

The War and the Gender divide: Examining Women's Poetry of the First World War Era

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Abstract

World War I poetry generally tends to take into consideration only the works of male writers such as Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, male poets who had been in the line of duty themselves. However, what is largely ignored is the vast body of women's writing of the era. This blind ignorance, even with the existence of published anthologies is due to the prevailing notion that war is largely a man's business. Little existing documentation of women's contribution in various serving units during the Great War also contributes to the ignorance. They served as nurses, drivers and a wide variety of other roles on the battle front. The women who remained at home showed immense courage in handling the situation. Some were involved in knitting, some in solving the food crisis. Others entered the munitions factories to serve the country. This paper aims to bring to light the crucial role that these women played during the Great War. This paper will examine how women battled sexism and the shibboleth of traditional gender roles to emerge as brave fighters on the battlefield and at home, at par with the men.

Keywords: War Poetry, World War-I Poetry, Women's Poetry

Women's poetry of the First World War era is not spoken about in mainstream channels. In fact, many are positively unaware about it. Whenever we refer to the poetry of the World War era, we inevitably cite poems by writers such as Wilfred Owen and Sassoon- who wrote realistic war poetry, having been in the line of duty themselves. The mere mention of the existence of such poetry elicits a very surprised response from most people. The naysayers have always asked,

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“What can women tell us about the realities of war on the forefront? Weren’t they at home, heartsick, worried, waiting for their fathers, brothers or husbands to come back home?”

To a certain extent, mainstream representations also feed such ideas into our minds even if we are very aware of the world around us. Take any mainstream Indian film on war for example. It inevitably shows women crying pools of tears, urging their men not to go to war and asking them “When will you come back home?”. However, the struggles and tears of these women whose men were at war are very real. However, no written representation of even that grief exists. They are portrayed as passive, waiting entities, while the men earn glory for defending their country. The BBC documentary named ‘The Roses of No Man’s Land’, which records first-hand accounts of women who had served as nurses during World War I, shows that they had been among the bloodshed and the horrors. Despite such accounts existing, the prevailing attitude is dismissive- war was after all a man’s territory. The vast corpus of World War literature is much more than the story of men who fought and died for the country or lived to tell the horrific tale. It also includes the accounts of women who were more than just passively waiting entities. They fought on the lines with men; only that history is not lauded or glorified in popular mediums.

Many assume that war poems written by women would only be filled with grief, longing, or in some cases, excess sentimentalism would be the output. However this is far from true. Women asked uncomfortable questions, questions which were difficult to answer. A man, aged between eighteen and forty-one, could immediately join the army, but very few roles existed for women at the time. There existed a wide gulf between the roles of men and women during wartime. This is poignantly summed up by American poet Gabrielle Elliot in her poem ‘Pierrot goes to war’, “Pierrot goes forward – but what of Pierrette?” (Tumult and Tears, 12)

This poem talks about two lovers who must be separated at the outbreak of the war when Pierrot, the man, must leave to serve in the army. Even a love poem like this manages to voice such deep questions.

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In some cases, the women saw through the fanfare of departing armies to realize that many of these young men were moving towards certain death. Katherine Tynan who watched West Kent Regiment depart from Ireland says in her poem, 'Joining the Colours':

“There they go marching all in step so gay!

Smooth-cheeked and golden, food for shells and guns.” (Tumult and Tears, 13)

The tone of grim irony is not very different from a poem by Owen or Sassoon. Poet Winifred Letts asks in her poem 'The Calls to Arms in our Street':

So it's beat, drums, beat;

But who'll find them food to eat? (Tumult and Tears, 14)

Here, the poet voices questions which cannot be easily answered. What was to happen to the women who were left behind? Poet Alexandra Grantham bids farewell to both her husband and her elder son with the words:

Love's last fond greetings waved with trembling hands.

War is a time of death and long good-bye

To home and all its peaceful blessedness;

A time when our travail's dear children lie

Killed or maimed on alien soil; when wickedness

Hate-maddened Christian goads on blood-drenched plain

To mock and crucify their God again. (Tumult and Tears, 15)

The poet denounces the madness of war and bloodshed in no uncertain terms. The poems are far away from the tone of conventional sentimentality. The sense of grief is expressed with a sense of bitter irony and observation in the following lines from a poem named 'The Leave Train Victoria Station' by Evelyn Tollemache:

a man but dreads

These last few moments more than any hail

Of shrapnel bullets raining overhead....

in early London mornings every day

Are bitterest battles fought and victories gained.

