

Sean O' Casey's *The Plough and the Stars*: Women's Woes during the Easter Rising

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Abstract

*Sean O' Casey (1880-1964) is known for his support for the working class, especially women. Through many of his writings, he tackles issues that address their suffering and agonies. In *The Plough and the Stars* (1926), he is concerned with the suffering of women due to the follies of their men and their political leaders during the Easter Rising. He aims at drawing the attention of those leaders to the agonies of women so that they stop fighting and blood shedding. Thus, this article focuses on the woes of women and how women are left alone in their homes under torture. It also attempts to contrast the agonies of those women with the patriotism of their men, which is the real cause behind their turmoil.*

Keywords: Violence, Easter Rising, Woes of Women, Sean O' Casey and *The Plough and the Stars*

Introduction

Many turbulent changes and threats, starting with the First World War, the atomic attacks and finally the deadliest terror attacks have endangered the lives of people in this increasingly globalised world. This cyclic violence has continued to envelop the modern world, thereby subverting the very concept of nationalism, which in turn, severely affects the lives of its individuals, families and especially women. Many women have lost their lives and their private possessions, and have become homeless and physically and psychologically handicapped. One of the miserable situations during fighting is that the victims are mostly women. They do not generally participate in war, yet they suffer a lot. They are considered as passive victims of war and violence. This is what MacPherson confirms in *Women and the Irish Nation*: "During the War of Independence (1919–21) women were depicted as passive victims of the conflict..." (26).

The Plough expresses Sean O' Casey's antipathy towards the madness of war and violence during the Easter Rising and "exposes the human costs of political revolution" (Atkinson 42). The woes of women were the backdrop of the play in order to urge the political leaders to stop fighting during the Easter Rising. Though O' Casey was a freedom fighter and served in various fronts, he hated blood-shedding and killing because it increased the suffering of women. Whatever the political or the economic motives of war, women suffered and underwent all the miserable agonies that war imposed on them. The outcomes of war such as killing of innocents, demolishing of livestock, trapping women inside their homes is clearly dramatised by O' Casey in *The Plough*.

This article discusses and brings out the inhuman acts of war during the Easter Rising and violence associated with it; humankind's suffering, especially the women, the atrocities and mindlessness of the war mongers in Ireland initiated by the nationalists. It portrays how fighting during the Easter Rising had adversely affected the life of women who suffered deeply because of the follies of their men. Men are depicted as hardhearted who pay no heed to the women's emotions and feelings. What matters most for men is their personal goals such as promotion to a higher rank. The woes of women in the *Plough and the Stars* during the Easter Rising in Dublin are contrasted with the foolishness and vanity of the patriotic leaders of the Easter Rising.

The Woes of Women in the Plough and the Stars

O'Casey portrays the Easter Rising fighting in a dramatic form that brings lively incidents and horrible pictures of fighting. Shots, blood shedding, corpses in streets, smoke, flames, fires, ruins and destruction of private and public assets, and looting are vivid war actions communicated through the play. He focused on the impact of war on the non-combatants and innocents and depicted them as real victims of war. The play is about Easter Rising with its true dimensions of disaster which gobbles up the society and its men and women who start the war with the holy intention of restoring to themselves their rights denied by the colonial masters. The beginning of the Rising is alluring but by the end is lost and what remains is mere disillusionment and destruction. The play ultimately comes to the impact of war on women in particular and the society and humanity in general.

