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Female Poets of World War I

Poetas femeninas de la Primera Guerra mundial

Rand Mohammed Salah Aldeen

rezali_rand@yahoo.com

University of Al-farahidi, Iraq

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ABSTRACT

Every citizen of Great Britain and the United States had their role during the First World War. Yet, Women were not allowed to be soldiers in front lines, as they were much needed into duties like nurses, ammunition workers, or as housemakers. Many of these women expressed their feelings about war through literature, especially poetry. However, their voices of WWI were often overlooked in comparison to those of male poets. This study sheds light on three of these female poets with reference to their poems about the First World War. These three poetesses are Jessie Pope, Muriel Stuart, and Katherine Tynan.

Keywords: Female poets, literature, World War I.

RESUMEN

Todos los ciudadanos de Gran Bretaña y Estados Unidos tuvieron su papel durante la primera guerra mundial. Sin embargo, a las mujeres no se les permitía ser soldados en primera línea, ya que eran muy necesarias en tareas como enfermeras, trabajadoras de municiones o amas de casa. Muchas de estas mujeres expresaron sus sentimientos sobre la guerra a través de la literatura, especialmente la poesía. Sin embargo, sus voces de la Primera Guerra Mundial a menudo se pasaban por alto en comparación con las de los poetas masculinos. Este estudio arroja luz sobre tres de estas poetas con referencia a sus poemas sobre la Primera Guerra Mundial. Estas tres poetisas son Jessie Pope, Muriel Stuart y Katherine Tynan.

Palabras clave: Literatura, poetas femeninas, primera guerra mundial.

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JESSIE POPE

Famously known for her jingoistic poetry, Jessie Pope is one of the renowned WWI female poets. Her poem, *Who's for the Game?* glorifies the idea of war and encourages men to participate, as war is a measure of masculinity for her. Pope writes,

*Who'll grip and tackle the job unafraid?
And who thinks he'd rather sit tight? (3-4)*

Instead of questioning that war is harsh and risky, Pope asks,

*Who knows it won't be a picnic not much
Yet eagerly shoulders a gun? (9-10)*

In the poem, Pope tells that war is not a picnic, and implies with her language that war can be as a good time as a picnic, but who knows what it will be. The poem begins by comparing the war to a *game, the biggest that's played* (1). A game, by definition, is a friendly competition where participants are either losers or winners. The use of the term "game" in the poem shows that men can join the war with no fear since war is a competition. Regardless the WWI reason, Pope encourages men to take the risk to represent their countries. She ends the poem explaining,

*For there's only one course to pursue,
Your country is up to her neck in a fight,
And she's looking and calling for you. (15-17)*

Pope's language encourages men to save their country. She uses feminine pronouns to portray the country as female, as it shows to be more effective, as man would never ignore the cry of help to save his country or the distressed female. Thus, Pope's poem serves an influential one as it suggests that men should consider war as a game. Not only did Pope test men's masculinity but also convinced them to join and help their country. Pope had never experienced war harsh conditions, and while some might judge her for comparing war that took millions of lives to a mere game, her poem with no doubt had effectively convinced many men to sacrifice their lives and fight for their country.

MURIEL STUART

Muriel Stuart is another WWI female poet. She had suggested that men are just pieces in the war game. She added that war is an opportunity for men to fight for their country, and a chance for them to be both patriotic and glorious. In her poem *Forgotten Dead, I Salute You* She talks about the sacrifices made by many soldiers to keep their country safe. She begins the poem by setting up the contrast between nature and man. Stuart describes,

*Many of nature's attributes such as how the
The hare makes soft her secret house
The wind at tourney comes and goes,
Spurring the green, unharnessed boughs (9-12)*

She introduces later an unnamed man, as a reference to all the dead soldiers, by saying,

*He knew the beauty of all those
Last year, and who remembers him?" (14-15).*

The poet suggests that the unknown man is conscious of all the world beauties when he is alive, but now he is dead, no one remembers him in the same manner. The poem language seems negative towards war when Stuart continues to focus on how no one remembers the unknown man as he is dead during war. She begins the third stanza stating:

*None remember him: he lies
In earth of some strange-sounding place,
Nameless beneath the nameless skies, (25-27).*

The unknown man will be just a nameless body in a world that will move on without remembering him or his sacrifice. Later, the poetess shifts her tone in the second half of the poem explaining,

*Yet such as he
Have made it possible and sure
For other lives to have, to be;
For men to sleep content, secure. (31-34)*

She moves to show a positive of the sacrifice that the unknown man made, as when one man dies in war, another one is able to sleep safely at home. Therefore, his sacrifice will not be fruitless, as it will allow others to live safely on his behalf. The poem does not only use a nationalistic tone, but also religious one. Stuart makes the biggest comparison as she compares the soldier's sacrifice during the time of war to Jesus Christ crucifixion. The soldiers' decision to leave his safe home and family to lose his life in war is equivalent to Jesus Christ leaving heaven to take the man's body, enduring persecution on Earth, and then being crucified by the people He tried to save. Stuart adds,

*There was his body broken for you,
There was his blood divinely shed
That in the earth lie lost and dim.
Eat, drink, and often as you do,
For whom he died, remember him. (44-47)*

In the same way that Jesus encourages His men to remember Him after he has died, the poet encourages men to do the same for the dead soldiers. Stuart's *Forgotten Dead, I Salute You* encourages men to fight for the war using both patriotic and religious techniques. The soldier might lose his life, but he is sacrificing his own life for others to live safely in their country. Stuart highlights this nationalistic approach by comparing the soldier's sacrifice to Jesus' sacrifice made not for just one country, but for the whole world.