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But whether They that go, or Those who stay –

Lips smiling while their hearts break – have attained

The Greater Triumph, God alone can say. (Tumult and Tears, 15,16)

Indeed, the pain of saying goodbye must have been greater than the fear of being pierced by bullets. It took immense courage to have a smile on the lips and say goodbye to the loved ones one may never see again. The glory of those who stayed is not in any way lesser than the glory of those who served the country in battle. In fact, even children were aware of the fact that they might not see their fathers again and frequently tried to keep up a brave front. These lines from the poem ‘Train’ by Helen Mackay are testimony to this fact:

The little girl will not cry,

but her chin trembles.

She throws back her head, with its stiff little braid,

and will not cry...

The big boy stands very straight,

and looks at his father,

and looks, and never takes his eyes from him,

And knows that he may never look again. (Tumult and Tears, 18)

When thousands of British soldiers left for the warfront, the people in charge of the army supplies realized that they did not have enough resources to provide warm clothes for officers. An appeal was made to the women to knit three lakh pairs of socks by Christmas. Though greatly mocked at, it was a service which saved the army from freezing in the trenches. Even children stepped in to help the adults. These touching lines are a testimony to the feelings that children were inspired by:

MY SOCKS

I am only a little girl

But I am doing my bit

By helping the grown-ups knit socks,

And God grant my prayer

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To watch our boys Over There
And bring them home safe
To all longing mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers,
That is a child's prayer. -Sophie Presley Glemby (Tumult and Tears, 23)

Some knitting poems were however, graver in tone:

SOCKS

Shining pins that dart and click
In the fireside's sheltered peace
Check the thoughts the cluster thick...
Never used to living rough,
Lots of things he'd got to learn;
Wonder if he's warm enough ...- Jessie Pope (Tumult and Tears, 24)

Here, the very act of knitting checks the terrible thoughts of losing her son. It is a method of distraction. However, she is soon overcome by the thoughts that the boy who was not used to living rough may have to get used to harsh wartime realities. For some, knitting was a way of connecting with their loved ones:

And in and out she weaves them from a heart with hope a brim –
It's not a sock she's making, it's a web of love for him.- *Anne Page* (Tumult and Tears, 25)

One can imagine that without woollens to protect them, the army couldn't have fought the way it did. Yet who talks about the great service rendered by these women?

Now, even with controlled food prices, inflation entered the food market. England began to feel intense food shortages because it was a country largely dependent on imports. With German submarine warfare constantly sinking ships and their crews to the bottom of the ocean, the government decided that women would have to step in once again to resolve the food situation. Garden associations as well as the press were eager to convince any person who owned a plot of land to sow food crops instead of flowering plants. Women once again stepped in to do

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their bit for the nation. In the poem, 'My Garden 1918', Sybil Bristowe finds hope in the fact that her garden has been of service:

Such was my garden once, a Springtide hope of flowers,
All rosy pink or violet or blue
Or yellow gold with sunflakes on the dew.
Now in their place a Summer garden tower
Of green-leaved artichokes and turnip tops,
Of peas and parsnips, sundry useful crops.
– But even vegetables must have little flowers. (Tumult and Tears, 30)

Women at home and across all service units heeded to the call to 'Grow More Food'. In her poem, Mrs. M. Stone writes:

KENT 'A' GARDEN

In Warwick Park at Tunbridge Wells
There was a field o'ergrown
With grass and thistles, weeds and stones;
And rubbish there was thrown.
We got permission for our Corps
To dig this up and sow it
With vegetables, fruits and herbs
To give help where we owe it....
And then one day we looked with pride
Upon the green tops showing.
Our seed potatoes had come up,
And healthy shoots were growing.
God bless our Navy on the sea,
And give us power to aid them.
Our wounded too, in hospitals
We long with gifts to lade them.

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And if our garden prospers well,
And we grow things to eat,
We'll send them to the hospitals
And to our gallant fleet. (Tumult and Tears, 30, 31)

There is an unmistakable hint of patriotism at having been of service to the nation.

Women were involved in all aspects of equipping the armed forces. They joined the factories which manufactured everything from rations and uniforms to guns and bombs to help their country in need and they did so with complete patriotic fervour:

Hear the battle-song enthralling!
For the bugle's clearly calling,
And the boys are wanting khaki from your loom....They come laughing be it glory, be it
doom...
'Tis to make the brave ones braver
'Tis to prove the grave need graver,
That the boys are asking khaki from your loom.
Oh! work wisely at your scheming
At your sewing and your seaming!
'Tis a magic stuff you're weaving in that gloom! -Kathleen Braimbridge (Tumult and
Tears, 32)

This poem is an enthusiastic call to the weavers of the country to be of service to the nation. By 1915, the army ran short of all kinds of armaments, forcing the women to enter the factories. But, this wasn't appreciated by many. Sexist notions dictated after all that women were supposed to be life-givers. Being involved in any venture that leads to a loss of life was morally incorrect. However these critics failed to see how desperately these women needed a source of income to sustain themselves during the time of war, when the cost of living shot up and the average wages continued to plummet. The women entered the factories to feed themselves but also out of a sense of patriotism.

