

Margaret Postgate Cole's Poetry of the First World War

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Abstract

The First World War marks an inevitable transformation in the traditional gender roles of women from being passive domestic sustainers of the family into active contributors in social life as voluntary nurses, ambulance drivers, and factory workers. Nevertheless, women's poetic contributions to literary representations of war continue to be precariously neglected till the publication of Catherine Reilly's *Scars Upon my Heart* in 1981, a war anthology of seventy-nine women poets. Margaret Postgate Cole (1893-1980) is among these women war poets who provide a distinguished feminine insight into the experience of war, different from the male perspective. Far from displaying an amateurishly sentimental and romanticized engagement with war, Margaret Postgate Cole shows a great artistic aptitude in unmasking the conniving ideological roots of war that are reinforced by the patriarchal authorities. Cole, in her poetry, concentrates on the unjustifiable ideology of war, preying on innocent young soldiers. The aim of this article, therefore, is to analyze Cole's poetry of the First World War to demonstrate her profound awareness of the meaninglessness of the war that is promulgated by the rulers and decision makers.

Keywords: War Poetry, Margaret Postgate Cole, women, ideology, war.

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Margaret Postgate Cole'un Birinci Dünya Savaşı Şiirleri

Öz

Birinci Dünya Savaşı, kadınların geleneksel cinsiyet rollerinde kaçınılmaz değişimlere yol açmış, onları ev içinde ailenin sürdürülmesini sağlayan pasif bireyler olmaktan çıkararak, gönüllü hemşirelik, ambulans şoförlüğü ve fabrika işçiliği gibi sosyal hayatın içinde aktif rol alan bireylere dönüştürmüştür. Bununla birlikte, 1981 yılında Catherine Reilly'nin yetmişdokuz kadın savaş şairini kapsayan, *Scars Upon my Heart* (Kalbimdeki Yaralar) başlıklı savaş şiiri antolojisinin yayınlanmasına kadar, kadınların savaşın temsilindeki edebi katkıları yok sayılmıştır. Margaret Postgate Cole (1893-1980) savaşın yaşanmışlığına, seçkin bir feminen yakışım sağlayan kadın savaş şairlerinden sadece birisidir. Savaş konusunu amatörce bir duygusallık ve romantik kavramlara işlemek yerine, Margeret Postgate Cole savaşın ataerkil otoriteler tarafından oluşturulan ve desteklenen ideolojik kökenlerini gözler önüne sererek büyük bir sanatsal yetenek ortaya koymuştur. Cole şiirlerinde genç ve masum askerlerinin kanından beslenen, savunulması imkansız savaş ideolojisi üzerinde durur. Bu nedenle, bu makalenin amacı, Cole'un Birinci Dünya Savaşı şiirlerini inceleyerek, toplumun yöneticileri ve kanun koyucuları tarafından desteklenen savaşın anlamsızlığı konusundaki şairin farkındalığını ortaya çıkarmaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Savaş Şiiri, Margeret Postgate Cole, kadınlar, ideloji, savaş.

Extended Summary

The deep-rooted social ramifications of the First World War have been felt extensively in almost every segment of the British society. It has, beyond doubt, brought long-standing drastic changes into the British women's lives, accelerating the process of their incorporation into the social life more actively and potently. The submissive figure of a domestic woman who is confined to her home and preoccupied with housekeeping and the care of children is expeditiously replaced by an independent female figure who is empowered enough to work in factories, courageously handling the heaviest workloads, driving ambulances, or providing necessary medical care for the wounded soldiers in the trenches. Regardless of the fact that challenging conditions of war have enforced them to undertake the responsibility of these difficult works, the First World War, still, contributes a great deal to the emancipation of women by instigating the course of their leaving domestic sphere. Contrary to their speedy access to the public domain, women, for a long period of time, have been considered unqualified, uninformed, and ignorant of the real experience of war and endeavored intentionally by the patriarchy to be kept away from the literary platform of war. The horrific facade of the war has been proffered to be listened by a one-sided male perspective which has fostered the ascendancy of a literature of war that is male-centered, extremely biased, and incapable of reflecting the innate realities of war. Furthermore, the male-dominated war poetry is even observed to be accusing women of being the prevalent causes of the war. The most well-known example of this is Siegfried Sassoon's "The Glory of Women" in which the poet tries to demonstrate how the war is glorified by women whose sons and lovers were brutally killed in the war. The anthologies of men's war poetry do not give enough credit to women to express their own perspective of war till the end of the 20th century. In 1981, the masculine sovereignty in the trajectory of war poetry is revolutionarily abrogated with the publication of Catherine Reilly's *The Scars Upon My Heart* which includes seventy nine women poets who expose how war is experienced, felt and reflected by women in their poetry. This trailblazing book of women's war poetry contributes, at the same time, to the literary emancipation of women who are imprisoned within the stereotypical and oppressive masculine discourses.

