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War and Human Predicament: A Study of Hemingway's *For Whom The Bell Tolls*

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Abstract:

Ernest Hemingway is a legendary figure of America. His works reveal a sense of disenchantment, alienation and revulsion from the horrors of war. In the modern period from around the First World War, and with the Great Depression and in the involvement in the Second World War as Britain's ally, America's growing participation in world affairs became a notable aspect of its self-construction. In 1936-39, the Spanish Civil War found lots of US volunteers who fought in the war and eventually, this experience became part of the context and subjects of literature. Hemingway, who worked as a war correspondent in Spain, drew on Spanish peasant life, the Spanish national pastime of bullfighting and the anti-fascist resistance in his work *For Whom The Bell Tolls* (1940) and some of these experiences contribute to the making of the strong "masculine" code by which many of his heroes lived. Hemingway's novels have delineated the problems and the life of the post-war period. He had felt the deep agonizing experiences of war as a soldier and had also suffered the severe wound which left its mark on his psyche. Philip Young writes, "This is the world seen through a crack in the wall by a man who is pinned down by a gun fire" (*Ernest Hemingway*, p.40). This paper depicts in 1930s how Hemingway's interests centered round the Spanish War, its slaughter, death, violence and human predicament which he has depicted in *For Whom The Bell Tolls*.

Keywords: war, violence, death, human predicament, disenchantment.

Introduction

Hemingway was a literary artist of high caliber. War was one of his most favourite themes and it indeed was the major theme in America's national life in the twentieth century with several engagements in different parts of the world creating a requirement demand for the American soldier to fight overseas. In *Death in the Afternoon* (1932), a study of the art of bullfighting, Ernest Hemingway wrote, "All stories, if continued for enough, end in death, and he is no true story teller who would keep that from you". Violent death, often the subject matter of his fiction, shaped Hemingway's life. It also triggered his exit – with a blast from a shotgun he held in his mouth. War always attracted him. Hemingway joined the Italian army, first as an ambulance driver, then as an infantry officer. In 1918, at nineteen, he was almost killed by shrapnel burst. For the rest of his life, Hemingway flirted with destructive forces, both human and natural. He was in Spain during World War II. In Paris after World War I, Hemingway joined the expatriate group of artists and writers described by Gertrude Stein as "the lost generation." It has often been said against Hemingway that he gravely handicaps himself by dealing with violent action rather than the act of intelligence. The world of his novels is a world at war where the figure of death looms large. Here lies the relevance of his novels *To Whom the Bell Tolls*.

Hemingway was wounded in the First World War. He was taken care by a Red Cross nurse Agnes with whom he had fallen in love and this love is the genesis of his most red war novel *A Farewell to Arms*. His writings give us a true and realistic picture of war. Hemingway wrote, "When you go to a war as a boy you have a great illusion of immortality. Other people get killed; no you...Then when you are badly wounded the first time you lose that illusion and you know it can happen to you. After being severely wounded two weeks before my nineteenth birthday I had a bad time until I figured out that nothing could happen to me that had not happened to all men before me. Whatever I had to do men had always done. If they had done it then I could do it too and the best thing was not to worry about it"¹. (Sean Hemingway, p. 12) To give a first hand war reporting, Hemingway liked being part of action. Hemingway himself said, "The writer's standard of fidelity to the truth should be so high that his invention, out of his experience, should produce a true account than anything factual can be. For facts can be observed badly; but when a good writer is creating something, he has time and scope to make of it an absolute truth"². (Sean Hemingway, p. 23)

Gordimer says:

I am not concerned with what Ernest Hemingway did or did not do in his own body , his own person, out of his own courage in wars...Let us leave his life alone. It belongs to him as he lived it. Let us read his books. They are his particular illumination of what our existence has been , his gift to us that belongs to us all.(*Hemingway Centennial Celebration)

Hemingway does not glorify war. The war itself is viewed with suspicion. As Frederic Henry in *A Farewell to Arms* says:

I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain. We had heard them, sometimes standing in the rain almost out to earshot, so that only the shouted words came through, and had read them, on proclamations that were slapped up by the bill posters over other proclamations... and I had seen nothing sacred and the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like the stockyards at Chicago (162-63).

