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Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*: Demythologizing Warring Fantasy

Major Mehedi Hasan Shahriar
Principal,
Mainamati English School and College
Cumilla Cantonment, Cumilla, Bangladesh

ABSTRACT

Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* was published in 1929. This epoch-making anti-war text is written against the context of World War I. Given this information, this article wants to project how this text demythologizes the warring fantasy that was the background for the writer and his comrades to be involved in World War I. This article argues that the established romantic warring fantasy of war and particularly World War I is demythologized through the presentation of the gap between the promise and fulfillment, disillusionment of heroic feelings in war, issue of nationalism, the psychological trauma, the mind-numbing horror of war, and the destruction of a generation of man in *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

Key Words: *World War I, warring fantasy, horror of war, demythologization, nationalism*

Introduction

Erich Maria Remarque (1898 – 1970), a war veteran of WW I, is one of the most widely celebrated German-born novelists. He is called the "recording angel of the Great War". He is famous for the anti-war sentiments in his writings. Most of his novels are influenced by his bitter experience of WW I. Remarque's life and his novels are closely related, and through his protagonists he tries to impart a humanitarian message to his reader. His books are startlingly frank expressions of real feelings as well as vivid characters that sprang from the author's own life. Re-creating on paper the amorphous hell of the Western Front, Remarque actually presented the atrocities, brutality, nothingness and futility of war in his famous novel *All quiet on the Western Front*. Remarque had achieved global success with this novel, which challenged the myth of heroic military death and focused on the "lost generation" that had been destroyed by war.

War is a topic of literature from time immemorial. In ancient time war was presented with lofty sentiments and inflated rhetoric. Even in the literature of Victorian and Edwardian periods, war was glorified with high sounding words and presented in heroic mode. Again, like older war narratives and chants which is used to inspire warlike spirits, belligerents of the World War I also produced literature to instill the warlike spirit among the youths. Invasion and Future War literature can be regarded as a subset of more general futuristic writing that began in the 19th Century.¹ Many of the literary heroes have military roots. War literature of classic time is basically associated with heroism, bravery and sacrifice. War was considered as the noble deeds. And in this way, a myth is developed, warring fantasy is generated with the idealized image of war which is associated with false patriotism, honour, dignity, valour, courage, and military glory. Youngs are presented the idealized images of war. Against this myth and warring fantasy, Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* unmasked

the fact of war that war is synonymous to death, decay, destruction, savagery and thus demythologizes the established warring fantasy. Almost every scene of *All Quiet on the Western Front* speaks of the meaningless atrocity, brutality, nothingness and thus futility of war. Here we find the image of multitudes of devoted, unquestioning, patriotic young men being led to senseless slaughter, betrayed by their elders. The Western Front has come to epitomize the notion of war as a vast arena of victimhood.ⁱⁱ The characters of *All Quiet on the Western Front* do not find glory in sacrificing their lives like their mythic counterparts. Above all, as a war veteran, Remarque debunked the warring fantasy in *All Quiet on the Western Front* by remaining true to the facts of World War I.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For better understanding, the research method for this study included thematic analysis, close reading, textual analysis, content analysis of materials. Like other literary research, this research often deals with interpretations of meaning and social, political and cultural background of the literary text. After identifying items from the fiction, non-fiction articles, and other illustrations, each item was coded for initial themes. These were then accumulated into categories and designed conceptual themes. Literary research has many scopes to speculate about textual interpretations that have to be plausible through comprehensive argument. That is why, textual analysis, as a method, is used in this research. Pertinent instances have been taken from the examined items and organized in order to deliver evidence for the claim of the article. The following themes emerged: (a) The gap between the promise and fulfillment (b) the issue of nationalism (c) The psychological trauma and (d) destroying a generation of man. The discussion of the themes is supported by material from an evaluation of the pertinent literature.