Human relationship is the first thing which gets obfuscated by wars and risings. Love is its victim and woman, the symbol and the centre of love and its creativity, is systematically destroyed by the monster of war machine. The drama significant women characters such as Nora, Bessie and Mrs Gogan; their significance lies in their dislike for war. The female consciousness is more interested in continuity than in revolution. The idea of continuity is very close to the heart of woman. Marriage and family life maintain the stability and continuity of civilization which is corroded by political and economic divisions, crises and wars. This is woman's creativity in pressuring and restoring what history tears apart. Corrosion is uniform and repetitive. Vitality and organization are unique and infinitely discoverable. These appeal the female consciousness of the women in the drama. They, directly or indirectly, deny the claims and opinions of men. Men assert themselves through violence and instability. Women – in marriage and family – work for non-violence and stability, for culture and spirit. Women are the unacknowledged energy of culture and community. Men systematically destroy this basic, elemental energy and try to invent an illusionary world of energy of their own in their war machine. This war machine forcibly weans away men from their women and thereby destroys its own inventor. Woman intuitively knows this basic truth of life. Man feels it and wants to lose himself in sharing this creative energy with his woman but his cerebral part or element is so strong that it arouses his ego to go apart in order to enjoy his own creation – the illusionary world of destructive energy of war machine and get destroyed. Mrs. Gogan understands that the world of man is the world of death (The Plough 141). The dialogue between Fluther and Mrs. Gogan is symbolic. Fluther feels "It's only a little cold I have" (The Plough 141). He does not feel that something is seriously wrong with him; man underplays the reality of his world of death. So arrogant is he of his man's power. Only a woman understands where the reality lies. She makes man aware of the danger staring in his face but he will not take care of it as Fluther states saying: "A man in th' pink o' health should have a holy horror of allowin' thoughts o' death to be festerin' in his mind" (The Plough 141). The man might be faint and coughing but he cannot think of death – he must keep it at a far distance from himself. This is his ego speaking. The reality bursts out from the mouth of the woman who knows that the world of man is the world of death.

The woman next in importance is Nora who herself is the creative life-force seeking to keep her partner to herself and away from his destructive war-machine. Similar to Mahfouz's woman in *Death and Resurrection*, Nora tries to hold her man back from engaging himself in further action. Symbolically, Mahfouz's woman represents the life-force acting as a mediator between the giant, a symbol for imperialism, and the man, a symbol for Egypt to resolve the conflict and work out a peace plan. To Nora, men are mere "babies" who "don't know th' danger o' them things" (The Plough 148). Man has made the sword but he does not know how to wield it; while using it he has no sense of time and place and that comes his ego. Peter is not ready to tolerate that somebody should call him "a lemon-whiskered oul' Swine" (The Plough 148). So he will have his revenge with the sword. The war-machine is so handy that he jumps to it at the slightest provocation without thinking about the priority of its use and the correctness of time and place. He is ready even to violate the sanctity of home. So for man nothing is important – even house and family. His ego must not be touched. He needs to keep himself within his senses. He needs a woman to put his sword in a sheath so that there can be peace in the home and then in the world – Nora warning him, "If you attempt to wage that sword of yours at anybody again, it'll have to be taken off you an' put in a safe place away from babies that don't know th' danger o' them things" (The Plough 148). She has to remind him "of what's proper an' allowable in a respectable home" (The Plough 148).

O'Casey, in *The Plough*, also examines how the Easter Rising can cause a rift between a wife and a commandant husband and how wives feel when they are left alone in their houses. This couple is newly married but their life is disrupted because of the Easter Rising. The scene between Nora, the wife, Clitheroe, the recently promoted commandant, and the Captain reflects women's hatred towards war.

Nora hides away a promotion letter for her husband just to keep his attention focused on her and for the fear of falling prey to the war monster. She feels sad because her husband cares only for the Citizen Army, forgetting his own commitment towards his wife. On hearing the news of her husband's death, she has a miscarriage and becomes mad. Like Lady Macbeth, she walks in her sleep due to her intense emotions that tie her to her husband.

Men are really like babies who make mess and cause violence. For this reason, Nora takes the responsibility of restoring peace. She asks the two men to put an end to the dispute so that she can be ready to receive her husband. She wants to make a peaceful home for her husband, which in return will spread to the outside world: "let it end at that, for God's sake; Jack'll be in any minute, an' allowable in a respectable home" (*The Plough* 148). She thinks that peace starts at home first and then in the universe. She attempts to create an atmosphere of peace for her husband, but the atmosphere outside is so intense that it has rooted out the peace at home.