For whom the Bell Tolls marks the culmination of Hemingway's creative genius. Hemingway's intimate knowledge of Spain and Spanish people and the civil war gave him a background and awakened the spirits of many writers of different nationalities to side with the Republicans in their struggle with the Fascists. The member of the International Brigade fought for liberty. In *For whom the Bell Tolls* Jordan, an American volunteer represents the same spirit in his crusade, and the failure of hopes and ideals is the failure of the hopes and the aspirations of mankind. Nemi D' Agostino has observed:

What we find in the book is another lost young man, another individual failure, a solitary drama that is symbolic of all the individual dramas of all times and places. The only difference is that now the individual failure is overtly seen as part of a collective failure, a common drama in which the new ideals and hopes one by one prove fruitless, and in the end the only thing which remains is the unbroken chain of pessimism and despair.³

The story of the novel shows the conflict between the Republicans and the Fascists aided by the volunteers sent by Mussolini. The central action of the novel hinges on the blowing of a bridge. Robert Jordan has been entrusted with this task so that the Fascists may

be prevented from attacking the Republicans. The time of blowing the bridge is the most important thing. The events take place in the valley of Gaudarrama. Jordan has been mortally wounded and lies down in the pine wood.

Robert Jordan's love – affair with Maria is the subplot introduced in the novel. Her parents have been shot dead and she is raped by the Fascists. She has been rescued from the train carrying political prisoners by the Guerillas. Maria anguished and crazy has been brought to normalcy by Pilar. Jordan's intense love with Maria indicates a sense of fulfillment and joy experienced by the hero in the midst of crisis. The incidents cover seventy hours in the valley of Gaudarrama. Hemingway has portrayed the motivating forces, the cogitations and the deliberations of the hero.

The Spanish Civil War awakened a sense of anger and hatred for the Fascists. The war drew Hemingway's attention and he became preoccupied with the political problems in his novel. He knew Spain in 1920. Carlos Barker has pointed out.

The almost medieval country he had known in the nineteen-twenties during Alfonso's eight year dictatorship by royal – decree had begun to change rapidly in 1931 with the overthrowing of monarchy and the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Workers.⁴

When he visited Spain in 1931, he became familiar with the miserable plight of the common man and the corruptions rampant in the Bureaucracy.

The novel has become an epic and Carlos Barker has pointed out the similarity between an epic and *For whom the Bell Tolls*. Stain has been compared to Illium and Robert Jordan resembles the hero Achilles of the Trojan War and Pilar to Ajax. Fascists are similar to the supernatural power of destruction in an ancient Greek epic. The airships come in threes and the multiple of three, like the three witches in *Macbeth*. Robert Jordan has his premonitions of death. Pilar has the intuitive power to prognosticate future. The holding action at the bridge reminds one of Thermopylee and Horatius at the bridge. In spite of these resemblances *For whom the Bell Toll* cannot be regarded an epic. In the modern age, the progress of science and reason have resolved the mysteries of nature and the old heroism of life is gone.

Hemingway has imbued the work with symbolic significance. The naturalistic descriptions have been mingled with the symbolic suggestions. In an atmosphere of war, firing and bombardment cruelty and destruction, Sierra de Gaudarrama provides a contrast. It

has been treated symbolic of a place which has love and health. Maria, the crazy woman, is rehabilitated and Robert Jordan himself is spiritually strengthened in his love with Maria. Like other Hemingway heroes he has courage, strength and valour and can risk his life in the moment of danger. In blowing up the bridge, he has received the mortal wound. Maria's hair was cut short by the Falangists. The loss of hair is symbolic of the loss of womanhood. There are allusions to her growing hair. She has become a woman again with the growth of her hair. Maria says to Jordan, "They gave me this hair cut in Valladolid. It is almost grown out now." She remained in the mountain for three months and her hair grew. The growth of her hair symbolizes the recovery of her mental health.

Robert Jordan, the Hemingway hero, is like the fighter of the International Brigade. He has gone to a different country to fight for the loyalists. He has been inspired by an idealism which inspired the foreigners to fight for the Republic in Spain.

