



Research Paper

## War and Literature: A Comparative Study of Select Works of Pablo Neruda

Rashi Srivastava

(Research Scholar, Department of English and Modern European Languages, University of Lucknow)

**ABSTRACT:** In this paper, Chilean poet Pablo Neruda's poetic transformation is analysed, that his works experienced before and after the Spanish Civil war. In the pre-war era, his poems encompass the themes of love, longing and adulation. After the outbreak of the Spanish civil war, Neruda is deeply shaken which is reflected in his works. He begins to write on war and its cruelties. A drastic shift in his thematic concerns is compared and analysed through some of his works in this paper.

**KEYWORDS:** Poems, Love, War

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### I. INTRODUCTION

War has always been a crucial aspect in every culture in the entire world, whether these are the Indian battles such as Kalinga War, Battle of Panipat, Kargil war or the western wars such as Hundred Years War, American Civil War, World War I and II. Wars have the capacity to alter the perspectives of human beings and the nature of environment. Therefore, these wars also influenced the writers and their works, some of which were deeply affected with the dehumanization. Pablo Neruda was one of them.

Poets and writers from small Latin American countries such as Colombia, Venezuela, Peru, Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay, Argentina, Nicaragua and Mexico wrote numerous works especially in the modern period. A generation of Latin American poets emerged in this era. They are considered extremely significant in Latin American poetry. The important poets were Ernesto Cardenal, Nicolás Guillén, Mario Benedetti, Gabriela Mistral, Gonzalo Rojas and Octavio Paz. The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Latin America and the Caribbean states that:

But the two greatest names of the period, and of the century, are the haunted Peruvian, César Vallejo (1892-1938), poet of the twentieth-century orphanhood, and Pablo Neruda (1904-73), a man by contrast always at home in the world, one of the many by contrast always at home in the world, one of many outstanding Chilean poets and, in 1971, the second, after Gabriela Mistral (1945), to win Nobel Prize" (390 Collier)

The Spanish civil war was fought between the Nationalists and the Republicans that started in the year 1936 and ended in 1939. A number of writers and poets were influenced by it. Many writers turned leftists in this phase and drew allegiance to the Republicans, fighting in the war with them. George Orwell wrote *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), his personal account of the evilness that prevailed in the war. Christopher Caudwell who was a British writer and Marxist went to fight in the Spanish Civil war and was eventually killed. Ralph Fox is another British journalist and novelist who died fighting against the Nationalists. Pablo Neruda is another name who started writing for the Republicans and turned a communist. But before the war, he was a poignant poet of love and adulation.

Ricardo Eliécer Neftalí Reyes Basoalto (1904-1973), known popularly by his pen name Pablo Neruda, was born in the Latin American country of Chile. Neruda started writing poems from an early age. The involvement of poets and writers in political and ideological agendas has been a common phenomenon and Neruda was no exception to that. But initially his plan was to write love poems for which he became a worldwide sensation. His first collection of poems *Books of Twilight* came out in 1923.

Another collection of poems entitled *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair* (1924) and with this collection, Neruda became one of most acclaimed poets of love in the world. This collection of poems is one of the most widely read collections in the world. His poems had the pain and the sensuousness of love that charmed its readers. "Tonight I can write the saddest lines" is one of the widely read poems from the collection.

One of the major qualities of the poem is that it is easy to understand for the masses and yet it conveys the strongest emotions that, the impression of which stays in the minds of its readers.

The title of the poem itself describes the theme of the poem which is of lost love. The lines "Tonight I can write the saddest lines/I loved her, and sometimes she loved me too." (5-6) describes the sorrow and helplessness of the poet. The lines are actually reflecting the essence of life. These emotions are felt by people in their lives too and this is one of the major reasons for the success of his poems as they are based on reflection and contemplation of life. He juxtaposes emotions of sadness and content in these lines:

Tonight I can write the saddest lines.

To think that I do not have her. To feel that I have lost her.

