

War and Love in Rabindranath's “Destruction” and Nazrul's “Hena”

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ABSTRACT

The English poets, Owen and Sassoon, exposed the hypocrisies and lies in the romantic view of war. In South Asia Rabindranath had an idealistic view of humanity and was shocked at the progress of human civilization towards the destruction of mankind. Nazrul was in favour of fighting for liberty for one's motherland, but he also knew the horrors of war from his first hand experience in the battle front. He came across both the moments of allurement and repulsion of the whole business of war, which find reflection in his writings. The focus of this paper is a realistic analysis of war and the soothing beauty of love as revealed in Rabindranath's “Destruction” and Nazrul's “Hena”. In other words, an attempt is made to bring to light the problematics of war in contrast to the positive forces of love and beauty as envisioned by Rabindranath and Nazrul. A qualitative analysis is made in keeping with the aim of this paper – to lay bare the anti-war discourse in the chosen works of Rabindranath and Nazrul. The paper seeks to be a part of the ongoing discussion on anti-war discourse finding meaning not in the destructive power of war but in the eternal and positive forces of beauty and love.

KEYWORDS: *beauty, love, humanity, anti-war, realistic view*

INTRODUCTION

To discuss about war, one is reminded of the poetry of Wilfred Owen and the famous lines of his Preface: “My Subject is War and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity ... all the poet can do today is to warn. That is why the true Poets must be truthful” (quoted in Carter 333). From his first hand experience of the Great War, Owen realised the difference between the romantic and the realistic views of war and deduced that it is not sweet and beautiful even to die for one's own country. Indeed, he, along with Siegfried Sassoon, exposed the hypocrisies and lies in the romantic view of war and, thus, began anew the anti-war discourse. In South Asia, the scenario was different as fight for liberty from the bondage of colonial rule had already started. Rabindranath had an idealistic view of humanity and was shocked at the progress of human civilization towards the destruction of mankind. Nazrul was in favour of fighting for liberty for one's motherland, but he also knew the horrors of war from his first hand experience in the battle front. He came across both the moments of allurement and repulsion of the whole business of war, which find reflection in his writings.

The focus of this paper is to analyse the harsh reality of war in the light of anti-war discourse on humanitarian and aesthetic grounds as revealed in Rabindranath's “Destruction” and Nazrul's “Hena”. Thus, an attempt is made to bring to light the problematic reality of war in contrast to the positive forces of love and beauty as envisioned by Rabindranath and Nazrul. War has not ceased to exist in this world and the warmongers are bent on desecrating the beautiful creations of the world. The Second World War ended with even more hideous devastation than the First World War and the final destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Indeed, with this rise of the U.S. the socio-political scenario of the world took a more devastating look. In the words of Frantz Fanon, “Two centuries ago, a former European colony decided to catch up with Europe. It succeeded so well that the United States of America became a monster, in which the taints, the sickness and the inhumanity of Europe have grown to appalling dimensions” (Fanon 252). This “sickness” and “inhumanity” were there in the past and also a part of the present socio-political reality of the world as

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revealed once again in Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Palestine wars. Here lies the relevance of the present discussion on war. A qualitative analysis is made in keeping with the aim of this paper – to lay bare the anti-war discourse in the chosen works of Rabindranath and Nazrul. The paper seeks to be a part of the ongoing discussion on anti-war discourse finding meaning not in the destructive power of war but in the eternal and positive forces of beauty and love.

