CHALLENGING MALE SUPREMACY: POETESSES OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR (1)

ERKEK EGEMENLİĞİNE MEYDAN OKUMAK: BİRİNCİ DÜNYA SAVAŞI KADIN ŞAİRLERİ

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Abstract: Introduction: War is one of the most debatable themes in arts and literature which arouses paradoxical feelings ranging from hatred, rage and revenge to sympathy, patriotism and gallantry. Aim and Method: This study will focus on war poetry with reference to Jessie Pope and May Wedderburn Cannan’s attitudes towards the First World War in their poetry. Findings: Being either neglected or ignored in social, cultural and political fields, women have tried hard to be heard through their works. War poetry is one of these spaces that women have challenged the male supremacy by asserting their autonomy. Conclusion: While the study of war, like other studies and disciplines, has enabled male authors to provide their most sincere and vivid first hand experiences in literary and social terms, it has denied and muted female experiences for war is also reserved as one of the male provinces or kingdoms wherein women have struggled to have a space to have an opportunity to produce. In this respect, it is noteworthy that The First World War changes the image of women who generally appeared as objects in war literature and introduces a number of female figures who have crucial roles to play in the war as active participants as well as writers.

Key Words: Challenging Male Supremacy, Poetesses of World War I, Jessie Pope, May Wedderburn Cannan


Anahtar Kelimeler: Erkek Egemeniğine Meydan Okumak, 1. Dünya Savaşı Kadın Şairleri, Jessie Pope, May Wedderburn Cannan

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INTRODUCTION

“*It is only the dead who have seen the end of war.*” Plato

The Man goes forth to battle with pulse that throbs for strife,

He knows the joy of action, the seal and thrill of life,

He goes the great adventure to seek, per-chance to find,

And, somewhere in the background, the Woman-stays behind. (qtd. in Khan, 1988:1)

The above mentioned lines clearly express the dichotomy between women at home and soldiers on the battlefield. Just like the battlefield, the art of poetry has been seen as a male dominated arena. Therefore, female war writers have struggled for a very long time to be included in the canon of the First World War Poetry which is dominated by male authors. As Mary Borden asserts the female voice was heard on the “second battlefield” (qtd. in Havlicek, 2015:5). It is clear that women’s perceptions of the First World War have offered miscellaneous and considerable data to the readers and writers of the period and thus enriched the genre substantially. Several poetesses wished to give voice to their experiences and observations. However, different views have not been easily welcomed: “Despite such depth, breadth, and volume of texts produced by women, such texts and their authors have been excluded from the literary canon which includes their male counterparts” (Havlicek, 2015:5).

Nevertheless, clearly, it is to be admitted that experiences related to the war or responses to it cannot be thoroughly expressed by omitting or disregarding poetesses who are able to offer their own perceptions and comments thus contribute to the development of the genre providing a new concept of war for the fact that war is an issue that affects humanity including both women and men. In this respect, Nosheen Khan opines that

Assuming that war is a human event, not a happening which affects one age or sex rather than another, it holds that anyone affected by war is entitled to comment upon it. It also believes that a war poetry which does not include the depth and range of female reaction cannot claim to tell the truth of war since it ignores the response of those who, at great cost, produce the primal munition of war - men - with which their destinies are inextricably linked. (Khan, 1988:2)

Therefore, women’s war poetry may not be described as just an attachment or an additional piece of information but “a new dimen-
sion to the established canon of war literature and ... a new vista to an understanding of the ‘truth’ of war” (Khan, 1988:3).