The woman is to the man as the mother to the baby. Nora is the actual source of energy to her husband. But his ego is not ready to accept this essential truth. Man takes woman to be just a doll with which he can play as and when he likes without taking care of the sentiments and desires of the woman without treating her as a sentient human being. She is expected just to satisfy him and his desires at his sweet will. He comes home just for this. Love to him is just a game; comes home, plays the game and again goes out with the puffed up feeling of having won the game and with the bloated ego of being the master. But the woman understands her baby. Nora is that understanding woman. There is this significant long talk between Clitheroe and Nora: "Ay, you gave it up – because you got th' sulks when they didn't make a Captain of you. It wasn't for my sake, Jack" (*The Plough* 153).

The long talk between Nora and her husband explains the position of a man and a woman in their actual relationship. Man is made to understand the significance of love between them. For sometime, he is lost in singing the tune of love. But the vainglorious world of man will not allow him to betray if it knocks at his door and encourages his ego with an offer of worldly advancement. The man becomes dazzled and blinded and forgets her and his love for her. The requests of the woman are simply brutally rejected:

VOICE. Commandant Clitheroe, Commandant Clitheroe, are you there? A message from General Jim Connolly.

CLITHEROE. Damn it, it's Captain Brennan.

NORA *anxiously*. Don't mind him, don't mind, Jack. Don't break our happiness. ... Pretend we're not in. let us forget everything to-night but our two selves!

CLITHEROE *reassuringly*. Don't be alarmed, darling; I'll just see what he wants, an' send him about his business.

NORA *tremulously*. No, no. Please, Jack; don't open it. Please, for your own little Nora's sake! (156-57)

Clitheroe gets irritated with Nora's plea to intervene between him and the call of war. The nature of man favours violence and destruction over peace and happiness, especially when there is remuneration or promotion. Like Mahfouz's Woman in *Death*, Nora's love and affection is denied and she is thrown away after she has been used. Clitheroe is selfish and wants to achieve his own desires at the expense of his family. What the Woman says of the Man in Mahfouz's *Death* is also true of Clitheroe: "You are selfish. You have had your fill of me and now you cast me off and hanker after the smell of blood" (*Death* 137). This is what exactly Clitheroe does when the message comes from General Jim Connolly. He pushes his wife to hanker after blood. Nora attempts to stop her husband by all means but he is not going to listen to her words. She burns the promotion letter, but this plan does not work as well. She again pleads to Jack to ignore the knock at the door and pretend that they are not in the house, but she fails again. Clitheroe opens the door for the Captain to get in. The Captain informs him that he has been promoted and that the promotion letter has already been sent to him. In the course of action, one feels sympathetic towards Nora who has been doing her best to prevent her husband from joining the fight. She has been desperately attempting to secure her husband from the viciousness of war. She knows that the death of her husband is the death of the family. They are newly married and she is pregnant. She anticipated that promotion to a commandant is the way to destruction – abjuring the purest creative love leading to peace and tranquillity by breaking the heart of woman and running after something which is destructive of human relationship and humanity:

NORA *flaming up*. ... Is General Connolly an' th' Citizen Army goin' to be your only care? Is your home goin' to be only a place to rest in? Am I goin' to be only somethin' to provide merry-makin' at night for you?

Your vanity'll be th' ruin of you an' me yet. ... That's what's movin' you: because they've made an officer of you, you'll make a glorious cause of what you're doin', while your little red-lipp'd Nora can go on sittin' here, makin' a companion of th' loneliness of th' night! (158)

Nora is hurt for this. But she is indifferent to her own humiliation and pain. No amount of torture can stop her from seeking to save the man from jaws of death. Man is needed for herself and for love. Hence life is not to be offered to death. With this belief, Nora searches for her husband: "All last night at th' barricades I sought you, Jack. ... I didn't think of th' danger – I could think of you. ... I asked for you everywhere. ... Some of them laughed. ... I was pushed away, but I shoved back. ... Some o' them even sthruke me ... an' screamed an' screamed your name" (*The Plough* 196). It is the mother searching out for her lost child; it is the mother trying to save her child from the jaws of death. For this the mother is ready to make any sacrifice. But the man is an ignorant child that he cannot appreciate the maternal affection. For his vanity he treats himself as a mature man who can take care of himself and does not like to be called a mother's child – "... What way d'ye think I'll feel when I'm told my wife was bawling' for me at th' barricades? What are you more than any other woman" (*The Plough* 196)?