Margaret Postgate Cole is one of the most outspoken and significant women

poets who are included in women's war anthology, compiled by Catherine Reilly. Regardless of the fact that she does not have a genuine interest in politics at the beginning of her career, the inequitable imprisonment of her brother becomes the primary reason of her transformation into a fanatical socialist. After marrying the politician and historian, G. D. H. (Douglas) Cole, Margaret Postgate Cole becomes a fervent member of Fabian Society that is a socialist organization of Britain. In collaboration with her husband, Margaret Postgate Cole publishes a great amount of political treatises, essays, and books. During the 1930s, Postgate Cole, with her husband, publishes *Women of Today* in which her socialist ideas are reconciled with the political problems of women. Later in 1938, Postgate Cole, independently of her husband, publishes *Marriage, Past and Present* in which she discusses women's legal problems like the marital oppression of women, divorce rights, responsibilities of motherhood, female sexuality, restoring the social rights of women who do household chores, and thereby, tries hard to stop the political subordination of women under the patriarchal system. What is more, Margaret Postgate Cole is also greatly interested in literature and, in 1918, publishes a book of verse where she can freely express her anti-war political thoughts. The book consists of two parts; the first part includes love poems, written from a male perspective while the second part includes war poems in which the poet reveals her dissenting attitude to war. Although she only writes one book of poetry, Margaret Postgate Cole achieves to confront her readers with the shocking realities of war. Accordingly, the main concentration of this article will be to investigate Margaret Postgate Cole's poetry of war in which the poet plunges into the ideological roots of war to uncover its hidden causes and the underlying perpetrators. Unlike male poets who, more or less, express similar experiences of soldiers, Margaret Postgate Cole mainly focuses upon the political undercurrents of war while dealing with the dramatic stories of dead soldiers and their families.

Introduction

The publication of Catherine Reilly's *The Scars upon my Heart* in 1981, a collection of women's war poetry, instigates a groundbreaking turn in the canonical tradition of war poetry, destabilizing a firmly established patriarchal ideology according to which war poetry is uniquely a male dominated literary platform on account of its being men's first-hand experience (Barlow 2000: 27). Regardless of their segregation from trenches, women do not hesitate to write about war in defiance of the patriarchal preconceptions that "continue to equate war with the battlefield and to privilege experience over quality of thought and expression" (Stout, 2016, 63). Women are not only extricated from the masculine realm of war poetry but also prejudicially accused of being incapable of understanding the bitter reality of the war. Accordingly, Siegfried Sassoon's "Glory of Women" is a widely recognized poem which lays unreasonably excessive culpability on women who are assumed to be the rudimentary sustainers of war, taking sadistic pleasure of the death of their loved ones. Thus, men's representation of women in war poetry can unquestionably be declared to be "misogynistic", incapacitated to reflect a female perception of war (Featherstone 1995: 95).

By virtue of the inclusion of women poets, war poetry retains an exceptionally heteroglossic quality and the power of articulating the plurality of voices that enable readers to have a more comprehensive understanding of war. Women's experiences of war are unavoidably different from men's experiences, and hence, their personal enunciation of war is entirely different from male poets in the way that women's poetry of war brings forth a large-scale extensive impact of war, observed in almost every section of the society while soldier poets' view of war is relatively restricted with what is transpired in the front lines. Women's war poetry "describes the liberating social change heralded in women's life by war; the particular nature of their work; and the sights and sounds of war as they impinged upon their consciousness" (Khan 1988: 70). Women's aspiration for active involvement in political and other social institutions and their struggle for recognition are reflected in their poetry which give expression to female perception of

war, obtained during their active services as drivers, nurses, or relief workers in the war. Amy Bell endorses the view that “British women poets attempting to find an authentic wartime voice and emphasize the participation of women in the war did so primarily through the articulation of images of female heroism in wartime” (2007: 417).