BACKGROUND

Being inspired by the high-sounding words and comforting illusions of warring fantasy, Erich Maria Remarque drafted himself in the Great War in which he was badly wounded. A decade after the war in 1929, he published *All Quiet on the Western Front*, where the grim reality faced by the German soldiers during the war was presented. He was concerned with the brutality of WW I because the loss of life was greater than in any previous war in history, in part because militaries were using new technologies, including tanks, airplanes, submarines, machine guns, modern artillery, flamethrowers, and poison gas.ⁱⁱⁱ This Great War left millions of corpses that could not even be buried. The horror of the Great War, traumatically reenacted over and over and over after 1918 down to the present moment, drew its chill from the shattered, bloated, fragmented corpses that covered the wastelands made by the war.^{iv} Two crore people lost their lives and more than that were wounded in this black period of time. Among them were 9.7 million military personnel and about 10 million innocent civilians. Remarque fought for Germany in the Western Front and projected his war experience in his epoch-making fiction '*All Quiet on the Western Front*' (1929) where the terrible brutality of war informs every scene in the novel. Remarque very minutely presented the futility of war, the horror of trench fight and the nothingness of war that he experienced in the Western Front during WW I. It works both as a vehicle for overwhelmingly genuine and striking portrayals of war and as an approach of featuring the disillusionment of that time. The author presented his own experience, expressed views about the existing nature of war by focusing on the German-French conflict in World War I. Many critics are of the opinion that the dominant theme of this novel is the terrible brutality of war. *All Quiet on the Western Front* sets out to depict war as it really happened, going against the romantic depiction of glory and bravery, with a distinctly unromantic image of fear, meaninglessness, and brutality. In offering his grimly accurate sort of a soldier's experience, Remarque stripped the

distinctive romanticism from the war narrative in the staunchly antiwar *All Quiet on the Western Front*. The novel instantly became an international best seller and critically celebrated success.^v

WHAT IS WARRING FANTASY?

The history of war is as old as the fight between Cain and Abel. The ever-craving nature of human being to dominate and to become immortal lead them to fight or join a war as they believe that sacrificing life in the alter of Motherland/Fatherland will ensure immortality. And for this, men join the war in search of glory and pride in the battlefield though there is no glory and pride in killing people and destroying civilization. This yearning is capitalized by the authorities and the poets and writers to add meaning to war and warring fantasy is created. War is seen in terms of manhood, bravery and heroism. Older war narratives and chants had one of the primary purposes to inspire warlike spirits.^{vi} This fantasy is made by the master poets like Homer in *The Iliad* and Virgil in *The Aeneid*, which he begins with, "I sing of arms".^{vii} Homer justified and glorified war in *The Iliad* to portray the importance of honour and dignity to warriors, its pertinence in human society, and war as the means to a peaceful afterlife.^{viii} To the ancient Greeks, honour and glory is more significant than life. *Heraclitus*, an ancient Greek pre-Socratic philosopher said, "War is the father of all, and King of all." In ancient Rome and Greece, representation of war is magnified and termed as the noblest of deeds. It motivated future generations of young people to fight and die. This is also applicable in the beginning of twentieth century as war was seen by most Europeans as a glorious enterprise especially it is seen before the two World Wars. They felt proud and elevated in joining the call of the Motherland/Fatherland. They even considered war crimes as an inherent part of the war and they did not mind. Youngs are presented the idealized images of war that is false nationalism, valour, courage, honour, dignity and military glory. Being captivated by these high-sounding words, comforting illusions i.e. fantasy of war, millions of dreamy males joined the battlefield though very soon the real aspect of war is exposed and the heroic gestures are awfully replaced by the grim determination and desperate will to survive.^{ix}

DEMYTHOLOGIZING WARRING FANTASY – WHAT DO I WANT TO SAY?

The WWI started in 1914 and ended in 1918. Two crore people lost their lives and more than that were wounded in this black period of time. Among them were 9.7 million military personnel and about 10 million innocent civilians. Seeing the carnage, this was believed to be the end of every war. But it was not. In this turning point of the history, 28 countries waged war under the banner of Allied Power namely Great Britain, France, Russia, Italy, Japan and the USA and Central Power namely Germany, the Ottoman Empire, Austria-Hungary, and Bulgaria. All the countries drafted their soldiers in the name of chauvinism, a special type of nationalism, patriotic idealism, for "the Kaiser, God, and the Fatherland".^x The authority used an idealistic, patriotic and poetic rhetoric to convey the concepts of national loyalty and glory.^{xi} Remarque and millions of others joined the war effort in search of heroic glory, chivalry, valour, courage, honour, dignity and above all immortality. But everything was futile. The war reality smashed the myth, the warring fantasy. Soon they experienced savagery, animalistic instinct, carnage and gore, crime against humanity, barbarity and many more of these types. In *All Quiet on the Western Front*, the narrator, Paul Baumer, tried to keep some semblance of his humanity, but surviving this hell eventually left him empty.^{xii} It was a book written to reflect the human cost of war. It shows us how war has a hidden face that most people do not see until it is too late. In the novel, he describes a group of young men who at first think war is glorious. But as the war drags on, the group discovers how war is not all it is set out to be. As the war went on, they saw their friends either die or be permanently

