woman are outrightly and callously rejected:

VOICE. Commandant Clitheroe, Commandant Clitheroe, are you there? A message from General Jack Connolly.

CLITHEROE. Damn it, it’s Captain Brennan.

NORA (anxiously). Don’t mind him, don’t mind, Jack. Don’t break our happiness. ... Pretend we’re not in. let us forget everything to-night but our two selves!

CLITHEROE reassuringly. Don’t be alarmed, darling; I’ll just see what he wants, an’ send him about his business.

NORA (tremulously). No, no. Please, Jack; don’t open it. Please, for your own little Nora’s sake! (156-57)

Clitheroe gets irritated with Nora’s plea to intervene between him and the call of war. The nature of man favours violence and destruction over peace and happiness, especially when there is remuneration or promotion. Nora’s love and affection is denied and she is thrown away after she has been used.

Clitheroe is selfish and wants to achieve his own desires at the expense of his family. This is what exactly Clitheroe does when the message comes from General Jim Connolly. He pushes his wife to hanker after blood. Nora attempts to stop her husband by all means but he is not going to listen to her words. She burns the promotion letter, but this plan does not work as well. She again pleads to Jack to ignore the knock at the door and pretend that they are not in the house, but she fails again. Clitheroe opens the door for the Captain to get in. The Captain informs him that he has been promoted and that the promotion letter has already been sent to him. In the course of action, one feels sympathetic towards Nora who has been doing her best to prevent her husband from joining the fight. She has been desperately attempting to secure her husband from the viciousness of war. She knows that the death of her husband is the death of the family. They are newly married and she is pregnant. She anticipated that promotion to a commandant is the way to destruction – abjuring the purest creative love leading to peace and tranquillity by breaking

the heart of woman and running after something which is destructive of human relationship and humanity:

NORA flaming up. ... Is General Connolly an’ th’ Citizen Army goin’ to be your only care? Is your home goin’ to be only a place to rest in? Am I goin’ to be only somethin’ to provide merry-makin’ at night for you?

Your vanity’ll be th’ ruin of you an’ me yet. ... That’s what’s movin’ you: because they’ve made an officer of you, you’ll make a glorious cause of what you’re doin’, while your little red-lipp’d Nora can go on sittin’ here, makin’ a companion of th’ loneliness of th’ night! (158)

Nora is hurt for this. But she is indifferent to her own humiliation and pain. No amount of torture can stop her from seeking to save the man from jaws of death. Man is needed for herself and for love. Hence life is not to be offered to death. With this belief, Nora searches for her husband: “All last night at th’ barricades I sought you, Jack. ... I didn’t think of th’ danger – I could think of you. ... I asked for you everywhere. ... Some of them laughed. ... I was pushed away, but I shoved back. ... Some o’ them even sthruke me ... an’ screamed an’ screamed your name” (The Plough 196).

The purest love is beyond a man’s understanding. He can understand only war, destruction and death for these make him manly. This is how he understands Nora’s sentiments: “Are you goin’ to turn all th’ risks I’m takin’ into a laugh” (The Plough 196)? The vainglorious man gets everything from woman. The fact is that he is a man worth the name because of the woman who makes all sorts of sacrifices to make him a man – Nora implores Jack:

“please, Jack. ... You’re hurting me, Jack. ... Honestly. ... Oh, you’re hurting me! ... I won’t, I won’t! ... Oh, Jack. I gave you everything you asked me. ... Don’t fling me from you, now” (The Plough 197).

It is the clash of man’s self-centredness and woman’s selflessness. Once the child learns to stand on his own, he flings himself away from his mother; he becomes vain of his capability if it worries her. Here is the ego of the grown-up man – the Captain Brennan who fiercely addresses Clitheroe, “Why are you beggin’ her to let you go? Are you afraid of her, or what? Break her hold on you, man, or go up, an’ sit on her lap” (The Plough 197).

Now, the vast world is his area of his work and so he must rip himself away from the woman’s lap. He has now grown up too big: “He roughly loosens her grip, and pushes her away from him” (The Plough 197).

He has to adhere to call of war, he must go even if it is dangerous for his life. He calls this fortitude, gallantry and manliness. But only his woman knows the truth. – it is really cowardice that forces the man to war and he has to hide his true feelings and put up a brave face:

Women are helpless before this god of war; they can at best scream and go mad. While the violence is going on, both husband and wife suffer death. That is the one and only one end to which this war leads. It bloats the ego of man and separates the husband from wife and kills their love. That is why it is a murderer - "Murderers, that's what you are; murderers, murderers" (The Plough 205)! War succeeds because man is enslaved in its hand. Only if the man listens to the rationality of woman, the whole situation might change. But the swollen egoist that man is, he would not pay attention to her and accept her love. And that is because he wrongly assumes that he can stand on his own feet whereas the fact is that whatever he is, he is reliant on woman. Man without a woman is nothing; such a man turns destructive "Oh come! You great baby" (131). The adjective great is significant and ironical. It is a jibe at the bloated ego of man who actually is 'baby'.

Clitheroe is arrogant and blind to this reality. Death and destruction follow. To be a hero, he abnegates the love of his wife and accepts war and death. It is the death of no particular man or woman. It is the homicide of humanity and human relationship; the killing of woman and of all the sacred and innocent things of the living world.