While some women poets wrote their experiences of war at home, some others expressed their immediate experiences at the trenches, working as nurses, ambulance drivers and munitions suppliers. The cultural and the economic freedom provided by war enabled women to more easily discuss their political and ideological views in their war poetry. Women’s war poetry gives voice to the female awareness about the irrationality and inhumanity of war. The publication of anthologies of women’s war poetry has contributed to the liberation of war poetry from the hegemonic masculine domination as well as affirming that women’s crucial role in providing a multifarious perspective to the dissimilar human experiences of war cannot be underestimated or mitigated. This article, therefore, is specifically vested on the poetry of a prominent female figure of the Great War, Margaret Postgate Cole (1893-1980) who embarks upon “mourning and home-front perspectives” of war and provides a comprehensive analysis of the conceptualization of war (Einhaus 2015: 473).

Margaret Postgate Cole’s War Poetry

In spite of the fact that she does not write many poems about war and has only one book of poetry, Margaret Postgate Cole is still considered to be an outstandingly “prolific” writer and reformist, dealing with journalism, politics and literature concomitantly (Dowson-Entwistle 2006: 17). Not much is written on Cole’s war poetry, yet, thanks to the publication of a series of women’s war anthologies, Cole, along with other women poets, gains an increasingly significant literary attention from readers, critics, and scholars of literature. Opening a considerably broad literary space to discuss her social and political ideas, Margaret Postgate Cole unsettles the dominant patriarchal discourses about the traditional cultural constructions of masculine and feminine roles in the modernist age. In her book, *Marriage*, published in 1938, for instance, Cole ardently problematizes exceedingly topical and universal issues like “dependency in marriage, the sour-

es and implications of women's economic independence, women's 'dual role', childcare policy, the socialization of housework, female sexuality, birth control, and divorce reform" (Martin-Goodman 2004: 150). Margaret Postgate Cole, working together with her husband G. D. H. Cole, became a strong supporter of the "FABIAN SOCIETY" which was a socialist organization "dedicated to 'equality of opportunity' and the abolition of the 'economic power and privileges of individuals and classes'" (Dowson 2006: 50). Moreover, her brother's imprisonment becomes an immense influence on Margaret Postgate Cole's plunging into political activism that is expounded as follows:

The Great War broke over an England whose middle classes were largely unaware of its implications and unprepared for its repercussions. When Raymond Postgate, a militant Guild Socialist, was sent to prison for being a conscientious objector, Margaret's comfortable world changed. After Ray's sentence 'I walked out of the Oxford Court Room with Gilbert Murray...into a new world of doubters and protestors and into a new war-this time against the ruling classes and the government which represented them'. (Vernon 1983: 4, emphasis in the original)

Cole's faithful devotion to socialist views also stimulates her preoccupation with the feminist issues, leading her to fight for improving the social and political rights of women. She "consistently pursued married women's right to work and equal pay and wanted to find ways of making married women's role compatible with a successful career, a stance that she portrayed as compatible with her socialist views" (Martin- Goodman 2004: 182). All throughout her life, Margaret Postgate Cole defends laboring women's economic and political rights and works for the amelioration of the married women's legal status and the problem of women's education rights. Cole's reformist feminism and socialism posit groundbreaking challenges to the patriarchal impositions on women's submissive domestic roles.