In the Foreword to Chomsky's *American Power and the New Mandarins*, Howard Zinn wrote, "... this is the responsibility of the intellectuals, to use whatever gifts we have – to expose lies and to tell the truth – in the interest of making a better world" (Zinn, 2002; p.ix). Rabindranath and Nazrul brought to light the harsh reality of war. In "Crisis in Civilization", Rabindranath tells the tale of the gradual loss of his faith "in the claims of the European nations to civilization" (Tagore, "Crisis" 726). He wonders "how imperialist greed could bring about so ugly a transformation in the character of so great a race" (725). As he looks around, Rabindranath sees "the crumbling ruins of a proud civilization strewn like a vast heap of futility" (726). Again, in the essay "Man", Rabindranath glorified not the efficiency of the machines in slaughtering people but the humanity of the Mahsud villagers with the words, "The natural instinct to kill enemies is the prompting of man's animal nature; but he transcended it and uttered the strange command: Forgive your enemies." (Tagore, "Man" 207-8). Rabindranath gave importance to humanity and was shocked at the ugliness and insult of human beings because of imperialistic greed and war. Nazrul was a true patriot and in the words of Basudha Chakravorty, his "articles give clarion calls for sacrifice of life, for pledging everything, including life, to the destruction of evil" (Chakravarty 30). Again, according to Gopal Halder, "Through the highest period of creativity, rich in variety as it was, Nazrul's genius bore, above all, the deep impress of revolutionary patriotism and passion for freedom" (Halder 14). In the essay "I am a Soldier" Nazrul wrote, "... the nation does not want a saint now, she wants a man whose love sings with violence, with the spirit of revolt" (Nazrul, "Soldier" 150). However, in the poem "The Rebel", Nazrul expressed his madness to bring an end to wars in the world – "I am the ruthless axe that Parasuram carried and will rid the world of its tribe of warriors and usher calm, generous peace!" (Nazrul, "Rebel", line 137). Again in the same poem Nazrul expressed a rebel's desire for the end of war as he also wants to take rest – "And I shall rest, battle-weary rebel, only on the day when the wails of the oppressed shall not rend the air ..."

(Nazrul, "Rebel", line 139). Indeed, Nazrul, with all his patriotic zeal, was a lover of humanity, and therefore, wanted the world to be free from oppression and war. Rabindranath and Nazrul, like true artists, were lovers of beauty and wanted to bring an end to the ugliness and destructive game of wars, which reduce the beauty of God's and human being's creations to ashes. What follows is a realistic analysis of the chosen texts in the light of anti-war discourse.

In the short story "Destruction", Tagore has shown that war is ugly as it has the power to disfigure all the beauties of the world. The story begins with the vivid description of a rare little house built with love of Pyar Sofa and his daughter Camil and centred round a beautiful flower garden. Mr. Sofa was a poor person with the greatness of heart, living peacefully and happily with his daughter and the beautiful garden. Interestingly, the greatest desire of Mr. Sofa was to create new plants which required immense patience and time, which is reflective of the time and effort given by human beings for generations for the progress of civilization. But, war, as the title indicates, brings destruction to the creation of ages. As war started between Germany and France, Pyar Sofa was compelled to join the war as a soldier along with Camil's lover Jack. Camil promised his father to protect the lovely garden with her own life. But, when Jack came back from the battlefield on two days' leave to deliver the happy news of Camil's father achieving the title of the commander, he found – "That day in the morning a cannon ball came and fell in the flower garden. The garden was destroyed along with the person who gave life to it. The only kindness in it was the death of Camil" (Tagore, "Destruction" 177). Hence, the beautiful garden was destroyed along with Jack's beloved. The ironic comment blended with pity, thus, brings to light the destructive effect of war on beauty and love. Indeed, the only outcome of the modern day war is destruction.

Rabindranath begins the next section with an essay which brings the picture of the obliteration of the collected treasures of the world. The poet comments, "The force of civilization is proved once again in another country. The proof has remained in the dust, not anywhere else" (Tagore, "Destruction" 177). This takes one back to Peking, where art and sculptures of ages were kept in a palace. As China had to fight against two great civilized nations and lost the war, the museum was reduced to dust. The prose piece ends with the ironic comment of the writer, "But, the rare Art, the valuables of ages are torn apart by the claws of the recent progress of civilization" (Tagore, "Destruction" 177). When Rabindranath went to Peking, he had seen the ruined palace with his own

eyes and was so disheartened that he did not want to say anything else about it. It takes ages to reach perfection in art, but within a few moments war can reduce to ashes the treasures of ages.