wounded. Then the end comes when there was only one person left. All of them became “The Lost Generation”. The hoax of the war is clear to the soldiers, and the myth is evaporated and the idea of manliness and above all immortality turned into nightmare. Thus, the gap between the promise and fulfillment was massive.

THE GAP BETWEEN THE PROMISE AND FULFILLMENT

The established myth of war is that it is great and grand. The war is the place for heroism, it is a place to prove one’s worth, to become man from boy, a guarantee to become legend. But, Remarque’s epoch-making novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* pointed all these romantic warring fantasy as illusions. *All Quiet on the Western Front* starts with the lies of Kantorek, Paul’s school master. Innocent Paul and his classmates believed their schoolmaster when he assured them that victory is imminent. He marked them as ‘Iron Youth’ and asked them to fight for ‘the Kaiser, God and the Fatherland’.^{xiii} But the reality of war destroys that myth. After joining the army, Paul and his comrades realizes that all were bogus and they shortly confronted the tough realities of war that only brought death and decay; disappointment and disillusionment. After the first bombardment, Paul is pulled from the rubble. He stared into the distance, devoured stale bread, and then started to gather the dog tag of his dead schoolmates. From one battle to another, Paul fights to keep some semblance of his humanity, but surviving this hellscape eventually leaves him empty.^{xiv} On the other hand, Kantorek and other bloody war traders enjoyed their lives with families-children, wives, hobbies and career. Thus, the gap between promise and fulfillment is presented by highlighting the unpleasant side of war, sounds of sufferings and shock of the soldiers.^{xv} Thereby the illusion of warring fantasy is hereby debunked.

THE ISSUE OF NATIONALISM

From time immemorial, patriotism, service to the motherland, nationalism, sacrificing life for the noble cause of protecting the motherland, etc., have been associated with the warring fantasy. But Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* demythologizes this quarrelsome fantasy by showing another side of the coin, its destruction due to hardcore and aggressive patriotism, chauvinism. In 1914, the world had a serious case of chauvinist upheaval. Kantorek is the perfect example of this. His impassioned speech about serving the fatherland and the glory of war shows a national mentality that leads to the deaths of millions of young men.^{xvi} Nationalism has been used as a means of recruiting the common man into a terrible cause of war. Even it is used to force those who are unwilling to join war as Behm was unwilling to join but ironically was the one who faced deadly consequences first in the war. It, with the help of imagery, showed that nationalism is exploitable as Paul and his classmates naively joined the war without considering the possible outcome of the war. In the scene of Russian Prisoners, the author seems to be regarding nationalism as detrimental as it has persuaded many into viewing the enemy as sub-human by humanizing the enemy Russian prisoners. Paul, the narrator said, “A word of command has made these figures our enemies; a word of command might transform them into our friends”. It showed that the war initiated by nationalism was simply unnecessary sacrifice, as a solution to this dispute could be found through an agreement. Patriotism at the front was different from the rhetoric of the rear, and no one was more aware of it than the soldiers themselves.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA

War is believed to bring a peaceful afterlife. With this believe, great warriors fought from time immemorial. But, *All Quiet on the Western Front* offered the world a different view. In fact, the battle fantasy has been disproved because it is a promise taken by despair and promises of lands that are suitable for heroes have ceased to exist due to unemployment,

destitution, natural and psychological decay and trauma. War trauma stems from a long exposure of unfavorable experiences affecting the psychology of individuals associated with combat. Combat stress has considerable effects on the psychology of individuals connected with war. It can lead to desensitization and a cycle of a loss of hope. The narrator Paul mentions “Distinctions, breeding, education are changed, are almost blotted out and hardly recognizable any longer” (129). As highlighted by this quote, over time individuals involved in combat become emotionally desensitized to life. Furthermore, constant fears of safety and security has led individuals to place importance on survival and this fear of safety and security on the part of the warrior certainly debunks the warring fantasy of earlier time. This traumatic experience, which described a sense of despair, has been presented many times in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and the myth of heroic warriors of the past continues to be demythologized. A loss of hope can be a common symptom of depression, and a variant of an experience associated with war-trauma. In the novel, Paul comments “All at once everything seems to me confused and hopeless” (page 42).^{xvii} Unlike, the legendary warriors, the characters in *All Quiet on the Western Front* experienced trauma. Thus, once again, the set of warring fantasies is disproved.