Cole's conjectural preoccupation with socialism and feminism undeniably play an essential role on her anti-war poems which encapsulate the undercurrent ideologies of war. As Higonet also underscores, "[i]n female elegies responding to social ruptures and violence of the Great War, we can trace strategies of interrogation, startling images, that defamiliarize traditional pastoral scenes and rhythms that wrench the tools found in canonical works" (2013: 186). In a similar

vein, along with the practically ongoing war of the battlefields, Cole, through her poetry, wages a strenuous intellectual war against the undisclosed ideological perpetrators of war, preparing a legitimate ground for the war through the construction of patriotic discourses. Instead of imitating a purely sentimental and emotional effusion of the horror, pity and pain of war, Cole's war poetry reflects her political indulgence in displaying the fallacy of the dogmatic premises of war that necessitates a blind adherence to patriotic ideals. Even though it is not a direct experience of the trenches, Cole's poetry still vividly displays the social, cultural, economic, and psychological repercussions of war on the society in general as well as on the everyday lives and consciousness of individuals.

"On a Pierrot Show", composed in August 1924, delineates the whole world as a pierrot show in which humans conceal their real feelings in the face of upcoming war. The poem is an invocation of a classical pantomime art that depends on the speechless actions of a pantomime artist who tries to convey his meaning through his dance while his white colored face mimes the events and carry his emotional utterances:

A scrap of tinsel hung against the night;
Around, dark silent hills and silent sea;
But here's a world that plays unheedingly?
A few thin planks, a flaring crimson light.

And here they sing, and play, and scrape, and bow.
Fancy kind faces in the shades that press,
Nor seem to see the night's black emptiness

—And one small board to shield them—as we now. (Cole 1918: 29)

At the beginning of the poem, Cole compares humans' insistence on carrying on their cheerful lives into a scrap of tinsel hung against the darkness of the night around which there are silent hills and silent sea. Tinsels pertain to glittering ornaments, used to decorate trees during the period of the festive season in Christmas. The poet points to the disastrous conditions of war that sheds a shadow of darkness and tragedy on human life while humans are so desensitized and bedazzled that they keep on living in an atmosphere of festival, reluctant to see "the night's black emptiness" (Cole 1918: 29). While humans envision their life in a

jovial mood of a festival, they are surrounded by a complete darkness and emptiness. An appalling modernist imagery is predicated on the notion of “threadbare tinsel” hung on emptiness to juxtapose humans’ momentary gratification of their daily life with the annihilating power of war that devours everything within its deep emptiness. The entire world, as Cole recurrently emphasizes in her poem, appears to be unheedingly play its pantomime during which the fears and anxieties of humans remain veiled by the ostentatious white make up on their faces. People are reluctant to confront the reality of war which constitutes a disturbing menace to their daily routines. As a result, individuals in the society mostly choose to live their life as if war does not change anything and assume their roles of being Pierrot, a gloomy clown in “stock comedies and pantomimes” with a “white face and loose blouse” (Laws 2013: 1). Pierrot is a typical character who is “sensitive, melancholy, and intrinsically alone, playful and daring”, yet does not talk about the causes of his pain and suffering (Laws 2013: 1). Cole’s poem gives expression to a most basic defence mechanism of a human psychology which refuses to accept that war brings an ultimate confusion, derangement and ambiguity into the natural flow of human life. Cole expresses her inordinate disconcertment in the heedlessness of the society to the forthcoming war. What is firmly believed by the poet is that human beings have an immense power to ward off war but they prefer to remain passively silent to it. The poem is submerged with intense feelings of resentment and anger about humans’ indifference to war and their paralyzed consciousness, leaving the whole society unable to take a serious action to prevent war. Further, Cole’s poem moves beyond traditional war poetry about humans’ emotional experiences of war and brings out a serious criticism at the dumbness of humanity, depicted as a pantomime actor, miming and playing foolishly rather than uttering his/her thoughts straightforwardly in the face of an upcoming war. The poet builds her poem on a striking imagery of light and dark to underline the contradiction between humans’ false optimism and the actual uncertainty of war. Humans’ faint hopefulness causes them to live in a “pleasant dream of light” that turns out to be a mere “bubble”, disappearing “on the war’s dark ways” (Cole 1918: 29).