The purest love is beyond a man's understanding. He can understand only war, destruction and death for these make him manly. This is how he understands Nora's sentiments: "Are you goin' to turn all th' risks I'm takin' into a laugh" (*The Plough* 196)? The vainglorious man gets everything from woman. The fact is that he is a man worth the name because of the woman who makes all sorts of sacrifices to make him a man – Nora implores Jack: "please, Jack. ... You're hurting me, Jack. ... Honestly. ... Oh, you're hurting me! ... I won't, I won't! ... Oh, Jack. I gave you everything you asked me. ... Don't fling me from you, now" (*The Plough* 197). It is the clash of man's selfishness and woman's unselfishness. Once the child stands on his feet he flings himself away from his mother; he does not care if it hurts her. Here is the ego of the grown-up man – the Captain Brennan who fiercely addresses Clitheroe, "Why are you beggin' her to let you go? Are you afraid of her, or what? Break her hold on you, man, or go up, an' sit on her lap" (*The Plough* 197).

Now, the vast world is his field of activity and so he must rip himself away from the woman's lap. He has now grown up too big for her lap: "He roughly loosens her grip, and pushes her away from him" (*The Plough* 197). The battlefield is calling him; he must go even if he meets his death. He calls this courage, bravery and manhood. But the truth is only known to woman – it is really cowardice that pushes him into war and he has to hide his true feelings and put up a brave face:

NORA *clinging to Clitheroe, and indicating Brennan*. Look, Jack, look at th' anger in his face; look at th' fear glintin' in his eyes. ... He himself's afraid, afraid, afraid! ... He wants you to go th' way he'll haveth' chance of death sthrikin' you an' missin' him! ... his vry soul is cold ... shiverin' with the thought of what may happen to him. ... It is his fear that is thryin' to frighten you from recognizin' th' same fear that is in your heart! (197)

Nora can read the face of the Captain who has come to inform Clitheroe of his promotion to a commandant, which will encourage him to lead the combatants. She sees fear and anguish on the face of Captain Brennan and she attempts to drive her husband's attention to the truth behind his promotion. All her attempts to protect him are gone with wind. For the sake of his false bravery he abjures the true 'comrade' – and embraces the false one; deliberately and foolishly love and lives are sacrificed for death. This is the wisdom of man that will not listen to the sanity of woman – the principle of love, peace and creativity. Nora desperately attempts to obstruct him: "I won't let you go. ... I want you to be thru to me, Jack. ... I'm your dearest comrade; I'm your thruet comrade. ... they only want th' comfort of havin' you in th' same danger as themselves. ... Oh, Jack, I can't let you go" (*The Plough* 195-6)! She is left only with "a scream of pain" (*The Plough* 199) and agony of madness. But even in this state of her mind she is fixated on Clitheroe whom she feels incapable of protecting himself. The Covey describes her condition: "Th' doctor thinks she'll never be th' same" (*The Plough* 202).

Her mind seems to be in a state similar to that of Lady Macbeth; people have only their screams. Both are lost in "madly minglin' memories of th' past" (*The Plough* 203). Too much of violence of spirit has fallen upon their minds. Bessie describes that Nora's state of mind mixes up dead things for living things. She affirms that Nora will not recover from this serious disease. Her husband betrays her for he does not need her help any more. There is a total break between the husband and the wife; in separation and loneliness she turns mad while the husband feels pride in embracing death – "she has had a hero for a husband" (*The Plough* 204).