Rabindranath finally ends this piece of writing with an ironic poem, where he excoriates the very concept of Western civilization as its greatest achievement is to oppress and destroy mankind. The poem brings with a contrast between the past and the present realities intertwined with the poet's world of dream. The poet once accepted the words of scriptures that Man is the greatest of all creations and since he knew human beings with his humanity, he took this life as holy. At that time he found himself close to heaven when he woke up at dawn with the twittering of the birds. He lost himself in the joy of nature with its beauty and grace. During festivals the friends gathered together and enjoyed the holidays. Then the poet woke up to the present reality of the sudden appearance of the Western civilization with "thorns on the path" (Tagore, "Destruction" 178). He points out the vileness of this civilization with words associated with hell, like "impure" (178), "humiliation" (178), "devil" (178) and "destruction" (178) in contrast to words associated with heaven in the earlier section of the poem, like "pure" (177), "heaven" (177) and "soul" (178). Thus, the poet brings home the point that war has the potentiality to reduce the world into hell. As war reduces man to the level of animals, the poet arrives at the conclusion that God has created human beings by mistake and that he is so crooked that he cannot be made straight forward even with thousands of beatings. The final line of the poem – "Man is engaged in the destruction of mankind" (178) – brings in the pathos of war.

In Nazrul's short story "Hena", one finds the harsh reality of modern warfare coloured with the poet's imagination. The narrator compares warfare to the celebration of the festival of Holi, particularly in terms of the riot of colours and brings in front of our eyes a chilling picture of the battle field painted in red – "... the ammunition has turned sky and ground completely red. Reddest of all is the congealed blood on the bayoneted chests of the unfortunate ones" (Nazrul, "Hena" 19). This brings home the harsh reality of war with all its cruelty and mercilessness in killing one another and its power to desecrate the earth and the sky. The horrid reality of war is further described in terms of both sight and sound: "The thick rain of fire that pours down from exploding cannonballs and bombs is so intense that if these were real raindrops trickling from the blue eyes of the sky, the entire world would be flooded just in a day! And if these 'droom - droom' sounds that are louder and

more intense than any thunderbolt, would continue like this, peoples' eardrums would split, turning them deaf" (19). The envisioned image of the flood reminds one of the Great Flood described in the Bible which could have brought an end to creation on this earth forever, but there was a divine intervention and finally the creations of the world, including human beings, were saved by Noah. Perhaps, the world needs another Noah to save it from the destructive power of war. The narrator also points out, "The worst of all is the smoky smell" (19), which brings home the picture of the world covered with smoke and people getting suffocated. Then, the narrator wonders like Shakespeare's Hamlet, "Aren't human beings the best of all creations? Then why kill them in these ugly and terrifying ways?" (19). Indeed, the very concept of war results in the fall of Man from a heavenly to a beastly being as also pointed out by Rabindranath in the concluding poem of "The Destruction". Thus, with a heart full of pity, the narrator comments, "If only human beings used their intelligence in more productive ways; they could have become akin to angels!" (20). Again, like Owen the narrator of Nazrul's short story points out the futility of war, "The friend lying next to me, rifle slipping from his hand, cannot be awakened even if a thousand cannons roar by his ear. No general can ever make him obey orders" (20). The phrases "seven days" (20), "tiresome fighting" (20), "muddy trench" (20), "cold and dry lips" (20), "broken skull" (20), "scores of dead bodies" (20) and "leaning against my dead friend" paint the picture of the harsh reality of war. In the writer's imagination even the gun seems to be tired, "My Lewis gun doesn't work anymore. It grew tired after days of continuous shooting" (20). And, finally, Sohrab's dead friend staring at him and seems to be asking for "a drop of water" (21), reminds one of the pathetic situation of the battle of Karbala, where Imam Hussain and his family and companions were denied water. However, Sohrab juxtaposes this painful reality of the battle field with his fantasy that the dead soldier's beloved might be waiting for him "with a glass of sharbat in the other world" (21).