As opposed to men, who fought as soldiers in the war, women were involved in the war and they were on the stage “as nurses and welfare services staff members” (Havlicek, 2015:6). Therefore, the image of the angel in the house referring to passive, docile and ethereal women has been replaced with much more active and strong female figures. Women were also authors who offered an alternative point of view concerning the war which is worth considering just like the male perspective. This multiplicity in views might be explained in Bakhtin’s terms: “One’s own discourse and voice, although born of another, or dynamically simulated by another, will sooner or later begin to liberate themselves from the authority of the other’s discourse” (Bakhtin, 1998:535), in other words, “Heteroglossia, ... [which] constitutes a special type of double-voiced discourse ... In such discourse there are two voices, two meanings and two expressions” (Bakhtin, 1998:539). It is also necessary to refer to the fact that “The active part played by women in the Great War requires its woman poet or novelist or dramatist who will transform the dry sentences of Government reports into living words before the memories of 1914-18 pass into oblivion with the war generation” (Smith, 2000: 105).

Considering the historical and cultural value of female writers’ experiences, Lillian Robinson in her article “Treason Our Text: Feminist Challenges to the Literary Canon,” puts emphasis on gender division or discrimination: “There is no reason why the canon need speak with one voice or as one man of the fundamental questions of human experience” (qtd. in Havlicek, 2015:11). It is also noteworthy that “… a single form or language is not adequate to convey the trauma of war; a singular genre or isolated word is incapable of conveying such horrors” (Havlicek, 2015:13).

**AIM and METHOD**

War is one of the most debatable themes in arts and literature. Considering the significance of the theme of war and literature about war, this study will focus on war poetry from the point of war poetesses. Among such war poetesses are Jessie Pope, May Wedderburn Cannan and many others. The study will explore these female figures’ attitudes towards the First World War in their poetry with reference to their selected works. Thus, this study aims at dwelling on the issue of female war poetry writing voicing the experiences of the above mentioned poetesses concerning the First World War poetry. Different approaches and analyses of different poetesses and their poetry will probably change the conclusion.
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK and LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical documents and anthologies include a great number of poems concerning the First World War written by a number of eminent poets such as Owen, Sassoon, Rosenberg, Brooke, and many others, some of whom are of lesser importance. However, what these poets have in common is that they all focus on the theme of war reflecting not only their different poetic and thematic tendencies and preferences but also their social, cultural and psychological traits. However, “... the documentation of the female experience during the war have not been given equal consideration ... “a few books about the female experience in the First World War have been published ... but full justice has still not been done to the scope of women’s efforts between 1914 and 1918” (qtd. in Havlicek,2015:6). This attitude may prove the fact that women are not admitted to the canon by their male counterparts who assume that the genre is a male monopoly, by disregarding the fact that wars may arouse several paradoxical feelings ranging from not only positive but also negative sensations which allow both men and women to share their varied comments and opinions.

In terms of the documentation of female works, it may also be said that “The First World War Poetry Digital Archive contains over seven thousand documents, images, audio, and videos related to teaching, learning, and researching the First World War ...Vera Brittain is the sole female war-writer represented in this digital archive’s collections” (Havlicek,2015:9). It may be added that “Vera Brittain, who saw war service as a VAD both at home and at the Front, records in Testament of Youth (1933), her reminiscences of the war years: ‘all through the War poetry was the only form of literature that I could read for comfort, and the only kind that I ever attempted to write” (Khan, 1988:3).

The reason for the oblivion and ignorance is associated with women’s being away from the battlefield which is also a result of male poets and critics’ misogynistic attitude which denies women’s not only physical but also psychological and social fulfilment. It is opined that “The reason for such a small number [in the First World War anthologies] is neither qualitative nor quantitative: women did not write less on the subject of war than men, neither did they write lesser poetry; it is their lack of battlefield experience that does not get them to the anthologies. Or, perhaps, in some cases even the gender itself ...” (Permiakova, 2015: 10).

However, it should be noted that “Taken on its own terms, this body of poetry offers a variety of perspectives upon the female mind in time of war” (Khan, 1988: 4). Consequent-
ly, war is such an issue that should cross the
gendered frontiers or roles to cover the whole
humanity, as both men and women can never
devour war and death. According to Freed-
man, “In the persona of the nurse, the not-
woman crosses the zone of the not-men, and
despite her problematic role, begins to carve
out a relationship to the war which does not
divide experience along gendered lines” (qtd.
in Havlicek, 2015:18).