In most of her poems, Margaret Postgate Cole does not make use of English landscape to ignite the patriotic feelings of her readers. Nature, for Cole, is a

medium to deliver the traumatic ramifications of war on human life. In this regard, Cole's poetry is a testimony to the convergence of human life with the natural life, undergoing similar losses, pains, and sufferings. Therefore, "Spring Song, 1917" is a poem which begins with an unconventional image of spring, drawn from "Pericles on the young men who fell in war" and claims that "The Spring is gone out of the year" (Cole 1918: 30). Cole, in her poem, accentuates how nature has gone adrift with the cataclysmic effect of war on the whole universe that results in the total disappearance of the spring out of other seasons. The poem draws a striking parallel between nature and war:

O April's running out and out
With Strong winds blowing,
And every day we wait and look
For green things growing.
But every day that wakens, sees
The thrush still plain in the barren
trees,
Singing his puzzled melodies
Where once were leafy places
In this strange leafless spring. (Cole 1918: 30)

The irrecoverable damage that is brought about by the war is not only felt by human beings but almost every element of nature is inflicted with the detrimental impact of war. On par with Pericles' funeral speech, delivered "after the first battles of the Peloponnesian war" for the death of young soldiers at the beginning of their youth (Halsall 2000: 1), Cole's poem is written as a tribute to the young soldiers who were killed untimely because of war. However, unlike Pericle's speech which is delivered with an ultimate purpose of motivating his people to defend their country to death, Cole's poem embodies a critical interrogation of the unjustifiable logic of war.

The poem revolves around the disruption of the natural cycle with the interference of war that ushers the death of so many young soldiers. Humans' expectation of finding a warm weather of April in which plants will find an adequate space to thrive and flourish shifts quickly into disillusionment with the passing of seasons without the coming of the spring. Metaphorically speaking, humans' joy of life and

their hopes for future are stolen by war that leaves all humanity in a perpetual state of depression and hopelessness. There is a detailed description of the sterility of nature in which naked trees are not clothed with their green dresses. A thrush, perched on the barren branches of the trees, sings his songs but also perplexed about the disarray of the seasons. The impossibility of maintaining the rebirth of nature in spring season resonates with the psychological trauma of the war on the consciousness of modern society which cannot recover from its spiritual paralysis. The death in nature reflects the helplessness of human beings about the prospect of a better future as war brings physical death for soldiers while psychologically killing the whole society. In the last part of the poem, the mournful and elegiac tone is superseded by a harsh criticism of the authorities, who decide on war and send soldiers to death:

Ah, there was never a spring like this,
For when was there a year like this,
Or a people desolate as this,
Whose captains in high places
Have stolen away the spring? (Cole 1918: 31)

Cole, in these lines, addresses to the government officials and military commanders who configure the fate of a country by giving the decision of war. Cole holds all the rulers accountable for the death of these soldiers and stealing away their happiness. The barren trees in nature also evoke the futility of expecting any kind of recuperation both in nature and modern society. Cole recurrently emphasizes that unprecedented desolation that humans are undergoing are caused by the authorities who are not sincerely concerned with the happiness and prosperity of the individuals but with their own political passions. In opposition to “On a Pierrot Show” in which the poet’s accusations are garnered on the society in general, “Spring Song, 1917”, blatantly excavates the ideological roots of war in which so many innocent people fall victim to the political ambitions of the privileged groups of the minority. The poem, in this regard, goes beyond being a simple war elegy on the death of young soldiers but plunges deep into the underlying causes of war to reveal its sustaining ideology, imposed by the decision makers of the governments.

“The Veteran”, written in 1916 is another outstanding poem in which Cole’s discursive formulation of war subverts readers’ assumptions in a disquieting manner. The poem explores the intersection of a newly enrolling soldiers and a veteran

of war who have a completely different perspectives of war. Cole ingeniously reflects the discrepancy between the romantic image of war, constructed by the political ideologies to legitimate war and the horror, atrocity and disappointment of war that is experienced personally by soldiers.

We came upon him sitting in the sun,
Blinded by war, and left. And past the fence
There came young soldiers from the Hand and Flower,
Asking advice of his experience.

