

War and Violence in the Select Poems of Kamala Wijeratne

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Kamala Wijeratne is a significant name in contemporary Sri Lankan poetry. Set in the backdrop of civil war and ethnic violence, Wijeratne's poetry is an expression of her resentment to war and violence that gripped Sri Lanka and its repercussion on the lives of the civilians. The civil war that started in 1983 between the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamil groups devastated the peace of Sri Lanka for more than two decades. With the failure of the efforts of the governments to curb violence and initiate peace talks with LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) and the Sri Lankan military adopting stringent measures to wipe out the terror outfits, the trauma spread across the island incurring huge loss on the life and economy. Though the LTTE admitted its defeat in 2009, the civil war and its effects continue to haunt the memory of the island. The conflict between the ethnic groups and ideological clashes has been a much discussed issue that has even found its way into films, theatre and literature.

The present paper explores the manner in which the two key detrimental factors -war and violence are represented in the select poems of Wijeratne. Speaking about the major concerns of Wijeratne's poetry, Lilamani de Silva states that most of her poetry revolves around the impact of Lankan "political strife". Wijeratne's poetry reflects the terrific effect of war on the human psyche and questions the very foundations of war that spreads nothing but violence and bloodshed, death and destruction. Her poems underline the notion developed by Barry S. Levy and Victor W. Sidel that war is dreadful than many major diseases "combined" and which can destroy the entire culture and thereby threaten the very roots of civilisation. Each of Wijeratne's war poems underlines the futility of war and provokes us to think seriously about the extent of damages and pain that war can induce.

Wijeratne's "Monuments" is a poignant poem that depicts how war destroys the lives of young men. The poem builds the image of a speaker who is on a bus journey. As the bus halts at every stop to load, the speaker sees 'monuments' erected in the memory of the dead soldiers with their names etched on them. These monuments

are erected by the parents and family members for the dear departed souls. The speaker states that this is a common sight at every bus stop. Each monument has a new name but the story is old. All these soldiers are killed in the war in the North,

The legend goes on, on every bus
Stand a new name every time but
The story's old "To the hero who fell in the north
Erected by Father, Mother and next of kin"

As the journey continues and the poem progresses, the speaker notices that most of the young heroes who had been killed in the war and whose names are engraved on the monuments were actually the sons of the farmers who "teased out paddy from this land". The poem then presents the other possible side of the lives of these young men if they had not gone out for war. If the young men had not gone for war and died, they would have led a normal life of a farmer with their families. They too would have ploughed the fields, harvested the crops, followed their fathers to the paddy fields, sat in front of the hearth relishing the scented "new" rice being served by "mother's fond hands". The speaker's journey continues and so is the sight of the monuments. The images of the parents whose young sons are killed in the war seem to rise before her eyes. A farmer appears with his "muddied loin cloth" and a house wife with "billowing sleeves and string of beads". They seem to be staring at her as the bus moves in the "unwinding road". The speaker tries to capture visually the faces of the parents that has become "stern with unshed tears",

A farmer in a muddied loin cloth haunts me
And a housewife with billowing sleeves and string of beads
Stare at me out of the unwinding road
And their faces are stern with unshed tears.

If the poem "Monuments" presents war hit Sri Lanka from the eyes of a speaker who is on a bus journey, "To A Student" records the horror of violence unleashed by ethnic war through a poet - teacher. Addressed to the students, the teacher in the poem is conscious of the fact that her students cannot make eye contact with her because they belong to different ethnic groups. The teacher is aware that their ears are "stopped" against her voice as their ear drums are cracked by the "echoes of gunshots" and "blasts of grenades". The students are worried about their brothers, friends and lovers. Similar to the teacher, the students can see torn pieces of flesh suspended from trees and bushes and pieces of bones. The roads are filled with human blood. These lines indicate the fact that violence had become the order of the day. The students are distracted and disturbed by the violence and bloodshed around them. Though they are physically present in the classes, they are mentally stressed with the terror of war. The poet - teacher in fact is aware of the plight of her students.

The teacher then talks about a method to stop this violence. She wants the students to see her in the eyes. She wants them to join together and they would all search for a "herb that heals" and make a "cooling poultice to cure mass lunacy". She earnestly advocates this new approach to solve the problem and adopt "fresh methodology to stop other Hiroshimas". Hiroshima is used as a metaphor here. It serves as a warning bell that if fresh methodology is not adopted immediately, her island will soon turn into another Hiroshima.

"A Soldier's Wife Weep" is one more poem where Kamala Wijeratne constructs the trauma of war through a soldier's wife. The soldier has gone to the war never to return. As the husband leaves for war, the wife lights the lamp before Buddha. The poet juxtaposes the image of peace symbolised by the image of Buddha against the violence of war. The soldier's wife recollects the memory of good time that she spent with her husband during his visit to the village on the weekend. Like atypical wife, she had watched her husband leaving for his duty, lit the lamp praying for his safety and even took his horoscope to be read by the astrologer. She found solace by reading the

horoscope of her husband that suggested no ill omen. But on Thursday, her fate changed when her husband's body was brought home. With her dried up emotions, she says that she did not know what to believe and what to think. The emotional emptiness is highlighted when the wife helplessly says that she does not really know how to "preoccupy" herself and how to make the "day go forward" without her husband. The poem ends ironically with the lines that the horoscope readers were all "wrong" as their predictions regarding her husband failed.

"Musical" is one more poem that mourns the loss of youth in the war. The affection of the poet towards the youngsters is revealed in the very first line when she says that the young men looked so smart in their olive-green uniform. But behind their trimmed uniforms, and rhythmic marches, there lies the horror of war. The young men are loaded in the truck and are taken to the North for the war. The poet admits that the very sight of the smart young men brought tears in her eyes because she knows that most of the young men will be dead in the war. She then compares the long convoy of olive - green uniformed soldiers to the long line of "caged parrots" in some random pet shop that she saw one day. She notices sadly that the green colour was "fading" from their feathers and instantly she knows that their "days were numbered". Similar is the case with the young soldiers whose lives are toyed in the name of war. She instinctively feels that she should be by their side and liberate them so that they can fly back to the "greenwood" and resume singing all day. The imagery and the comparison create the required effect. She wants the young soldiers to be liberated from the clutches of the war so that they can return to their normal lives and enjoy it to the fullest extent. She immediately realises her helplessness. She cannot do anything except pray for the young lives. The young soldiers looked happy as they marched through the streets and sang their songs with enthusiasm. But their song and their voice are overshadowed by the ruckus sound of the truck that takes them away to the North where the war is being waged. The poem poignantly picturises the loss of innocence in the pangs of war. The youthful exuberance of the soldiers is contrasted with the brutality of war that awaits them in the North.

The oeuvre of Kamala Wijeratne thus exhibits her concern for the marginalised sections of society who are the victims of violence and war. The innocent youth going to the war front, the tensed wives who are anxiously waiting for their husbands to return from the war, the helpless poor parents who wait for their never returning sons to come back are the people who appear often in her poems. The relics speak, the memorials tell stories and every part of Sri Lanka comes alive to narrate the horrors of war and violence, conflict and confusion that enveloped this island and left a deep scar on its mindscape as well as landscape.

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