Within this frame, it might be interesting to
quote Sandra Gilbert who opens her article
“Soldier’s Heart: Literary Men, Literary
Women, and the Great War,” with Christabel
Pankhurst’s words: “This great war … is Na-
ture’s vengeance – is God’s vengeance upon
the people who held women in subjection,
and by doing that have destroyed the per-
fect, human balance” (Gilbert, 1983: 422).

With reference to gender, Gilbert asks the
following questions, related to women and
men’s attitudes towards them: “What part ...
did women play in the Great War? How did
men perceive that role? … What connections
might there be between the wartime activities
of women and the sense of sexual wounding
that haunts so many male modernist texts? …
did women themselves experience the wound
of the war in the same way their sons and lov-
ers did?” (Gilbert, 1983: 422).

Nevertheless, representing a gender-based
view, women are disregarded in the canon be-
cause it is believed that “… there is no genu-
inely perceptive female poetic voice on the
theme of war, and that women’s attempts to
come to grips with the theme would at best be
those of armchair poets, highly inconsistent
with the predominantly macho ethics of war,
or that women’s war poetry epitomises igno-
rance and limits the scope of poetic expres-
sion to sentimental doggerel” (Kiepuszewski

Clearly, it is to be admitted that this marginal-
isation is not fair as women suffer at home as
much as men do on the battlefield as reflected
in Irene McLeod’s lines:

Men battle and die on a breath,
But women who love them must wade
Up to the lips in a sea
Bitter as death; they are flayed
To the soul, yet await the decree
Of a chance, live till the game is played
(Khan, 1988: 166-167).

Although the lines may not offer first hand
experiences of an active participant, they
present a different perspective of a non par-
ticipant woman envisioning the trauma of war
from the distance as sincerely as men do. As
is known, “War is waged by men only, but it
is not possible to wage it upon men only. All
wars are and must be waged upon women ... as well as upon men” (qtd. in Khan, 1988: 2).

As Khan claims, there are numerous poetesses who play different roles in presenting the war issue: “Women poets see their war roles variously as reporters, propagandists, interpreters, advocates, satirists, elegists, healers and visionaries and their verse correspondingly expresses a comprehensive range of human emotions: pity, revulsion, horror, disgust, hate, anger, togetherness, isolation, love and compassion, all are in evidence” (Khan, 1988:4).

It is also unequivocal that “Women war poets of The Great War were not the only victims to suffer from the assumption that “combat is a prerequisite for the production of a literary text that adequately deals with war” (qtd. in French, 2009:16). Further to this, it may be claimed that the war is surprisingly fair enough to devastate and destroy each and every organism in nature: “War, however, is unfortunately democratic. It does not discriminate between men and women, nor does it discriminate between non-combatant and non-participating individuals as war seeks to suffocate every living thing in its relentless march toward an end where the only victor is death” (French, 2009: 31).

In this respect, it might be useful to refer to Freud, who discusses his observations on war and death under the following subtitles, “The Disappointments of War,” and “Our Attitudes towards Death.” In the words of Freud,

... wars cannot cease as long as nations live under such varied conditions, as long as they place such different values upon the individual life, and as long as the animosities which divide them represent such powerful psychic forces. We were therefore quite ready to believe that for some time to come there would be wars between primitive and civilized nations and between those divided by color, as well as with and among the partly enlightened and more or less civilized peoples of Europe.