And he said this, and that, and told them tales,
And all the nightmares of each empty head
Blew into air; then, hearing us beside,
Poor chaps, how'd they know what it's like?" he said. (Cole 1918: 32-33)

"Hand and Flower" that is mentioned in the poem is the name of a well-known pub in London, used as an indication of the "importance of pubs in British culture of this time" (Evans 2014: 154). The poem portrays a remarkable contrast between the recently recruited soldiers who are coming out of a pub as a popular socializing place where the members of the community come together and a lonely veteran, sitting outside the pub. Separation of the blind soldier from the rest of the society provides a conspicuous insight into the brutal consequences of war that leaves individuals in a complete sense of isolation. The wounded soldier is sitting under the sun alone in the street while other soldiers who are enlisting into army are taking pleasure of their life without being aware of the reality of war. It is also quite noteworthy that Cole demonstrates the successful proceeding of the government's propaganda campaign side by side with the tragic consequences of war, exemplified by the blind veteran. The poem lays bare how the operation of the governments' war propaganda that uses individuals as tools for their own benefit, tear their lives apart and discard them after using them like a commodity material. Hence, Postgate develops a harsh criticism on the war policies of the governments and attracts attention to the blind soldier who is thrown aside like a useless person after serving as soldier for his own country.

Upon seeing the blind soldier on their way out of the pub, a group of young soldiers comes near him to learn about his first-hand war experiences. The blind

veteran tells them stories about how horrible the war is, and at last, he calls them “poor chaps” who do not know anything about the seriousness of war and what kind of tragedy is waiting for them in the trenches. While the immature soldiers, still quite happy, move away from the blind veteran, the poet succeeds in bewildering her readers in the last two lines of the poem: “And you’re—how old’ ‘Nineteen, the third of May’” (Cole 1918: 33). Leaving the shocking reality to the end of the poem, Cole reveals the fact that the blind veteran is not in fact an old man who gives advice to young soldiers but he himself is a young boy at his eighteens, not older than other boys. Cole, quite skillfully, manifests that war steals away the vitality, joy of life, and youthfulness of soldiers and transform them into old men who tell stories of their war memories and give advice to others.

In addition to “The Veteran” which portrays a lonely veteran sitting under the sun, alienated from the rest of the society, “The Falling Leaves” is another exceptional poem which shows the futility of war. Cole, in her poem, uses a powerful image of nature where the falling leaves are resembled to the falling of soldiers in the battlefield.

To-day, as I rode by,
I saw the brown leaves dropping from their tree
In a still afternoon,
When no wind whirled them whistling to the sky,
But thickly, silently,
They fell like snowflakes wiping out the noon;
And wandered slowly thence
For thinking of a gallant; multitude
Which now all withering lay
Slain by no wind of age or pestilence,
But in their beauty Strewed
Like snowflakes falling on the Flemish clay. (Cole 1918: 34)

At the beginning of the poem, brown leaves dropping from the tree in a still afternoon without the blowing of any wind remind the poet of the dying soldiers in the battlefield. The poem incorporates an implicit criticism of the meaninglessness of war which is delivered through a metaphoric delineation of the falling of leaves and snowflakes that are compared to soldiers who are dying not because of

old age or sickness but by war. The whiteness, softness, tenderness, and purity of snowflakes that disappear immediately after falling into the ground prompt Cole to discuss and severely refute the ideology of war that legitimizes the untimely death of young soldiers whose short lived lives on earth is no longer than a snowflake that melts away once it falls on the ground. Thickness of the brown leaves entails the multitude of soldiers, wearing their brown uniform and laying on the ground, withering away and completely forgotten. Additionally, snowflakes seem to be indistinguishable from each other but in reality, each drop of snowflake is surprisingly unique and different from others. Accordingly, soldiers are ideologically perceived to be a group of identical men in the same war uniform, undistinguishable from each other. However, the poet compels her readers to recognize the individuality of every soldier who has a distinct identity and personality. Unlike a typical nature poem, Cole's nature imagery does not kindle a harmonious atmosphere of nature where falling leaves turn into soil and become part of nature once they wither away. The poet aims to construct a startling image of nature to convey the unreasonableness of war that cannot be defensible by any cause or ideology. She does not discuss the futility and brutality of the war directly by addressing the subject but achieves to deliver her meaning through discursive images of natural objects like falling leaves or snowflakes. This indirectness of approach is, indeed, what makes Cole an exceptionally unique poet.