In a state of hallucination during her sleep she screams “Something ails me, something ails me ...” (*The Plough* 205) and then she wakes up calling Jack. Her condition has worsened. Both suffer from the same ailment – violent separation from their husbands whom they have cared for as their babies. They want their babies back to themselves but the war would not allow it: it has its own demand; it needs the sacrifice of babies on its own altar. Women are helpless before this god of war; they can at best scream and go mad.

While the violence is going on, both husband and wife embrace death. That is the one and only one end to which this war leads. It bloats the ego of man and separates the husband from wife and kills their love. That is why it is a murderer - “Murderers, that’s what you are; murderers, murderers” (*The Plough* 205)! War succeeds because man plays in its hands. Only if the man listens to the sanity of woman, the whole situation might change. But the bloated egoist that man is, he would not listen to her and accept her love. And that is because he wrongly assumes that he can stand on his own feet whereas the fact is that whatever he is, he is the creation of woman. Man without a woman is nothing; such a man turns destructive.

Somewhat similar is the theme of Bernard Shaw’s drama *Candida*. Candida too calls her husband Morell a baby: “Oh come! You great baby” (131). The adjective great is significant and ironical. It is a jibe at the bloated ego of man who actually is no better than a ‘baby’. Morell surrenders to her sanity:

MORELL. *quite overcome, kneeling beside her chair and embracing her with boyish ingenuousness.* It’s all true, every word. What I am you have made me with the labor of your hands and the love of your heart. You are my wife, my mother, my sisters: you are the sum of all loving care to me. (*Candida* 151)

Morell understands that peace, happiness and prosperity flourish at home first and then all around. Clitheroe is arrogant and blind to this reality. Death and destruction follow. To be a hero, he abjures the love of his wife and embraces war and death. It is the death of no particular man or woman. It is the murder of humanity and human relationship; the murder of woman and of all the purest and innocent things of life and society.

Nora and Clitheroe start their life together with a vision of a happier life. It is not a fanciful romantic world of which they see a dream. It is a reality of life – the end of life to which together they have to move. In moving towards that end they come closer to the love, peace, and tranquillity in Nature. It is the cradle “of happier transports to be” (*The Plough* 165). Nature is the centre of all creative energy shared by the trees, birds, and bees. They know of no other thing. Only man knows about war and destruction in violation of the principle of Nature. In the world of man there is this direct clash between world and Nature. Man embraces world and thus war and destruction in preference to Nature providing ‘happier transports to be’. World is abhorrent of this transport. Thus, when Nora and Clitheroe are singing of this transport ‘a knock is heard at the door’. Here one is reminded both of Wordsworth and Shakespeare. Wordsworth in his poem ‘The World is Too Much with Us’ repents over the destruction of the soul of man by his worldliness; he then wishes to be a Pagan enjoying the beauty and tranquillity of Nature. Man violates these with a vengeance and creates an imbalance in his life. When he moves towards that there is a knock. Significantly the word ‘knock’ reminds us of the ‘knock’ at the gate in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. It is the gate of hell where innocence has been murdered. Here murderers are knocking at the door making Nora fearful and clinging closely to Clitheroe. She is really apprehensive; murderers are out prowling and may snatch Clitheroe away from her; her sentiments resemble that of Lady Macduff. And so she anxiously prays “Don’t mind him ... Jack. Don’t break our happiness. ... Pretend we’re not in. Let us forget everything to-night but our two selves” (*The Plough* 156)!

But murderers must have the man – Clitheroe, to be fed into the war-machine and thus to be dead. Nature is helpless; the world with its war-machine is all powerful. Nature can transport birds, trees and bees to a happier world but it is helpless before man who prefers the world with destructive machines. Man is so willing to embrace the danger; only woman protests as Bessie confirms it (*The Plough* 159-160).

O’Casey makes his audience aware of the suffering the women face during war. Women continuously scream over their men and protest against war and destruction. There is Bessie with anger in her heart over “th’ poor Tommies ... me own son, dhrenched in water an’ soaked in blood groppin’ their way to a shattherin’ death, in a shower o’ shells” (*The Plough* 168). These women cannot think of the bloody bodies torn into pieces. Therefore, they keep screaming but nothing happens to protect them from these horrible sights which war leaves behind. Woman’s cry or search for her man is considered a shameful act to man in the public view. That is, women must not weep or search for their men and they must accept the situation they lie in. But that is not the nature of women – they cannot be kept silent when they are in danger.