... we expected that these nations would find some other way of settling their differences and conflicting interests. (Freud, 2013:5)

Freud believes that pain caused by war might only be solved and cured through sound and healthy relations between both individuals and governments. Freud, in the Chapter titled “Our Attitudes towards Death” describes death “[as] natural, undeniable, and inevitable” (Freud, 2013:20). With reference to war, and disappointments in the war, Freud asserts that there is a very strong correlation between war and death in that they are both inevitable. Freud furthers his comments:

A large number of deaths seems unspeakably dreadful to us. We assume a special attitude towards the dead, something almost like ad-
miration for one who has accomplished a very difficult feat. This conventional attitude of civilized people towards death is made still more striking by our complete collapse at the death of a person closely related to us, such as a parent, a wife or husband, a brother or sister, a child or a dear friend. We bury our hopes, our wishes, and our desires with the dead, we are inconsolable and refuse to replace our loss. (Freud, 2013:21)

However, as Freud notes, war is so realistic that people cannot help becoming used to the idea of war and death:

... the war must brush aside this conventional treatment of death. Death is no longer to be denied; we are compelled to believe in it. People really die and no longer one by one, but in large numbers, often ten thousand in one day. It is no longer an accident. Of course, it still seems accidental whether a particular bullet strikes this man or that but the survivor may easily be struck down by a second bullet, and the accumulation of deaths ends the impression of accident. Life has indeed become interesting again; it has once more received its full significance. (Freud, 2013:22-23)

**JESSIE POPE and HER SELECTED POETRY**

Being a journalist and humorist as well Jessie Pope is known with her “... light verse ... her patriotic, motivational poems written during the Great War ... [which] ... encouraged men to enlist in the war effort or propagated women’s participation in the homefront effort” (West, 2010:128). According to Cowan, concerning her style, it is noteworthy that “Jessie Pope and her jingoistic, patriotic and sing-song like poetry were incredibly popular during the war, riding along on the great wave of patriotism and excitement for the war at the time” (Cowan, 2015:51). Having produced “War Poems (1915), More War Poems (1915) and Simple Rhymes for Stirring Times (1916), Pope touches upon each and every aspect of the war in racy, swinging meters” (Khan, 1988: 18).

Being one of the most debatable themes in arts and literature, wars arouse paradoxical feelings ranging from hatred, rage and revenge to sympathy, patriotism and gallantry. However, devastating effects of wars such as isolation, death, mental and physical injury of young soldiers and other victims to a large extent destroy positive feelings concerning war which seems to suggest democracy and progress but in fact disorder, fragmentation, futility, meaninglessness and alienation. Within this frame, one of the most eminent war poets Wilfred Owen demonstrates such an anti romantic and a realistic tendency in his lines “Dulce Et Decorum Est Pro Patria Mori” which ironically refer to the fact that it is not sweet to die for one’s country. Within this frame, Jessie
Pope is also a very well known poetess in that “The two British Museum drafts of Wilfred Owen’s ‘gas poem’, ‘Dulce et Decorum Esť’, one has the ‘dedication’ ‘To Jessie Pope, etc’ (the ‘etc’ presumably meaning ‘and all like her’), which is cancelled in favour of ‘To a certain Poetess’” (Bebbington, 1972: 82).

Jessie Pope in one of her poems titled “Who is for the Game” seems to be very enthusiastic for the war and describes the war as a game and a show and thus “... shows either great naivety or just total disregard for the actual experience of war ... She also seems entirely indifferent to the dangers the soldiers would have faced, and believed it to be more admirable for them to ‘come back with a crutch’ than to ‘lie low and be out of the fun’.

Her representation of war therefore is far too mild and lacks any sense of realism” (Cowan, 2015: 51) as detected in the following lines:

Who’s for the game, the biggest that’s played,
The red crashing game of a fight?
Who’ll grip and tackle the job unafraid?
And who thinks he’d rather sit tight?
Who’ll toe the line for the signal to ‘Go!’?
Who’ll give his country a hand?
Who wants a turn to himself in the show?

And who wants a seat in the stand?
Who knows it won’t be a picnic – not much-
Yet eagerly shoulders a gun?
Who would much rather come back with a crutch
Than lie low and be out of the fun?
Come along, lads –
But you’ll come on all right –
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.

(Weśt, 2010: 128-129)

In a similar vein, Pope, in “The Call,” as noticed in such lines as “Who’s for the trench?... Who’s going out to win?...Who’ll earn the Empire’s thanks? (Pope, 2007:38), and in “Play the Game” reading as follows

.....