There is also a description of the glamour and attraction in the life of a soldier in "Hena", but at the same time there is a comment on the taking away of one's humanity with the training of war and the ultimate reduction of soldiers to machines with the sadistic pleasure in killing the enemies. The narrator is attracted by "the sound of footsteps" (21) of the marching soldiers – "Left-right-left! The rhythm is so melodious!" (21). Sohrab is also attracted by the discipline and order of military life – "This is the beauty of military life – an order is given and you're told 'Get it done!' You can never ask 'Why do I have

to do this?' It's an order - bas!" (22-23). Sohrab has hegemonized the greatness of the British nation with its emphasis on discipline. And when one stands at a distance, war takes him to the romantic world of imagination. So, it's no wonder when Sohrab stood at a safe distance, to him, the cannonballs falling on distant planes looked like "falling stars" (24). The bunkar also seems to Sohrab to be a wonderful place, "I can almost believe that this is an underground land of djinns and fairies! ... One can live as luxuriously as the nawabs of Bengal in this place!" (25). There is also the menacing addiction – "A war shows how killing others can be so addictive" (21). Sohrab wonders at the simultaneous existence of the contrasting reality of pain and addiction, "You can hear the loud groans of the enemy as they die in droves! How terribly beautiful is this youth's delight at death!" (21). A soldier has to perform the duty of destruction, he gets ready for the destruction of mankind – "And now I have to get dressed for battle and go out to destroy Khoda's creation. This killing game is the right kind of training for a stone-hearted, hard-headed person like me" (22). The narrator also comments on the fact that war reduces human beings to machines, "These Gurkhas and their brothers-in-law, Garhwalis – both races turn into killing machines on the battlefield!" (27). There is also a comment on the life of a cosmopolitan soldier. If one remains alive, war turns into an adventure, "How happily those two years passed by!" (28) In Rabindranath's short story also one finds the happy moments amidst war. Jack came back from the battlefield with the happy news of Pear Sofa's promotion. War is also a means of escape to Sohrab, "I did not cross the seas with any high ideals. I only went to purify myself in fire – to hide myself too" (28). And, amidst war even "a stone-hearted, hard-headed" soldier seeks a moment of rest – "How my heart had been yearning for this solace in darkness!" (23).

As in Rabindranath's "Destruction", one finds in "Hena" also the progress of modern civilization in its power of destruction. In "Destruction", the narrator ends the story section with the words, "Everyone was surprised to calculate the force of civilization. The cannon ball came and fell from a distance of twenty-five miles. This is known as the progress of age" (Tagore, "Destruction" 177). So, the progress is towards more powerful weapons and ultimately towards destruction. In "Hena" one finds the amazing progress of the art of modern warfare, "The war is being fought so far away, but cannonballs are dropping on us in the forest" (Nazrul, "Hena" 23). Both the short stories point out the ugliness of modern warfare as it has the power to destroy the beautiful creations of the world. In "Destruction", the

beautiful garden created with love and care of father and daughter is destroyed. In "Hena", one finds, the "big houses around which shells have torn through, leaving ugly gaping holes!" (23-4). Indeed, war is a game of destruction which reminds Sohrab of the "game of creation and destruction" (24) that one plays in childhood with "clay dollhouses" (24).

Nazrul's short story also speaks of patriotism intertwined with love. Towards the ending of the short story Sohrab finds the patriotic zeal in himself, more so because the Afghan daughter Hena wanted him to fight for their motherland, "She was a warrior-woman, an Afghan daughter. Despite being an Afghan, I have spent my entire life as a foreigner; she wanted me to sacrifice my life at the feet of our motherland" (30). And, finally, he sacrifices himself for his motherland, "Khoda! If protecting my country with my blood makes me a martyr, then I am a martyr. I have done my duty until the very end of my life!" (30). Both Sohrab and Hena embrace death fighting for the motherland, and finally the lovers are united in death, "Let her sleep! No, no, we'll sleep together! O Khoda! don't give us any more pain by waking us up from this pleasurable sleep!" (31). Unlike Owen who did not find glory in dying in the battle even for one's own country, Nazrul seems to have glorified the martyrdom of the lovers, sacrificing for the motherland, only because it was a fight for liberty from colonialism.