They raise their voices hysterically to be heard as Nora does when she searches for her husband “My Jack will be killed, my Jack will be killed! ... He is to be butchered as a sacrifice to th’ dead” (*The Plough* 184)! Nora again reflects the true nature of woman. She states that “there’s no woman gives a son or a husband to be killed – if they say it, they’re lyin’, against God, Nature, an’ against themselves ...” (*The Plough* 184).

It is a clash of love and hate. The woman is for love; the man is for hate. Thus the two are not allowed to meet; Nora searches for Clitheroe everywhere and he is not to be found anywhere. Man and woman must remain separate; love must be lost in the wilderness. That is the dictate of war. And the woman who is working against this dictate must be dead. Nora goes hysterical and has to die without her man and without a little bit of their happiness: “I’d been lyin’ in th’ streets, only for him. ... they have dhruiven away th’ little happiness life had to spare for me. He has gone from me for ever, for ever. ... Oh, Jack, Jack, Jack” (*The Plough* 186)! Another innocent woman leaves this world – a world of cruel war. She has been a sincere friend to Nora after Clitheroe’s murder. She has been with Nora in her bedroom to take care of her because Nora has developed insomnia and sleepwalking. She is a real victim of this war in spite of her persistent attempt to establish peace. But, she is the one who pays the price for these follies of the man. Bessie is killed with shot while she has been pushing Nora away from the window. No man was there to help. All are out except for the insane Nora. Blood is pouring out of Bessie and Nora is hallucinating. What a miserable condition they have been through. Bessie asks Nora for a glass of water to quench her thirst before death; Nora is standstill. Bessie dies singing her death song:

I do believe, I will believe
That Jesus died for me;
That on th’ cross His blood,
From sin to set me free. ... (216)

She ceases singing, and lies stretched out, still and very rigid as described by O’Casey. Her horrifying condition is narrated by Mrs. Gogan; Bessie dies, innocence incarnate is killed –“*She feels Bessie’s forehead My God, she’s as cold as death. They’re afther murdherin’ th’ poor inoffensive woman! (The Plough 217)*”

Conclusion

Sean O’Casey’s dramatic portrayal of the Easter Rising and the woes of women bring lively incidents to urge his audience, especially the Easter Rising leaders, think about this important portion of the society. He is against blood shedding and violence because he is sure that it only increases the suffering of women as communicated through Nora. Her words below are deplorable and make one feel how the woman is really a victim of war and violence: A speech by Nora in *The Plough* encapsulates the woes of women during the Easter Rising in Dublin: “Oh, I know that wherever he is, he’s thinkin’ of wantin’ to be with me. I know he’s longin’ to be passin’ his hand through me hair, to be caressin’ me neck, to fondle me hand” (185).

Insecurity engulfs the whole nation in Dublin; Nora and Bessie are just examples. These two women and many others suffered a lot due to the false notions of nationalism of their leaders. Nora is suffering the ‘agony’ and the loss of happiness which lies in her husband who has been snatched away from her by the war-lords who have no mercy and have no humane feelings. She is in the same situation in which Lady Macduff feels herself to be alone, unprotected and at the mercy of the cruel world around her. Macduff has run away; Clitheroe too. Both have betrayed their wives. There is thus a complete break of the basic human relationship.

Women’s struggle for peace is remarkably presented in the play through the female characters who attempt their best to restore tranquillity and stability to their homes and their society. They know that peace is first to be established at home, society and then the universe. Nora’s attempt to hide a letter to her husband to take part in the revolution has failed; the result, of course, is disastrous. Clitheroe is killed, Nora gets mad. Her friend, Bessie, who has been helping her during her somnambulation, is killed and the blood was pouring out of her.

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