Die, to keep England safe and warm

.....

Football’s a sport, and a rare sport too,

To-day there are worthier things to do.
Englishmen, play the game!

...
Get to work with a gun,
When our country’s at war we must all back up
It’s the only thing to be done! (Pope, 2007:11) defines war as a game and football to play to win for patriotic concerns. Considering the above mentioned poems, it would be useful to refer to Wilfred Owen’s letter to Jessie Pope narrated as follows:

I have read your poem and I have to say that it is MISLEADING. You are influencing people to take part in something that will lead to nothing but tragic losses and unforgettable traumas. I have been in war and I know what it’s like to lose a friend. I know what it’s like to be in the warzone struggling to stay alive. Have you ever been in war? You poem is fallacious and everyone I know thinks so. So in response to your deceptive poem, I wrote a poem that I would like you to read. It is a sonnet. I used imagery, onomatopoeia, alliteration and metaphors, which of course you should know all about. So I would like you to read it and write me what you think of it. I hope you understand that you are blinding innocent people and leading them into their deathbeds. (Wilfred Owen’s Letter to Jessie Pope)

What Owen is against concerning Pope’s descriptions and attitudes towards war is very clear in that with a rather light hearted tone, Pope describes war as a funny and the biggest game to be played by brave men for glory and which will not cause death but a crutch at worst in “Who is for the Game.” The last line is a call from a woman that might stand for the country or the nation motivating men to join the game of war which is not going to be a very easy task. However, in “Dulce Et Decorum Est Pro Patria Mori,” war is never a funny game to be played but only an announcement of death and trauma which Owen himself experienced as represented in the following lines:

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound’ring like a man in fire or lime.—
Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.
In all my dreams before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

……

Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.

(Abrams, 1993:1845-46)

Such a cynical and playful tone is also detected in Pope’s poem titled “The One-Legged Soldier Man,” reading as follows: “Another leg they’ll find him,/For the one he left behind him.” Representing the opposite view, Owen in his poem “Disabled” presents a very harsh reality of war representing a young soldier doomed to sit in the wheelchair due to war:
“He sat in a wheeled chair, waiting for dark,/And shivered in his ghastly suit of grey,/Leg-less, sewn short at elbow. Through the park.”

(poetry foundation)

In “Ready, Aye Ready!” Jessie Pope in the following lines, draws attention to women’s emancipation:

No labour or toil we’re afraid of
Though the jobs may be rough
We’ll show you the stuff
That the women of Britain are made of.

(Khan, 1988:71)

Similarly, Pope refers to liberation of women in the war and lists some jobs that most women are responsible for during the war as narrated in the following lines in “War Girls.” As seen, women are no longer “caged and penned up,” until the soldiers return home:

There’s the girl who clips your ticket for the train,
And the girl who speeds the lift from floor to floor,
There’s the girl who does a milk-round in the rain,
And the girl who calls for orders at your door.

Strong, sensible, and fit,
They’re out to show their grit,
No longer caged and penned up,
There’s the motor girl who drives a heavy van,
There’s the butcher girl who brings your joint of meat,
There’s the girl who cries ‘All fares, please!’ like a man
And the girl who whistles taxis up the street.

........
Till the khaki soldier boys come marching back. (poetry foundation)

However, suffering of women is not deemed sincere and realistic as is detected in male war poets’ harsh criticism towards women poets. Siegfried Sassoon is only one of these poets who in his “Glory of Women” criticises “... female romanticism and ignorance of the reality of the carnage” (qtd. in Kiepuszewski and Koszalińska, 2003:138). Sassoon’s “Glory of Women” reads as follows:

You love us when we’re heroes, home on leave,
Or wounded in a mentionable place.
You worship decorations; you believe
That chivalry redeems the war’s disgrace.
You make us shells. You listen with delight,
By tales of dirt and danger fondly thrilled.
You crown our distant ardours while we fight,
And mourn our laureled memories when we’re killed.
You can’t believe that British troops “retire”
When hell’s last horror breaks them, and they run,
Trampling the terrible corpses—blind with blood.

