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THE GREAT WAR THROUGH THE FEMALE 'GAZE': READING VERA BRITAIN'S *TESTAMENT OF YOUTH*

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Abstract

While many men soldiers shared their experiences of the Great War through various literary forms, there were women too, mostly nurses, who wrote poignant and moving personal testimonies of their experience – letters, diaries, memoirs and narrative accounts, some of which found their way into print. One of the most prominent among them was Vera Brittain, a VAD nurse. Considering that war has always been considered a male domain, this paper attempts to look at war through the female 'gaze' by reading Brittain's memoir *Testament of Youth*. Works like that of Vera Brittain, seen through the lens of feminist literary theory, are important and meaningful interventions in feminist war literature.

Keywords: *Great War, VAD, nurses, war writing, female gaze.*

Introduction

'Gaze', as a critical term, gained prominence in the 1970s as a part of cinematic discourse. However, over the years, it has penetrated other critical theories with its subtle shifts in meaning. Jean Gallagher, in *The World Wars Through the Female Gaze*, also expands the notion of the gaze in critical discourse by situating numerous visual acts within specific historical contexts to reconstruct the wartime female subject. She says,

"Vision has... played an important role in the development and gendering of cultural discourses of war." (1998, p. 3)

Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), the seminal study that made the Modern Library's list of 100 best nonfiction books of the twentieth century and helped establish the tone and terms of the critical debate about literary representations of the war for many years following its publication, ignores the women who wrote about the war and renders them seemingly unimportant. His study mentions Vera Brittain briefly only twice, for example, and in both of those instances, Fussell does not assign Brittain's work an authoritative status that allows it to stand or speak on its own. That quite sums up the general attitude towards women's writing on the First World War. This kind of attitude can be attributed to the valorisation of physical experience, typically configured as male, over-all other experiences that were considered as far removed from the actual war front.

The 'exclusion' of women's experiences of war is a "gatekeeping mechanism...which privileges one aspect of a complex historical phenomenon, in order to foreground men's tragic experiences and the cost in heroic lives, while removing to the background any consideration of the broad social and economic mechanisms and heavy long-term costs of war." (Higonnet, 1995, p. 87) However, in the last three

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decades there has been a considerable amount of work that dispels the myth that war is only for men and women are meant to take care of the home. There has been “an increasing interest in the complexity of the war’s impact on different societies and social groups, and a growing recognition that there was no one war ‘experience’” (Braybon, 2003, p. 5).

When Britain declared war on Germany on 4 August 1914, thousands of women responded to the call of being of useful service at home or abroad. By then, almost 46,000 British women belonging mainly to the upper and middle classes were serving in the *Voluntary Aid Detachments*(VAD). These women included “suffragists, feminists, married and career women, qualified doctors and nurses, and those who felt that serving their country was a release from the genteel role of a daughter destined to run the household for ageing parents” (Powell, 2013, p. 19). For many British women belonging to the upper and middle classes and wanting to do their bit for the nation, nursing became a major choice. As Santanu Das says,

“During the war years, nursing was considered to be woman’s best chance to make up for the missed encounter with history that many, like Freud’s little Hans, believed had happened only at ‘the front’.” (2005, p. 185)

Volunteer nurses, as part of the VAD, were trained in four aspects of nursing care - first aid and bandaging, sick-room cookery, hygiene, and home nursing. Soon, these nurses found themselves in the war zones spread over Western Europe, especially France and Belgium. Initially, they would be given simple, safe and mundane work in order to allow them a period of acclimatisation. After this, the volunteers were permitted to come into direct contact with the care and clinical treatment of patients. As the war intensified and wounded soldiers started coming in hordes, most VADs found themselves providing fundamental care to their patients – albeit under the close supervision of the ward staff – within a few months of their arrival.

By the time the Great War came to an end, all the idealism and early promise of victory gave way to disillusionment and disappointment as no one had imagined the ruin and loss of life that the world witnessed in the four years. Like the men soldiers who shared their war experiences through various literary forms, there were many women, mostly nurses, who wrote poignant and moving personal testimonies of their experience – letters, diaries, memoirs and narrative accounts, some of which found their way into print. Vera Brittain’s *Testament of Youth*, a memoir sharing her experiences of the Great War, is one such text. Its importance lies not only in its historicity but also as a meaningful intervention in feminist war literature.

Vera Brittain was born in Buxton, the daughter of wealthy middle-class parents, and enjoyed a privileged and ‘ladylike’ upbringing. She did begin her Oxford education but felt compelled to leave after completion of her first year, unable to see her brother and his friends face danger and hardship at the front while she remained safe at home. For a young, well-brought-up lady, nursing was the obvious choice of war work, and Brittain offered her services to the Devonshire Hospital in her home town of Buxton, starting her career as a VAD nurse on 27 June 1915. On 18 October, she transferred to the First London General Hospital at Camberwell. Brittain’s writings, especially *Testament of Youth* that records her experiences during the Great War, offer a vivid illustration of the emotional trajectory followed by an intelligent young woman who, at the outset of war, engaged enthusiastically, anticipating challenge, but found horror and despair.

Vera’s trajectory of her changing attitude to the war is a classic example of the majority of the British public’s fleeting feelings about the war – from high idealism and patriotism to disillusionment and pacifism. It took the personal tragedy of losing her brother, fiancé and friends, to realise the futility of war. Coming in contact with German soldiers who had been hospitalised after being imprisoned, she felt “how ridiculous it was that I should be holding this man’s hand in friendship when perhaps, only a week or two earlier, Edward up at Ypres had been doing his best to kill him. The world was mad and we were all victims; that was the only way to look at it. These shattered, dying boys and I were paying alike for a situation that none of us had desired or done anything to bring about.” (1978, p. 376)

Her vocation as a nurse exposed her to male nudity, shocking her Victorian upbringing which “dictated that a young woman should know nothing of men but their faces and their clothes until marriage”. She added that she did everything: “short of actually going to bed with them [the wounded soldiers], there was hardly an intimate service I did not perform.” (1978, p. 165)

Unlike the men soldiers, as a woman, she also laments the lack of privacy:

“Privacy, however great our need of it...proved equally inaccessible, for each ward had only one washhouse, a rough annex containing several tin basins in a row, and one privy, with five tin commodes side by side and sociably free from partitions. To young women delicately brought up in fastidious homes, it was a perturbing demonstration of life as lived in the publicity of slums.” (1978, p. 300)

On the brighter side, the War changed the way women were allowed to go and work outside, even after dark. According to Brittain, “already the free-and-easy movements of girl war workers had begun to modify convention” (1978, p. 177). Despite the personal discomfort and trauma she had to go through due to the War, she was also acutely aware of the progress women were making because of the same War. Nursing, she stresses, had given her experiences that would have been impossible for someone belonging to her class. It had given her an “early release from the sex inhibitions that[...]beset many of my female contemporaries, both married and single” (1978, p. 166).

Although *Testament of Youth* was written primarily in memory of the men Brittain had lost – her fiancé, her brother, and two close friends – it was also written for those women who had served in wartime, to ensure that the female voice would be heard, and that one particular feminine perspective would be understood.

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