To hear the immense night, still more immense without her. And the verse falls to the soul like dew to the pasture. (11-14)

Writer Mark Strand analyses these lines saying:

The naturalness of these lines, their exuberant and youthful melancholy, their casual repetitions, their over-all simplicity mark Neruda's early style and account in some measure for the continued popularity of the book. (Strand)

The nature imagery is vividly used to explore the spirit of lost love and the temperament of the poet. The solitariness of the poet, burning in the agony of lost love, is elucidated in the above lines. The following lines are one of the most famous lines of the poem that illustrates the dejection and melancholy of the poet:

Another's. She will be another's. Like my kisses before.

Her void. Her bright body. Her infinite eyes.

I no longer love her, that's certain, but maybe I love her.

Love is so short, forgetting is so long. (25-28)

At the age of twenty, Pablo Neruda was explaining the emotions and sensitivity of love. It was indeed a commendable piece of work for a poet at such a young age and this led to his becoming a worldwide phenomenon. Another one of his poems from the collection is "I like for you to be Still". This poem depicts love in a platonic sense. The poet urges his beloved to stay still and quiet. He says:

I like for you to be still

It is as though you are absent

And you hear me from far away

And my voice does not touch you (1-4)

The lines explore another facet of love. Neruda presents it in a spiritual manner. The next lines also describe some ethereal elements: "It seems as though your eyes had flow away/ and it seems that a kiss had sealed your mouth" (5-6). The poem does not have a sorrowful tone. Instead it explains the desires of the poet for his beloved. In other words, Neruda uses philosophical ideas and words to describe the feelings of the speaker. He feels every bit of her lover in himself as he says these lines:

As all things are filled with my soul

You emerge from the things

Filled with my soul

You are like my soul

A butterfly of dream

And you are like the word: Melancholy (7-12)

But the concluding stanza is a contradiction to the entire poem where the speaker says:

I like for you to be still

It is as though you are absent

Distant and full of sorrow

So you would've died

One word then, One smile is enough

And I'm happy;

Happy that it's not true (27-33)

From the opening lines of the poem, the speaker says that he likes her beloved to stay still. He has used metaphors and symbols to describe that ecstatic state. But the last lines emphasise on the other aspect of stillness. A dreadful moment scares the poet as he thinks his beloved to be dead. The tone in the last stanza becomes sorrowful as he pleads her to say a word. At that moment, he doesn't desire her to stay quiet. And finally when she smiles, he's glad that she's not dead, that he has not lost her.

This is the alluring style of Pablo Neruda that captures its readers and astonishes them as well. His love poems tend to describe the emotions with vivacity. He also published numerous collections of poems that included *Residence on Earth*. It came out in three volumes within three decades starting from 1925. The poems are surrealistic in nature and associates Neruda with Surrealism. But a drastic change came in his writings from

the year 1936, the year when the Spanish Civil War broke out which is considered to be one of the bloodiest battles in war history.

The Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) was fought majorly between the Republicans and the Nationalists. The Republicans was a left-aligning, secular and democratic group that favoured for the urban middle class and rural class. On the other hand, the Nationalists belonged to the right wing which was largely conservative and radical. The base of the Republicans was the Basque country and Catalonia. Their party represented the liberal and communist approach. The Nationalists were anti-communist and their party included the armed military, landowners and the Catholic Church. The conservative Roman Catholic Church was anti-Republic as they feared about the loss of their position during the regime of the Republicans. The main aim of the Nationalist's party was to overthrow the ruling Republic regime of Spain.

Both the groups were aided by various sources. The Republics were supported by Mexico and the Soviet Union. The Nationalists were aided by Germany, Italy and Portugal. The Nationalist's leader Francisco Franco was supported by Adolf Hitler who considered this war as a prototype for the World War II. For three years, Spain burned in the fire of this brutal war. Men, women, children were killed with sheer cruelty. Air bombs were dropped on towns and villages. Amidst the want for power, the common man suffered. Women were raped, children were slaughtered. Horror had overpowered Spain.

In the year 1939, the Nationalists emerged as winners of this war and a Nationalist government was established with Franco Francisco as the leader. But around five lakhs people lost their lives in this battle including people from both the parties. Many reports suggest that after the war was over, many republicans were executed in concentration camps. It is therefore considered to be a dreadful chapter in the history of Spain.