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Munitions workers were uncomfortably aware that their work was dangerous. Working in munitions factories often meant working with substandard equipments, dangerous chemicals and no safety regulations in place. However, these courageous women continued to work in these factories at great personal risk. But many women died as a result of this work. Written records of these incidents are rare. A line in the poem ‘Munitions Wages’ talks about women being “blown to the sky” (Tumult and Tears, 42). Two verses in the poem ‘Ten Little Dornock Girls’ hints at such accidents:

Seven little Dornock girls did some N/G mix
One was overcome with fumes,
And then there were six...
Three little Dornock girls went to work quite new
The Acid fumes did smother one,
And then there were two. (Tumult and Tears, 42)

The government urged people to invest in War Bonds. “War Bonds” tend to work in a similar way to other bonds. The person who purchases the bond lends the government a sum of money with a guarantee that they will be paid back a greater amount later on (usually a period of ten years or more). The government could then invest this money in the things needed for the war. The women paid money out of their own meager incomes to help the soldiers in need. As one factory superintendent noted, that although many women could barely afford a meal in the already subsidized factory canteens, they still “invested substantial amounts in War Savings Certificates”.

WAR LOAN

We’re working on munitions to help to win the war,
Now England needs more money, so has called on us once more;
Right gladly would we aid her by giving of our own,
That’s why we are so busy putting money in War Loan:
So that our gallant fighting men can with conviction say,
‘Our women tried to aid us in every possible way.’ (Tumult and Tears, 34)

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In the poem 'Big Push', this anonymous munitions worker is proud of her service:

"It's the first time in our lifetime

Us girls have had the chance

To help our best boys when at War

And we'll make Hun murderers dance. (Tumult and Tears, 35)

Nurses left for the service overseas, on the front, within days of the war being declared. There were nurses who held professional certification from the Red Cross. Other units such as the V.A.D or Voluntary Aid Detachments usually assisted professional nurses. The service of these women came to be called holy or divine- accentuated by the association of the Red Cross and the cross of Christ. Many dying soldiers confused the nurses for their mothers, further adding to the maternal association with the vocation. The poems written by the nurses often feature young, dying or wounded soldiers. They also frequently praise their courage.

This nurse praises a soldier's steadfastness:

PLUCK

Crippled for life at seventeen,

His great eyes seem to question why:

With both legs smashed it might have been

Better in that grim trench to die

Than drag maimed years out helplessly.

A child – so wasted and so white...

So broke with pain, he shrinks in dread

To see the 'dresser' drawing near;

His shaking, strangled sobs you hear.

But when the dreaded moment's there

He'll face us all, a soldier yet,

Watch his bared wounds with unmoved air,

(Though tell-tale lashes still are wet),

And smoke his Woodbine cigarette." Eva Dobell (Tumult and Tears, 50)

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Dressings would often be very painful because before the invention of antibiotics, wounds would have to be cleaned with chemicals such as iodine and carbolic to prevent sepsis. Patients would often be handed cigarettes to calm them down. The wasted prospect of a boy soldier's life at barely eighteen brings out the harsh reality of war.

Nurses often had to treat war prisoners, people who had killed men of their own country. Maintaining neutrality and doing their duty must have been difficult. Nurse Vera Brittain who was assigned for duty in a German prisoners' hospital ultimately came to accept that even though these men belonged to the enemy's side, they were all ultimately human.

Another nurse looking at Vera work wrote:

I shall think of how I worked for her with nerve and heart and mind,
And how the dying enemy her tenderness would find
Beneath her scornful energy of will.
And I learnt that human mercy turns alike to friend or foe
When the darkest hour of all is creeping nigh.... (Tumult and Tears, 52)

These pressures often led to nurses suffering mental breakdowns, depression and even caused some to take their own lives. But no record of their human struggle appears in poetry written by male poets. On the other hand, the accounts of nurses are replete with descriptions of soldiers at war.