THE HORROR OF WAR

One of the greatest war novels ever written is *All Quiet on the Western Front*, by Erich Maria Remarque. It is a story, not of Germans, but of men, who even may have escaped shells, were destroyed by the war. The novel's purpose is to show the intense horror and violent nature of war, while at the same time changing public opinion that war has an idealism and a romance. The awful brutality of war is the theme of *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Whereas war novels before *All Quiet on the Western Front* tended to romanticize war like, emphasizing ideas such as glory, honor, patriotic duty, and adventure. *All Quiet on the Western Front* sets out to portray war as it was actually experienced, replacing the romantic picture of glory and heroism with a decidedly unromantic vision of fear, meaninglessness, and butchery.^{xviii} The story centers on Paul Bäumer, who enlists in the German army with glowing enthusiasm. But in the course of war, he is consumed by it and ends up "weary, broken, burned out, rootless" without any hope. Remarque's novel portrays the mind-numbing terror and savagery of war with a relentless focus on the physical and psychological damage that it occasions. At the end of the novel, almost every major character is dead, epitomizing the war's devastating effect on the generation of young men who were forced to fight it.^{xix} Paul and his friends become so inured to death and horror all around them that the inhumanity and atrocities of war become part of everyday life. Here, in his description of the real horror and paralyzing fear at the front, Remarque is at his finest. He describes the atrocities, the terrible consequences of weapons of mass destruction, and how soldiers become hardened to death and its onslaught of sensory perceptions during battle.^{xx} In Chapter 11, Remarque described the soldier's life as one long, endless chain of the following:

“Shells, gas clouds, and flotillas of tanks shattering, corroding, death. Dysentery, influenza, typhus scalding, choking death. Trenches, hospitals, the common grave there are no other possibilities.”

This is how, Erich Maria Remarque, breaking all the romantic warring fantasies to signify war, against all chivalric notions of representing war, presented the horror, atrocities, futility and nothingness of war in *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

DESTROYING A GENERATION OF MAN

Lofty sentiments and inflated rhetoric are used to glorify war and sanctify death. But, in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Remarque portrayed war as horrible and senseless; death as brutal and meaningless. Suffering and destruction were described in an ironic, detached manner. The feeling of frustration, hopelessness and despair are predominant in this novel. This is a story of dreamy young people who were forced to join the WW I for Germany in the Western Front. At the beginning of the novel, Paul and his friends are forced to join the war by their teacher. In the middle of the story, Paul is gradually losing his comrades during the bombardment at the front. In the end of the story, Paul eventually died at the quiet front. The entire group is lost and symbolically Remarque pointed the destruction of entire generation. Even if they survived, they could not return to normal life and it is clear when Paul recalls his life, "I am young, I am twenty years old; yet I know nothing about of life but despair, death, fear, and fatuous superficiality cast over an abyss of sorrow. I see how people are set against one another, and in silence, unknowingly, foolishly, obediently, innocently slay one another... All my generation is experiencing these things with me..."

CONCLUSION

All Quiet on the Western Front is acclaimed as one of the best anti-war novels in which the writer Erich Maria Remarque presented the atrocities, brutality, futility and nothingness of war. In this novel, Remarque very minutely projected the grim reality of war and shown that a field of war is not a place to achieve immortality, dignity, glory by exhibiting valour, courage, heroism, bravery etc. Rather, war means death, decay and destruction. This masterpiece has clearly shown that the myth of war, the image of military glory has no relationship to the grim reality of the battle field. The experience of war is not noble, purifying and glorifying one, rather a bizarre mixture of dirt, filth and anxiety. The central character, the narrator, Paul Baumer and his comrades experienced the amorphous hell of the Western Front of World War I. Thus, breaking the romantic notion of war and warfare, *All Quiet on the Western Front* successfully demythologizes the warring fantasy.

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