Pablo Neruda had worked as a diplomat in Burma, British India and Argentina. Later, in the year 1933, he was appointed in Madrid where he settled, and enjoyed calm and peaceful life with fellow communist poets such as César Vallejo and Federico García Lorca. But an abominable era of Spain was about to begin. As mentioned above, the Nationalists with their dictator Franco Francisco started a war against the Republicans creating a massacre. Pablo Neruda witnessed the atrocities laid down by the Nationalists first hand. He was deeply hurt and enraged as the war had a strong impact on his mind.

For the first time, he realized the grief of a mother carrying the cadaver of his young son, the trauma of the women raped by the armies of Nationalists, the misery of a little girl, crying over her dead parents with blood spilled all over her. Earlier, he was writing about the pain of love but it was trivial when compared to the gory scenes he witnessed in Spain. He was deeply moved and started supporting the Republicans who were left aligning. He was influenced by communism and started writing for the Republic of Spain. He encouraged the people of Spain through his writings and aligned with other communists living there. With reference to Pablo Neruda and César Vallejo, The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Latin America and the Caribbean elaborate:

Both men became Communists, like Nicolás Guillén, working their different ways from an early post modernista phase through avant-garde experimentation- Surrealism is a fundamental influence in modern Spanish American poetry- and onto more openly defined political affairs. (390 Collier)

In 1938, he published *Spain in my heart*, a collection of heart wrenching poems which he dedicated to the people of Spain. The poems described the bloodshed of the Spanish Civil war. Through this collection, we can observe a poetic transformation in Neruda's career. His poems started reflecting the pain of victims of the war and the politics played by the powerful. One of the poems in the collection is entitled "I explain a few things" that illustrates the gruesome reality.

Neruda starts the poem by effectively using the 'Ubi sunt?' theme which questions the whereabouts of the lost heritage. The poem begins with the lines:

You are going to ask: and where are the lilacs?  
And the poppy-petalled metaphysics?  
And the rain repeatedly spattering  
Its words and drilling them full  
Of apertures and birds? (1-5)

Neruda throws some light on the questions which are often put up to him. The poem answers these questions, narrating the exuberant life of Madrid before the civil war and the murky life of one post the war. He describes the euphoria of his house and Madrid. He says:

My house was called  
The house of flowers, because in every cranny  
Geraniums burst: it was  
A good-looking house  
With its dogs and children.  
Remember, Raul?  
Eh, Rafael? Federico, do you remember (13-19)

Writer Erin Becker explains these lines:

The poem begins with this question, anticipating confusion at the love poet's newly politicized tone. He relegates his former love poetry and surrealism to "metaphysics," disconnected from anything tangible, inconsequential like flowers. And instead of progressing with an answer to the question, Neruda develops an increasingly violent image of war-torn Spain, and ends not with an insight but with a command. (Becker)

Neruda narrates the accounts of his peaceful life that he used to celebrate with his fellow mates and poets such as Raul, Rafael and Federico. Here Neruda makes an address to the poet Federico García Lorca, a great friend of his. He and his other mates had witnessed the vibrant life of the surrounding, of the market place, of the sultry landscape that once symbolised Spain. Neruda also utters the lines: "Brother, Brother", which he's referring to his friends. It should also be noted that it is a communist reference as the term 'Brother' is considered an important word in the communist canon.

He renders an account of the market place: "Everything / loud with big voices, the salt of merchandises, / pile-ups of palpitating bread," further elaborating:

A deep baying  
Of feet and hands swelled in the streets,  
Metres, litres, the sharp  
Measure of life,  
Stacked-up fish,  
The texture of roofs with a cold sun in which  
The weather vane falters,  
The fine, frenzied ivory of potatoes,  
Wave on wave of tomatoes rolling down the sea. (30-38)

The prosperity that flourished in Madrid is apparent in these lines. The city folks had a high-spirited life. The description of food, vegetable, oils and laughter depict the happy of times that the people once enjoyed. This lively representation evokes a merry picture in the minds of the readers, a time when little hands were safe on the street, a time when the Catholic priests showered blessings upon everywhere.