The love sub-plots of both the short stories are quite interesting. In "Hena" one finds a "young girl from this distant land across the sea", who fell in love with Sohrab when he was fighting a war in the foreign land, while Sohrab was in love with Hena. Amidst the destruction of war, love comes as a sweet lingering force. Nazrul even lashes out at the critics of love – "Oh! The horn of Israfil! Blow and freeze the world with your sound... And let the whole earth and sky fall on the heads of those who slander love and blight the flowers" (22). Though Sohrab never reciprocated the foreign girl's love, yet it lingers on in his memory amidst the harsh reality of war – "The foreign girl is so far away from me today, but the fruit pickle seems to retain her touch!" (24). As Sohrab did not reciprocate her love she bade farewell with tearful eyes. Even after the war was over and he returned home he remembered the French girl's "wide blue eyes" (28), "her silky curly hair" (28) and "her sparkling tears" (28). Sohrab also remembers Hena and everything associated with her – "her silky, raven-black hair" (25), "the gardens of Baluchistan" (25), "her dark eyes lined with Istanbul kohl" (25), her "tears" (25) and "her henna-dyed hands" (25). Hena's love for Sohrab was like that of Cleopatra's

love for Anthony. It is only towards the end of the short story that Hena reciprocated Sohrab's love. Sohrab said, "Hena followed me like a shadow. How could she hold so much love that flowed like a rapid rushing down the mountain, within her fragile ribcage!" (30). It is love that is glorified in both the short stories in contrast to the destructive power of war. In "Destruction", the beautiful garden along with Camil is destroyed by the power of modern war, but the beauty of love lingers on in the memory of the reader and the ruined garden seems to tell their stories of love. In "Hena" the lovers become martyrs in sacrificing their lives for the motherland. Love seems to speak of eternity in both the short stories in contrast to the annihilative power of war as also in Hardy's poem "In Time of *The Breaking of Nations*".

This research paper examined the harsh reality of war and the beauty of life and love as revealed in Rabindranath's "Destruction" and Nazrul's "Hena". It is found that Rabindranath's "Dhangsha" glorified love and beauty in contrast to the destructive power of war. Rabindranath was against the progress of modern civilization towards the destruction of mankind. In the first section of "Dhangsha", Rabindranath has described the beauty and peace of the garden and its abrupt destruction by the modern weapons of war. This picture in microcosm brings the picture in one's mind the destruction of the beauty, peace and love of the macrocosmic larger world. In the second section, Rabindranath has shown how war destroys within a few moments the treasures of the world accumulated for ages. In the final section he has shown that war has the potentiality to reduce the heavenly world to hell. Nazrul's "Hena" glorified human love and sacrifice for the motherland for the sake of love. On the one hand Nazrul pointed out the glamour of a soldier's life while on the other hand he focused on the harsh reality of the battle front, which is painted in red and where soldiers die thirsty without the last drop of water. Amidst the harsh reality of war, in "Hena", love lingers as a soothing power. After more than hundred years of the beginning of the Great War, it seems today that the world has not taken any lesson from war history. The ugly dance of the Dionysian or destructive forces will perhaps go on till the Doomsday. Yet, the intellectuals believing in the Apollonian or creative

powers, like Tagore and Nazrul, will always be there to raise their voices against war. Further research may explore the question of war in the chosen texts from the gender perspective. There is also scope to analyse the question of war in the selected short stories of Rabindranath and Nazrul from the perspective of environmental hazards.

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