O German mother dreaming by the fire.
While you are knitting socks to send your son
His face is trodden deeper in the mud.

(Sassoon, 1993: 1833-1834)

Sassoon, in the above mentioned lines refers to the fact that women are never aware of the trauma of the war experienced by men in psychological and physical terms, instead they are just interested in the trivial things of life, like knitting socks.

Nevertheless, seemingly futile experiences may be considered to stand for a feminine noncombatant experience. Whilst men die on the trenches, and writing from direct experiences on the battlefield, women are regarded as even ignorant for the fact that they produce the shells which kill men as they are believed to be sharing the illusion of war while men are witnessing it. However, even though women may not be very much delighted with just knitting and waiting for their closest relatives to die in the Great War, this preoccupation may also be a symbol of their distress and a kind of repression of their innermost fears of losing their lovers, husbands or sons: “Even when the women writers describe the wartime losses that they have suffered as women – as wives, mothers, lovers – they are displaced, for the primary loss in war literature
is inevitably death; mourning is secondary” (qtd. in Permiakova, 2015: 6-7). Pope’s poem titled “Socks” which focuses on the memory of the war on the back stage referring to bravery and fighting, and bidding farewell reads as follows:

He was brave – well, so was I –
Keen and merry, but his lip
Quivered when he said good-bye –
Purl the seam-stitch, purl and slip.

Never used to living rough,
Lots of things he’d got to learn;
Wonder if he’s warm enough –
Knit 2, catch 2, knit, turn.

Wonder if he’s fighting now,
What he’s done an’ where he’s been;
He’ll come out on top somehow –
Slip 1, knit 2, purl 14. (Pope, 2007:21)

In one of her poems titled “No,” Pope seems to motivate people by warning them not to be sick at heart due to the war and the consequences of it and suggests trying to play their part more than just watching and waiting and knitting and sewing. The poem may also signal despair as is detected in the last line of of each stanza drawing attention to war’s being not an easy task, and referring to women who are doomed to be alone:

By bridge and battery, town and trench,
They’re fighting with bull-dog pluck;
Not one, from Tommy to General French,
Is down upon his luck.

There are some who stand and some who fall,
But how does the chorus go
That echoing chant in the hearts of all?
“Are we downhearted? NO !

There’s Jack, God bless him, upon the foam,
His isn’t an easy task,
To strike for England, to strike right home,
So much, no more, does he ask.

On the dreadnought’s deck where the big guns bark,
Or in quiet depths below
The salt wind wafts us a chantey. Hark !
“Are we downhearted ? NO !

And what of the girl who is left behind,
And the wife who misses her mate?
Oh, well, we’ve got our business to mind
Though it’s only to watch and wait.
So we’ll take what comes with a gallant heart
As we busily knit and sew,
Trying, God help us, to do our part,
“Are we downhearted ? NO ! (Pope, 2007:10)

It is notable that “Pope’s verses, despite their light hearted approach, are not without a sting
in the tail capable of wounding the guilty” (Khan, 1988:74). It may also be added that “... being far too flippant regarding the sacrifices the soldiers ... [Jessie Pope] represented a popular attitude at the time ... to get people behind the cause and to keep them motivated. She proved to be completely unashamed and unapologetic in her patriotism, encouraging every Englishman and woman to do all they could for their country” (Cowan, 2015: 56).

MAY WEDDERBURN CANNAN and HER SELECTED POETRY

One of the efforts in the war for women was being a member of several organizations such as Voluntary Aid Detachment: “Voluntary Aid Detachment nurses were, in general, anxious to replace a passive female role with the fierce and exhilarating preparations for national defence, Support for the war seemed to offer them a coherent and authoritative identity, an entrance on to the world stage, a chance to act as their brothers, lovers and friends were doing” (Ouditt, 1992: 1).