Nora and Clitheroe start their life together dreaming of a jauntier life. It is not a bizarre romantic world of which they see and dream. It is a reality of life – the goal of life where they have to move. In moving they come closer to the love, peace, and serenity in Nature. It is the cradle "of happier transports to be" (The Plough 165). Nature is the centre of all creative energy shared by the trees, birds, and bees. They know of no other thing. Only man is aware of war and destruction in violating the principle of Nature.

Man chooses world and thus war and destruction in preference to Nature providing 'happier transports to be'. World is abhorrent of this transport. Thus, when Nora and Clitheroe are singing of this transport 'a knock is heard at the door'. Here one is reminded both of Wordsworth and Shakespeare. Wordsworth in his poem 'The World is Too Much with Us' repents over the destruction of the soul of man by his worldliness; he then wishes to be a Pagan enjoying the beauty and tranquillity of Nature. Man violates these with a vengeance and creates an imbalance in his life. When he moves towards that there is a knock. Significantly the word 'knock' reminds us of the 'knock' at the gate in Shakespeare's Macbeth. It is the gate of hell where innocence has been murdered. Here murderers are knocking at the door making Nora fearful and clinging closely to Clitheroe. She is really apprehensive; murderers are out prowling and may snatch Clitheroe away. And so she anxiously prays "Don't mind him ... Jack. Don't break

our happiness. ... Pretend we're not in. Let us forget everything to-night but our two selves" (The Plough 156)! But murderers must have the man – Clitheroe, to be the victim of the war and thus to be dead. Nature is high and dry; the world with its war-thoughts is all powerful. Nature can elevate birds, trees and bees to a happier world but it is helpless before man who fancies the world with developed with destructive machines. Man is keen to embrace the danger; only woman protests as Bessie confirms it

O'Casey through this play, poignantly makes his audience conscious of the plights, that the women face during war. Women continuously squeal over their men and protest against war begetting destruction. There is Bessie with anger in her heart over "th' poor

Tommies ... me own son, dhrenched in water an' so bloody bked in blood groppin' their way to a shattherin' death, in a shower o' shells" (The Plough 168).

These women cannot think of the bloodshed. Therefore they keep shrieking but nothing happens to save them from these gory sights as debris of war. Woman's frantic cry or pursuit for her man is considered a heinous act to man in the public view. That is, women must not weep or search for their men and they must accept the situation they are caught in. But women they are not so hard hearted– they cannot be kept silent when their men are in peril.

They raise their voices psychotically to be heard as Nora does when she looks for her husband "My Jack will be killed, my Jack will be killed! ... He is to be butchered as a sacrifice to th' dead" (The Plough 184)! Nora again mimes the true nature of woman. She states that "there's no woman gives a son or a husband to be killed – if they say it, they're lyin', against God, Nature, an' against themselves ..." (The Plough 184).

It is a clash of creation and annihilation. The woman is for creation; the man is for annihilation. Thus the two are not allowed to meet; Nora searches for Clitheroe everywhere and he is not to be found anywhere. The separation of man and woman is the dictate of war. And the woman who is working against this dictate must be dead. Nora goes neurotic and has to die without her man and without a little bit of their happiness in the form of their child.

"I'd been lyin' in th' streets, only for him. ... they have dhruven away th' little happiness life had to spare for me. He has gone from me for ever, for ever. ... Oh, Jack, Jack, Jack" (The Plough 186)!

Another innocent woman looking for her son dies in this world – a world of excruciating torture. She has been a sincere friend to Nora after Clitheroe's murder. She has been with Nora in her bedroom to take care of her because Nora became insomniac and somniloquent. She is a real

victim of this war in spite of her persistent attempt to establish peace. But, she is the one who pays the price for the follies of men. Bessie is assassinated while she has been pushing Nora away from the window. No man was there to help. All are out except for the insane Nora. Blood is pouring out of Bessie and Nora freaks out -. What a wretchedness! Bessie asks Nora for a glass of water to quench her thirst before death; Nora is standstill. Bessie dies singing her death song:

I do believe, I will believe

That Jesus died for me;

That on th' cross His blood,

From sin to set me free. ... (216)

She ceases singing, and lies stretched out, still and very rigid as described by O'Casey. Her horrifying condition is narrated by Mrs. Gogan; Bessie dies, innocence incarnate is killed –

“She feels Bessie’s forehead My God, she’s as cold as death. They’re afther murdherin’ th’ poor inoffensive woman! (The Plough 217)”

Conclusion

The Plough and the Stars was written to remove the preconditioned glories of the Easter Rising as portrayed by the then poets. He is against the gory sights of war and violence because he is sure that it only increases the suffering of women as dramatized through Nora. Her words below are deplorable and make one feel how the woman is really a victim of war and violence: A speech by Nora in The Plough captures the woes of women during the Easter Rising in Dublin:

“Oh, I know that wherever he is, he's thinkin' of wantin' to be with me. I know he's longin' to be passin' his hand through me hair, to be caressin' me neck, to fondle me hand” (185).

Insecurity swamps the whole nation in Dublin; Nora and Bessie are mere examples. These two women and many others suffered a lot due to the fabricated beliefs of nationalism of their leaders. Nora is woeful and the loss of happiness due to loss of her husband poses questions to those who have no humane feelings. There is thus a complete break of the basic human relationship.

Women’s voice for peace is singularly presented in the play through the female characters who strive to restore serenity and steadiness to their homes and their society. They know that peace is first to be established at various levels of existence - home, society and then the universe.

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