

INFLUENCE OF WAR IN THE WORKS OF GEORGE ORWELL AND HAROLD PINTER

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ABSTRACT

The World Wars did create many things like chaos, disillusionment and hopelessness among people. In the process they also created several writers who chose to write their hearts out against totalitarianism. The wars influenced the writers so much so that what they wrote and how they wrote were conditioned by their war time experiences. George Orwell wrote when he witnessed the wars and its aftermath. Harold Pinter was a juvenile and underwent the trauma of war which conditioned him as a writer. This research paper seeks to bring out how wars played the central formative influence in these two writers.

Keywords: war, influence, oppression, revolutionary, nationalism

Introduction

The two writers chosen to illustrate the influence of war are George Orwell and Harold Pinter. They both lived during the second World War. George Orwell was a middle-aged man then, while Harold Pinter was a teenager. George Orwell had seen the First World War as well and was at the peak of his career during the Second World War. Harold Pinter started writing after the war and began his literary career after the demise of Orwell. Thus, they are representative of two different eras. Orwell represented the first half of the century and Pinter represented the second half of the twentieth century. The one thing in common between them is that they witnessed the Second World War.

Methodology:

The method of research employed is to study the biographies of the authors along with their works to understand the historical and biographical influences in the writings. Knowledge of the context in which a particular work of art was created is essential to understand it.

War and Writers:

In his speech delivered in 1948 at a writers' confederation in India, Munshi dismissed all fantasies saying that, "Unless literature deals with reality it has no appeal for us." He went on to add:

"Literature reflects the age. In the past days of decadence, the main function of literature was to entertain the parasitic class...But our literary taste is undergoing a

rapid transformation. It is coming more and more to grips with the realities of life; it interests itself with society or man as a social unit.” (82)

If literature was a reflection of the society at all times, it was more so during the war times. Wars devastated people and land so much so that it was impossible for writers to be unaffected by them. Either the writers were directly affected by war or were at least sensible to the sufferings of those who were suffering around them. The theme and stories of the writers were conditioned on the lives of the people they lived with. Since the wars were all pervasive affected every walk of life, it was impossible for writers to overlook that. In the post-world war era writers had the task of explaining the new post-war order.

George Orwell himself declares that he is a product of the war. According to him,

His subject-matter will be determined by the age he lives in – at least this is true in tumultuous, revolutionary ages like our own – but before he ever begins to write he will have acquired an emotional attitude from which he will never completely escape. (Orwell, 3)

Both the authors were against the oppression staged by the state on its people.

The entire novel of 1984 is based on a totalitarian state’s oppressive measures to keep its people slaves. It is a mockery on the idea of nationalism. The tactics employed by the state to keep the flame of nationalism burning is not so farfetched. It can actually be seen in present day politics as well. All forms of independent thinking and expression is curtailed. This idea is dealt with in the works of both the authors.

If we look at their motives for writing, we can understand how they have been influenced and shaped by the wars. George Orwell said,

The Spanish war and other events in 1936-37 turned the scale and thereafter I knew where I stood. Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism, as I understand it. (Orwell, 6)

This same person Orwell wrote a patriotic poem which got printed in the local newspaper, when the first World War broke out. Yet, by the time of Second World War he had had enough experiences to bust the myth of nationalism.

The defining political experience of his life, alternatively, was the six months he spent in Spain, in 1937, as a Republican volunteer against Franco. He was wounded in the throat – the bullet passing within a few millimetres of his carotid artery – and was present in barcelona when soviet-sponsored hit-squads attempted to suppress the Trotskyist POUM militia, of which he had been a member. Spain made Orwell ‘believe in Socialism for the first time’, as he put it, while instilling an enduring hatred of totalitarian political systems. (D.J. Taylor page 3,4)

Similarly, Harold Pinter had the experience of being evacuated and witnessed bombings as a teenager. Being separated from his parents and being thrown to face harsh realities of war time made him acutely sensitive. His

prime memories of evacuation as recorded by Billington “are of loneliness, bewilderment, separation and loss: themes that recur in all his works.”(10)

But the most formative aspect of the whole evacuation experience was a loss of identity and the sense of living in some strange in-between world: an emotional no man’s land. ‘There was,’ says Pinter, ‘no fixed sense of being...of being...at all.’(Billington 11)

For the bulk of the war, however, Pinter was in the East End which bore the brunt of the London bombing.(13)

If that was his first encounter with war, his next one was even important. He refused to enlist himself in the army as a conscientious objector for which he was jailed and fined.

It gave him his first decisive experience of the conflict between individual determination and social conformity. It also bred a lifelong suspicion of the Kafkaesque workings of the bureaucracy. Put simply, it was his first conscious political act. (Billington 38)

Harold Pinter in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech spoke of the lies he wished to expose through his writings.

“Political language, as used by politicians, does not venture into any of this territory since the majority of politicians, on the evidence available to us, are interested not in truth but in power and the maintenance of that power. To maintain that power it is essential that people remain in ignorance, that they live in ignorance of the truth, even the truth of their own lives. What surrounds us therefore is a vast tapestry of lies, upon which we feed.”

This tapestry of lies is what Orwell exposed through his satirical Ministry of Truth in his Nineteen Eighty-Four. Whatever Orwell predicted was witnessed by Harold Pinter and he chose to expose the lies and fight against forced conformity.

Orwell’s declaration of how his writing might have been if not for the wars, clearly shows that all that he wrote was only under the influence of war. He said,

In a peaceful age I might have written ornate or merely descriptive books, and might have remained almost unaware of my political loyalties. As it is I have been forced into becoming a sort of pamphleteer. (Orwell, 5)

Conclusion:

Wars had played a definitive role in the lives and careers of the two writers. They chose different genres. They wrote in different eras. They had different styles. Yet, they were conditioned by the same wars. The World War influenced the lives of both the writers. The long-standing effect

and influence of war can be seen in its impact on Harold Pinter. Thus, the war had affected the present and the future. It is this future that Orwell foresaw in his dystopian novel 1984. Orwell saw a bleak future ahead and laid it down in concrete images as a warning to the war mongering states, and those innocent people who fought the wars in the name of nationalism. Harold Pinter was forged into the writer he became by his war time experiences. If Orwell feared for the future, Pinter lived to see the fears come true. Thus, Orwell and Pinter are two writers who were forged by their war experiences. They both exposed the ugly side of nationalism. Their distrust of nationalism stemmed from the horrors of the war they witnessed.

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