The poem intends to portray the level of joy and happiness that prevailed in Spain. He was deeply attached with the spirit of the people of Spain. But it was one grim morning in the year 1936 that changed the history and life Spain forever.

And one morning all was burning  
And one morning bonfires  
Sprang out of the earth  
Devouring humans,  
And from then on fire,  
Gunpowder from then on,  
And from then on blood. (31-37)

The Nationalists forces and their allies like monsters attacked Madrid and "devoured" the innocent lives. Neruda asserts that that gruesome morning had started the chain reaction that did not stop for three years. He went on to say:

Bandidos with planes and Moors,  
Bandidos with rings and duchesses,  
Bandidos with black friars signing the cross  
Coming down from the sky to kill children,  
And in the streets the blood of the children  
Ran simply, like children's blood. (38-43)

His use of imagery to portray the tragic events is extremely poignant. He keeps the Monarchy and the priests of the Roman Catholic in the category of the bandits. They helped the Nationalists forces in plotting these attacks. His tone is ironic as the priests who were considered the ultimate preserver of humanity were the one destroying it. The airplanes bombarded the city with blood spilled on the streets. Neruda's vision of Spain was shattered in front of him. In *Homage to Catalonia*, George Orwell elaborated about the role of the Church in the war: "Actually churches were pillaged everywhere and as a matter of course, because it was perfectly well understood that the Spanish Church was part of the capitalist racket. (ch. 5)"

His use of metaphors is unique and striking, that he demonstrates in the following lines: "Jackals that the jackals would despise, / Stones that the dry thistle would bite on and spit out, / Vipers that the vipers would abominate!" (44-46) He uses such strong terms to communicate his emotions to the readers. The monsters that destroyed Madrid do not even fall in the category of the most horrific creatures in the world. He emphasises that the snakes, the jackals or even a spitted stone is far better than these traitors. Here it should be noted that the poet is deeply enraged. His tone of anger goes undisguised when he, in some manner, is spilling venom against the killers. Franco, the initiator of this mass massacre is killing these people like insects for his own selfish

motives. Neruda asserts that whether it is Franco, or his allies such as the Church, they all are rowing in the same boat of pride, ego and greed.

Neruda witnessed cruelty that he never expected. All the houses were broken, people murdered, a scene of destruction and total chaos is what Spain had become. But the poet warns these traitors that Spain will never yield in front of them. They will never bow down in front of these malicious creatures:

Treacherous

Generals:

See my dead house,

Look at broken Spain :

From every house burning metal flows

Instead of flowers,

From every socket of Spain

Spain emerges

And from every dead child a rifle with eyes,

And from every crime bullets are born

Which will one day find

The bull's eye of your hearts. (51-62)

He inspires the people of Spain to fight against these treacherous bandits. He proclaims fearlessly that every killing will inspire Spain to rise against the Nationalists. He goes on to say that the fire of a rebellion has started. The masses will rise against them and will definitely make their lives a living nightmare. It should be noted here that the poet's tone is that of pride for the people of Spain. Not only does he inspire but admires their courage to stand with their nation.

A pertinent question that many have asked Neruda is about his poetic shift from love and nature poems: "And you will ask: why doesn't his poetry/ Speak of dreams and leaves/ and the great volcanoes of his native land?" (63-65), to which he replies: "Come and see the blood in the streets. / Come and see/ The blood in the streets." (66-68). Spain no longer has the picturesque landscape. Neither has it had the love, the warmth of the people. About which aesthetic quality will he write? The streets of the Spain are filled with blood, about which he has written in this poem. In some way, he elaborates the ideas that gone are the days of lilacs and prosperous market. Spain is scarred by this war, a scar that can never be erased.

One of the major triggering moments in Neruda's life was when his poet friend Federico García Lorca was executed by the dictator Franco in the year 1936. The event had a strong impact on Neruda's mind and his writings. He realized the fact that the Nationalist forces were trying to suppress the fire of rebellion. Many, like Lorca have been killed for raising a voice against the tyranny. But the bitter truth was that the common folk of Madrid, who were simplistic in nature, who knew nothing about the politics of either Leftist or Nationalist forces, were butchered endlessly. They were plain and unfussy and had no role to play in the politics of Spain.