May Wedderburn Cannan, an eminent British poet, also an active member of the VAD, “published two volumes of war poems: In War Time (1917) and The Splendid Days (1919)” (Khan, 1988: 130). It is opined that “Cannan’s poetry seems to be heavily influenced by personal experience and in particular her relationship and her concerns for ... her fiancé, who was deployed to the Front in France and would survive the war but tragically die not long after from pneumonia. Her poetry succeeds very well in drawing attention to the plight of the women who were left behind with only their constant concerns for their loved ones to keep them company” (Cowan, 2015: 53). Such a female image is represented in “August 1914” through the lines “And a girl knelt down to pray:/’Keep Thou safe through the night, O Lord,/ Whom Thou hast kept through the day”(qtd. in Kendall, 2013:179) which point to the fact that a girl is praying for the soldier to return home alive; however, the soldier dies next night while she is praying: “And a soldier turned to sleep that night/ Who would not wake for the day. Thus, it is clear that “There is very little in this poem to suggest Cannan was enthusiastic about the war, instead it seems like she has been left saddened by the consequences of it” (Cowan, 2015: 53).

The following poem titled “Since They Have Died” suggests that the people who are lucky to be alive should transmit the gentleness of the dead and give happiness, love and pity to the earth to bring happiness again and to make the dead forget about the pain believing that the world is taken care of:
Since they have died to give us gentleness,
And hearts kind with contentment and quiet mirth,
Let us who live also give happiness
And love, that’s born of pity, to the earth.

For, I have thought, some day they may lie sleeping
Forgetting all the weariness and pain,
And smile to think their world is in our keeping,
And laughter comes back to the earth again.
(all poetry)

Cannan in her biography refers to Sassoon’s description of war as a “conquest,” and himself as “a conscientious objector,” presenting “an alternative to protest and despair” Cannan declares that “I had much admired some of Sassoon’s verse but I was not coming home with him. Someone must go on writing for those who were still convinced of the right of the cause for which they had taken up arms” as an answer to the saying “Went to the war with Rupert Brooke and came home with Siegfried Sassoon” (qtd. in Abrams, 1993:1849).

As detected from the following lines, Cannan’s “Rouen” “is a pledge to stay faithful to the scenes and shadows of the war panorama as witnessed by her. A record of her first contact with war, the poem’s most noticeable feature is the spirit of idealism which pervades the whole” (Khan, 1988, 130-131). Such lines as Can you recall ...? Can you forget ...? Can I forget ...? portray the poet’s obsession with memory of the restraint sadness.

Early morning over Rouen, hopeful, high, courageous morning,
....
Can you recall those mornings and the hurry of awakening,
...

And the freshness and the glory of the labour of the day.
Quiet night-time over Rouen, and the station full of soldiers,
All the youth and pride of England from the ends of all the earth;
And the rifles piled together, and the creaking of the sword-belts,
And the faces bent above them, and the gay, heart-breaking mirth,
....
Can I forget the evenings and the sunsets on the island,
And the tall black ships at anchor far below our balcony,
And the distant call of bugles, and the white wine in the glasses,

And the long line of the street lamps, stretching Eastwards to the sea?

When the world slips slow to darkness, when the office fire burns lower,

My heart goes out to Rouen, Rouen all the world away;

When other men remember, I remember our Adventure

And the trains that go from Rouen at the ending of the day. (Abrams, 1993:1850-51)

Cannan’s “Rouen” has a similar tone with Brooke’s “The Soldier” which presents a sense of optimism and patriotism of the soldier poet who is ready to sacrifice himself and free of any feelings related to fear and rage and by focusing on a very solid base for fighting and war which is “England” the recurrent image of the poem, the country of glory which deserves a glorious death:

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there’s some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,

A body of England’s, breathing English air, Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

And think, this heart, all evil shed away, A pulse in the eternal mind, no less Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given, Her sights and sounds, dreams happy as her day; And laughter, learnt of friends, and gentleness, In hearts at peace, under an English heaven. (Abrams, 1993:1827)

It is clear that it is not only men for whom the war is life itself, “In war time women, too, go to battle; they battle with the slow torture of fear and suspense, the long agonies of anticipation; the sleepless nights and fevered imagination; the pitiless hours usurped by visions of battered bleeding bodies. Although the First World War was obviously a directly less harrowing experience for women than for the men involved, women were profoundly affected by it” (Khan, 1988: 138-139).