KATHERINE TYNAN

Katherine Tynan had produced poetry that shows the harsh and cruel reality of war and exposes the lies that were told to so many soldiers before enlisting. Despite the fact that she had never participated in the battlefield; she shows her knowledge of the war reality in her poetry. Her poem *Joining the Colours* appears to have a positive tone, but the message shown in the poem is clearly anti-war, as she discusses the complications of enlisting in war just for glory. Tynan opens the poem with the departure of young men ready for war,

*There they go marching all in step so gay!
Smooth-cheeked and golden, food for shells and guns.
Blithely they go as to a wedding day,
The mothers' sons. (1-4)*

The first lines describe a positive scene of happy men marching to war with their young figures, but little they know that they were just food for the guns. Her mention of the innocent boys' deaths is both shocking and truthful. Tynan's deliverance of such a cruel message only intensifies when she compares their joyful movements of marching to their marching to their weddings. The last line of the stanza comes when she calls the boys as their "mothers' sons" (4). There is not a relationship as sacred and pure as that of a mother and a child. Many of the readers of Tynan's poem being mothers whose sons were soldiers, reading that their sons were targets of lethal weapons would cause them to feel anxious and fearful. Despite the message's harshness, Tynan's poem was an attempt to keep people from enlisting in war without fully comprehending the consequences of war itself. In the third stanza of Tynan's poem, men are not described as heroes, but rather as fools. Tynan warns,

*With tin whistles, mouth organs, any noise,
They pipe the way to glory and the grave;
Foolish and young, the gay and golden boys
Love cannot save. (9-12)*

Similar to the first stanza, Tynan uses short blunt phrases to contradict the tone of happiness. She describes the scene as musical while the boys play their instruments in rows. However, Tynan explains that they are playing their instruments to glory and to the grave (2). There is no option as Tynan does not write to glory or to the grave. The term "and" implies that the boys are marching their way into war in an attempt to gain some type of glory, but they also are marching to their own death. Tynan uses the word to emphasize that there is no use for glory when the soldier has died. Death is inevitably a result of seeking glory in such a blood-spilling arena. Not only does Tynan blatantly warn the boys of their upcoming death after joining the war, but she also labels them as foolish. Again describing the soldiers as "golden boys," (11) Tynan acknowledges the glorified perception that very much existed in the time period, but undercuts that description by calling them foolish and then explaining that "love cannot save" them (12). Love is deemed to be a powerful force able to save the most broken of things and people. However, Tynan says that not even love could prevent these boys from coming back from the war happy, healthy, or even alive. The musical imagery serves as the background to the scene, one that illustrates a Jessie Pope attitude toward war.

However, just two words, "grave" and "foolish," overpower the entire message. No one cares about the music and the boys' synced marching. When the lives of innocent boys are on the lines, everyone becomes aware. The final stanza of the poem reintroduces the concept of love once more. In the first stanza of the poem, the love being discussed was that shared between a mother and her son. In the third stanza of the poem, Tynan reminds the reader that love cannot save the boys. In the final stanza, however, Tynan mentions a romantic love between the boys and the girls. Tynan explains,

*High heart! High courage! The poor girls they kissed
Run with them – they shall kiss no more, alas!
Out of the mist they stepped-into the mist
Singing they pass. (13-16)*

The first two lines of the stanza seem to offer words of affirmation. The boys do in fact have high hearts and high courage as they sacrifice their lives to WWI. However, just like in the third stanza, what Tynan says

after the apparent positivity is more important and negates the importance of the good. Instead of elaborating on their courage, Tynan explains how the girls that run alongside the boys are unfortunate as well. They are not aware that they will no longer get to kiss their significant other again. It is unlikely that their boys will even return. Yet, because the girls are happily sending them off, just like the girls in the propaganda posters who insisted that the men leave the household, they fail to understand the realistic consequences of war.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, WWI was a unique era in global history. The magnitude of death was unpredicted and the opinions concerning the war across nations were varied. Men were encouraged to fight on behalf of the helpless woman, who could not protect themselves against the savage enemy. Men were also encouraged to join the war because maybe for the first time in the history of wars, their masculinity was being questioned. Given all the ploys to build a nation's army, the woman might have been one of the most successful and popular technique to lure men to participate in the deadliness of WWI. If any poems were circulated widely, the poems were usually about a woman's love, separation, and anxiety for a departed man.

While this genre of female war poetry is just as important as any other, women wrote other poems about the war that demonstrated attitudes besides love and passion. Women wrote poems about how the men in their lives ought to join the war effort because it was an opportunity to show one's nationalism and patriotism. Others explained how war was a falsely glorified hoax that brought death and destruction rather than honor and pride. Finally, a large percentage of women were involved in the war effort for the first time. This participation created a new genre of war poetry, written by those who volunteered to help the war effort in various capacities.

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BIODATA

Rand Mohammed Salah Aldeen: Assistant Lecture of the College of Education, Al-farahidi University. Iraq.
rezali_rand@yahoo.com