Chapter 7

"Why Can’t I Have the Vote?": Women’s Poetry, Politics, and the First World War

Argha Kumar Banerjee
St Xavier’s College, India

ABSTRACT

The First World War came at a crucial time when British women’s suffrage campaigns were gathering momentum throughout the country. The culmination of the movement during these years, in spite of various social and political differences, enhanced female solidarity and political consciousness to a considerable degree. Hectic political activism also witnessed a phenomenal rise and propagation of an exclusive and extraordinary women’s culture. The onset of the Great War however, struck a fatal blow to such an unprecedented female camaraderie and political conviction. My proposed chapter traces and gathers evidences in women’s verse written during this time period extending from the pre-war years of the suffrage movement to the early years of the post-war demobilisation correlating them with some of the major developments in women’s socio-political history of the period.

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INTRODUCTION

The floors are slippery with blood. / The World gyrates too. God is good / That while His wind blows out the light / For those who hourly die for us-- / We still can dance, each night... -- “The Dancers (During a great battle 1916)”. (Sitwell, 1918, p.25).

Writing in 1916, Edith Sitwell’s poem “The Dancers” uncovers the deep sense of void, apathy and self-indulgence of the civilian population, deeply immersed in frivolous pursuits of life against the backdrop of the hostilities of the First World War. The poem not only conjures up an image of doom and destruction by evoking the medieval dance of death but mocks at the ideological bankruptcy of the patriarchal state at war. Sitwell was not the only British women poet to protest and try to frame an alternative ideological message in verse. She along with female poets like Charlotte Mew, Margaret Sackville, Eva Gore-Booth, Phyllis Megroz, Margaret Postgate Cole and several others conveyed crucial ideological messages of protest and resistance through their poetry. Interestingly, the First World War came at a crucial and significant time for most female writers when the fight for their electoral rights was at its peak. In her essay “Women, War, and Madness” Jane Marcus (1989, p.136) asserts that the onset of the First World War served as a huge blow to the contemporary British women’s culture rescinding an “impressive coalition” on the eve of the war. “At the height of the suffrage movement in 1911”, as she points out in her analysis, “there were twenty-one regular feminist periodicals in England, a women’s press, a feminist bookshop, the Fawcett Library, and a bank run by and for women” (p.136).

The First World War came at a decisive time when British women’s suffrage campaigns were gathering momentum throughout the country. In spite of multiple social and political differences, the movement culminated during the years leading to the Great War, remarkably enhancing female solidarity and political consciousness among the common masses. Hectic political activism during these years witnessed the rise and proliferation of an extraordinary women’s culture. The war, according to some historians, political thinkers and critics, struck a fatal blow to such an unprecedented female camaraderie and political conviction. It would be erroneous to generalise as to whether British women emerged winners or losers from their experience of the years of the war, more so, given the complex variegated nature of their diverse experiences that tends to defy any conclusive inferences from being drawn. The socio-economic dynamics, differences in class and political ideologies of the war generation make it even more arduous to draw any definitive conclusion. However, as contemporary socio-political developments testify, the war years and the decades immediately preceding the conflict witnessed a remarkable chain of events that definitely had a profound impact on the political consciousness of British
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