Although men are opposing this view, it may be said that “Women may not participate in actual warfare, but the impact of war on their lives is more enduring; often their lives are irrevocably warped. Vera Brittain and May
Wedderburn Cannan are examples” (Khan, 1988: 167).

May Cannan’s “Lamplight” exemplifies a very tragic attitude towards war in that the lovers could not live out their dreams of planning the world together, having no future but only memories of the past, being defeated by death and finding an alternative road other than the dreamed space and time:

We planned to shake the world together, you and I

Being young, and very wise; ...

We planned a great Empire together you and I, ...

Now in the quiet of a chill Winter’s night

Your voice comes hushed to me

Full of forgotten memories: you and I

Dreamed great dreams of our future in those days, ...

We shall never shake the world together, you and I,

For you gave your life away;

And I think my heart was broken by the war,

Since on a summer day

You took the road we never spoke of. (Khan, 1988: 168)

“After the War” by May Wedderburn Cannan which epitomizes anguish and sorrow of a woman is a requiem composed after a lost happiness and a beloved, who would never come back to love the poetess as he used to. She pours out her deep grief in the following lines:

After the war perhaps I’ll sit again

Out on the terrace where I sat with you,

And see the changeless sky and hills beat blue

And live an afternoon of summer through.

I shall remember then, and sad at heart

For the lost day of happiness we knew,

Wish only that some other man were you

And spoke my name as once you used to do. (Kendall, 2013:183)

Finally, with reference to May Wedderburn Cannan’s poetic style, compared to Jessie Pope, it may be pointed out that

... [she] was far less aggressive in her approach; in fact, little of what she appears to say in her poetry suggests any clear favour for the war. ... she focuses on the ways in which women in particular were affected by sending their men to the Front and the worrying that became an unavoidable part of their lives. Hers is therefore a very human and
personal perspective and is entirely contradictory to Jessie Pope’s sensational and very public angle. (Cowan, 2015: 56).

CONCLUSION

While the study of war, like other studies and disciplines, has enabled male authors to provide their most sincere and vivid first hand experiences in literary and social terms, it has denied and muted female experiences for war is also reserved as one of the male provinces or kingdoms wherein women have struggled to have a space to have an opportunity to produce. In this respect, it is noteworthy that The First World War changes the image of women who generally appeared as objects in war literature and introduces a number of female figures who have crucial roles to play in the war as active participants as well as writers. Clearly, it is to be admitted that experiences related to the war or responses to it cannot be thoroughly expressed by omitting or disregarding poetesses who are able to offer their own perceptions and comments thus enrich the genre for the fact that war is an issue that affects humanity including both women and men. Jessie Pope, May Wedderburn Cannan and many others have challenged male supremacy and contributed a lot to the development and enhancement of the genre by providing plentiful valuable perspectives and observations related to the war. It is also clear that the reader may feel this abundance in prolific poetesses whose styles were versatile as well: “Some “women did write protest poetry, some of it predating that of the trench poets” while “other women’s poetry shows a range of more complex and sensitive responses” (qtd. in Hopchet, 2015:39).

Within this frame, it may be emphasised that war poetry, produced by poetesses, based on exploring the theme of war, its definitions, consequences, and connotations, provides the reader with a variety of perspectives, and thematic and stylistic analyses. Thus, multiplicity of such responses and structural concerns should be welcomed other than assuming a misogynistic attitude by solely criticising the perceptions of female writers or totally disregarding their experiences and observations and poetic preferences by considering the fact that these female poetesses’ poetry is never homogeneous and their voice turns the male dominated monologic war discourse of poetics into a polyphonic aesthetic art.

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