Neruda's "Almería" is another poem that describes the atrocities of the General Franco on the people of Spain. Almería is a city in Andalusia, situated at southern eastern Spain. In this poem, Neruda refers to a particular incident that occurred during the war. In February, 1937, a group of republican civilians were fleeing from Malaga to Almería. But they were captured by the Nationalist forces. Hundreds of men and boys were executed in front of their mothers and wives.

In this poem, Neruda describes the brutality and horrors that befell on these innocent republican lives. The poem begins with the lines:

A plate for the Bishop, a plate chewed and bitter,

A plate of steel scraps, of ashes and tears,

A plate brimming over with fallen walls and sobs,

A plate for the Bishop, a plate of Almería's blood. (1-4)

There's a repetition of the word "plate" that Neruda uses to equate the slaying of the people with a bitter platter of meal. He refers to the allies of the Nationalist forces in order to make them realize the level of barbarity they had achieved, which can never be forgiven. The "Bishop" represents the Church who was an ally of Nationalist. Neruda intends at reminding the Church about their participation the gory incident. They will forever be served a platter that reflects the blood of the people of Almería. The rich institution of the Church will never be redeemed as tears of these people will keep on haunting them. As mentioned above, Orwell has described in *Homage to Catalonia* about the Church's participation in the war:

To the Spanish people, at any rate in Catalonia and Aragon, the Church was a racket pure and simple. And possibly Christian belief was replaced to some extent by Anarchism, whose influence is widely spread and which undoubtedly has a religious tinge. (ch. 6)

In the next stanza, he approaches another bunch of rich folks. The "banker" represents the wealthy investors. They play with lives of the poor and make their way through money. Neruda condemns him by

illustrating that the children who have died, their twisted bodies and blood will always be dancing in their minds:

A plate for the banker, a plate of cheeks  
Of children from the happy South, a plate  
Of explosions, mad waters, of ruins and terror,

A plate of broken ankles and trampled heads. (1-4)

Neruda uses extremely macabre images and juxtaposes them with an ordinary element of life which is food. His idea is to terrify these killer forces by demonstrating the gory war images. Each one of them will see the scarred bloody shadows of the upright people in every corner of their lives. He employs the metaphor of dish and tea for the crimes these people have committed. He narrates saying that every morning they'll try to avoid this breakfast that reminds them of the blood that was spilled by them. But they will not be successful as the ghosts of the terrible past will scare them each morning:

You'll push it back a bit between the bread  
And the grapes, this plate of silent blood  
That will be there each morning, every  
Morning. (13-16)

In the next stanza, he mentions about the Colonel and his wife, who symbolizes the Military. Neruda desires a plate of such dish for them as well. He says that in each party where they relish on the bodies of the innocent, they will see their faces down and out in the cold and will reminded of their loathsome deeds. The sins of their past will not be forgotten neither by the world nor by the sinners themselves. He addresses to all such affluent personas such as:

Yes, a plate for you all, rich ones everywhere,  
Ambassadors, ministers, atrocious dinner-guests,  
Ladies with comfortable tea and bottoms:  
A plate destroyed, overflowing, filthy with the blood of the poor,  
Each morning, each week, forever and ever,  
A plate of blood from Almería before you,  
Forever. (21-28)

The ambassadors and ministers represent government allies who prosper on the blood of the people killed on the way to Almería. But Neruda forewarns them that wherever these people are, savouring life in posh localities, a bitter dish will be served to them which will comprise blood of the innocents. In other words, he reminds them that they shall never be vindicated from the sins they've committed. Their crimes are unpardonable and they'll be tormented with the faces and blood of the victims, for time and eternity.

Neruda explores the tragedy of the Spanish war and demonstrates the sheer inhumanity that occurred in the three years. His transformation from writing the ache of lost love to capturing the cries of war is tremendous to observe. Although much later he did publish some collections of love poems but the war had brought a turning point in his life and career and his war poems received as much acclamations as his love poems. The war gave him a better insight in understanding life and times. Through his poems, the readers around the world were able to comprehend the pain of the victims of war. Neruda painted a world of love and war with his pen which was dipped in the ink of reality and emotions.

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