During the Great War, over 100,000 women joined service units as volunteers. Some worked at home, some worked in foreign lands for years. Some were within the range of shells or gunfire. Each of did their duty with unshakeable determination and fierce pride in their khaki uniform. On the Eastern front, they worked under horrific conditions, as described by the following poem written by an administrator of the Scottish Women's Hospitals:

LIKE THAT

I've seen you kneeling on the wooden floor,
Tending your wounded on their straw-strewn bed...
I've seen you guiding over shell-marked ground
Dauntless, clear-eyed, strong-handed, even when

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The bullets flung the dust up from the road
By which you bore your anguished, helpless load.
I've seen you, oh, my sisters, 'under fire,'
While in your hearts there burned but one desire –
What British men and women hold so dear –
To do your duty without fear. -Mary Henderson (Tumult and Tears, 92)

Although the VAD nurses assisted the professional nurses, with casualties on the rise, they were allotted additional duties. The night shifts were especially a stressful time, when their already frayed nerves would be stretched to the breaking point:

And all are wrapt away in secret sleep and dreams.
Here one cries sudden on a sobbing breath,
Gripped in the clutch of some incarnate fear:
What terror through the darkness draweth near?
What memory of carnage and of death?
What vanished scenes of dread to his closed eyes appear?
And one laughs out with an exultant joy.
An athlete he — Maybe his young limbs strain
In some remembered game, and not in vain
To win his side the goal — Poor crippled boy,
Who in the waking world will never run again. -Eva Dobell (Tumult and Tears, 96,97)

Not all VADs worked as nurses. Many of them were engaged as cooks, scullery and ward maids. It is ironic because these services recruited women from the higher echelons of society. So, for many of these women, war-time realities would have been in sharp contrast to their comfortable lives before the war. This anonymous poet from Gallowhill Auxiliary Hospital, Paisley, spends a lonely New Year's Eve talking to the dirty kitchen range. She does however, say that she is proud to have been of service to the wounded army men:

You were so dirty.
Old Range, though you no more I'll clean

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I hope till nineteen-seventeen
And though I send you, well, to Jean,
There's no ill-will,
Because together we have been
In Gallowhill.
Home of our wounded Tommies, where
I nurse, dust, cook – without a care –
Clean you Old Range, or turnips pare
With Mrs. Plant;
There's one I bless because I'm there –
Our Commandant. (Tumult and Tears, 98)

The First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANY) was a women's unit formed in 1907, responsible for providing assistance to the military force in times of emergency. They oversaw rescue operations of war casualties from the battlefield itself. They also became the first women to drive ambulances. Not just that, they would maintain their vehicles and service them on their own. Their technical and mechanical skills came to be much revered.

F.A.N.Y

I wish my mother could see me now, with a grease-gun under my car filling..
A-top of a sheet of frozen iron, in cold that would make you cry.
“Why do we do it?” you ask. “Why? We're the F.A.N.Y.”
I used to be in Society once,
Danced, hunted and flirted, once!
Had white hands and complexion once!
Now I am F.A.N.Y. (Tumult and Tears, 100)

This anonymous F.A.N.Y clearly brings out the contrast between her pre-war life and her present reality. At the same time, the hint of pride in the tone of the poem is unmistakable.

The women who were recruited for the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC) came from the lower classes and mainly performed domestic chores for the officers. Back home, the

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press ran sensational stories suggesting that the morals of the men might be jeopardized being in such close proximity to these women. An appeal was made to make their uniform less alluring. Prevailing notions of morality and rampant sexism made sure these women were not given superior uniforms. But for them, their khaki coloured uniform (made of lower grade materials) was a sign of their patriotism and determination for service:

MY ARMY HAT

My comrades sniff and sneer about my hat,
Their idle words do not excite my rage,
For there is no dishonour in old age.
For seven months now has it braved the blast,
And, certainly 'tis somewhat worn and frayed,
Upholding not the beauty but the worth
Of that from which an Army hat is made.
'Tis old and scarred but what care I for that?

I'm very proud to wear an army hat. -I.Grindlay (Tumult and Tears, 103,104)

By 1917, food shortages became alarming. The government once again called upon the women to do national duty and released posters asking them to 'Speed the Plough'. Those who wanted to help became members of the officially recognized Women's Land Army (WLA). These women too, were given khaki uniforms to instill in them a sense of patriotism:

We were summoned from the city, from the cottage and the hall,
From the hillside and the valley we answered to the call,
For we're fighting for our country as we till the fertile soil,
And our King and Country need our help and ask for earnest toil.
Keep the home crops growing,
In the soft winds blowing,
Though your work seems hard at times 'tis not in vain...
Some are milking cows for England, some th' giant oak trees split,
We are working for our country and we are glad to have the chance,

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By increasing England's food supply to help the boys in France.

Keep the home flags flying,

England's food supplying,

Help to bring our gallant lads victorious home. -K M E Gotelee (Tumult and Tears, 110, 111)

Thus, women who stayed on the 'home front' did not just passively wait for their men to come back home. They grew food, engaged in producing woolens and entered the factories, even to the point of sacrificing their lives. The women on the battle front worked at par with men, within easy range of shells and bullets. Yet, their service is ignored and assigned a status inferior to that of men. They also battled crippling gender divides and rampant sexism to emerge victorious. Indeed, the range of subjects in their writings is wider than that of men's writings during this era and as such, merits careful study and research.

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