Robert Jordan is to blow up the bridge under instruction from General Golz. He remained in Spain for ten years and had a vast knowledge of its topography. He himself has been injured and he has killed people in war recklessly. He has to get rid of this guilt by writing. This is "an echo of Hemingway's own belief that the process of artistic creation has a therapeutic effect on artist." He has not been involved in the domestic politics. Robert Jordan is convinced that the discipline of the communists was essential if the victory was to be attained. Jordan's father shot himself with a pistol carried by his grandfather in the American Civil War. Hemingway's father also had committed suicide. Jordan has experiences the despair and the disillusionment. He has been aggrieved to find that the corrupt bureaucracy and the internal political machinations have betrayed the Spanish Republic. Anselmo, a Republican supporter remarks to Jordan that he has killed in war but not with pleasure, "Yes, several times. But not with pleasure. To me it is a sin to kill a man. Even Fascists whom we must kill – no. I am against of killing all men."⁵

Pilar, Pablo's wife is a brave gipsy woman with her tough character. She is, in Anselmo's word, "A hundred times, braver than Pablo. But something barbarous."⁶ She has a tongue that scales and that bites like a bull-ship. She is a unique woman who has sided with other guerillas who persuaded Jordan to kill Pablo. She is responsible for love and marriage between Maria and Jordan.

For Whom the Bell Tolls is not a confused work as Maxwell Geismar believes. It deals with the destiny of man. For deeper understanding of this novel, one should go to the lines quoted from John Donne that "No man is an island, intire of it selfe every man is a peace of the continent apart of the maine... any man's death diminishes me, because I am

involved in Mankind. And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee." The war has been fought and Robert Jordan has discharged his duty with loyalty. If storm comes no one is safe. The calamity will overwhelm the adherents and the opponents alike. Halliday has brought out this predicament depicted in this novel. Pablo has flailed many prominent Fascists to death. He has become terror incarnate. Pilar his wife has related how people are disgusted with Pablo's plan to persecute the Fascists. It is rather ironical that the loyalists waging war against the Fascists are imbued with some violence, cruelty and revenge which has been betrayed by the Fascists themselves. Halliday says "Robert Jordan is not an island and has been killed by the war which he fought.⁷ Both the sides have suffered substantial losses.

Conclusion:

Professor Gates opined:

Hemingway was one of the finest prose stylists in English. He captured in stunning stories and novels the uncomfortable realities of his age and forced into public consciousness a realization of the brutalities of war and their lingering psychological effects. His stories of Nick Adams depict the adolescent agonies of a generation. His best novels record for all time the emotional turmoil of modern warfare and modern life. It is the integrity of his craft, a richness beyond legend, that will forever endure. (*Hemingway Centennial Celebration)

The *Gita*, generally deemed to be a later addition to the epic, is an antiwar testament in that it seeks to free us from the passions of the mind which lead to violent confrontations between individuals, ethnic and religious groups and nations. It is a clash of egos that results in the raging inferno of war, the hell that humankind unleashes on earth, putting to shame all our achievements of science, art and philosophy. The fights between Israel and Hamas and between Ukraine and Russia remind us of our Kurukshetra. Zhuge Liang says, "The wise win before the fight which the ignorant fight to win"⁸. Hemingway has depicted war as a great calamity and has portrayed the wound, death and the distress in his works. He has also revealed that the war has caused a sense of alienation from the society and the old values of life have disintegrated. His characters are "Bloodied prize fighters, hired killers, disembowelled bullfighters, crippled soldiers, hunters of wild animals, deep-sea fishermen." Hemingway's world-view is a limited one because he has concentrated not on the normal

moments in life dealing with family life, business, agriculture but on tense moments that assess the capacity of his characters to endure under adverse circumstances. In spite of the limited range of his characters and narrow vision of life, his place is secure in literary history. When his death was announced on 3rd July, 1961, the obituary in *The Times* stated, “No history of the literature of our time will be able to ignore his achievement or his far-reaching influence”⁹. The best way to win a war is to learn not to fight one is the message of Hemingway.

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* Quotations on Gordimer and Louis Gates are taken from remarks given at the Hemingway Centennial Celebration at the John F. Kennedy Library on April 10-11.1999.