Cole's disparagement of the galvanizers of war continues with an escalation of tone in "Rest" which is a poem of satire, burgeoned on the cenotaph of a dead soldier. Cole expresses her anger at the superficiality of the writings on the soldier's cenotaph, usually inscribed with words like "rest in peace." The poet does not believe in the sincerity of these wishes and catechizes the controversy between the act of war and cordial expression of eternal peace:

Rest, rest—They say you have gained eternal rest.
Rest, rest, says the brass tablet above your cenotaph,
Rest in some far and elderly Paradise,
Rest, eternal rest for the tired spirit.
The tired spirit—yours!
This is a pleasant joke of the leading gods,
Who with such nice discrimination grant

Death, and eternal rest to you who sought
Nothing but life and the continuance
Of the good restless striving here.
The freshness of the day, the play of mind,
The many wrongs you found to set to rights.
The fight renewing daily with the world.
—So they gave you eternal rest. And kept for us
Life, and the peculiar pleasure of living on. (Cole 1918: 34)

Cole ruminates on the epitaph writing on the headstone of a soldier and reads it ironically to highlight its disingenuousness as a revelation of the hypocrisy and pretense of authorities. The poem engages with deconstructing the meaning of the epitaph which calls the dead soldier as a tired spirit who is in need of peace and rest. Cole considers this phrase as a joke of leading gods who stand symbolically for the rulers of the society, deciding on favor of war and prompting the death of these innocent soldiers. Cole unravels the fact that these soldiers who lie in their graves did not crave for death, on the contrary, they were restlessly trying to survive and live their life. The poet insistently argues that these soldiers do not deserve to die at the spring of their youth and exposes the mockery of the hegemonic discourse of the governments that enforce war, send millions of young boys to death, and claim that they found peace and rest in their grave. The poem ends with Cole's undermining the discourse of government officials who allegedly give peace to soldiers by putting them into graves while giving life to their remaining relatives. It is certainly not difficult to understand the underlying meaning that is aimed by Cole who boisterously shows the primary cause of war and the tragic outcomes of it. While soldiers are sent to their graves by their rulers to find peace, families and relatives of the soldiers are conferred with lifelong mourning, pain and suffering. The poem powerfully unveils the duplicity of malignant authorities who deceive innocent public with false war narratives. What is told by the authorities as truth is not, in fact, in attunement with the actual experiences of soldiers and their families who strive hard to cope with the atrocities of war. Hence, in Cole's poem, the innocence of the soldiers is incongruent with the corruptness of government authorities who manipulate the nationalistic feelings of their citizens to serve their own blood-spattered ambitions.

While “Rest” is a poem that focuses on the superficiality of the popular phrase of “rest in peace” on the graves of soldiers, “Afterwards” is another prominent poem which draws a picture of peace after an agonizing period of war. Cole makes use of outstanding nature imagery in the poem where the tragic outcomes of war can evidently be observed in nature:

Oh, my beloved, shall you and I
 Ever be young again, be young again?
 The people that were resigned said to me
 —Peace will come and you will lie
 Under the larches up in Sheer,
 Sleeping,
 And eating Strawberries and cream and cakes—
 cakes, O cakes, O cakes, from Fuller’s!
 And quite forgetting there’s a train to town. (Cole 1918: 35)

The first part of the poem comments on the aspirations of young lovers who dream about the life that they expect to find after the war. There is a sense of consolation in the public consciousness that they will return back to their peaceful days of pre-war period when they enjoyed nature, eating their strawberries and cakes under larch trees. The poem asserts that the never-ending human anticipation to get ordinance and harmony is an unavailing attempt in an already de-centered and disconnected world at the end of the traumatic experience of war. In the second line of the poem, the persona clearly states that since it is impossible to turn back in time and be young again, it is equally impossible to pursue their old life without confronting drastic changes, brought about by war. The idyllic representation of nature is replaced by a post-apocalyptic image of nature where the disastrous impacts of war can be seen and felt in almost every part:

And peace came. And lying in Sheer
 I look round at the corpses of the larches
 Whom they slew to make pit-props
 For mining the coal for the great armies.
 And think, a pit-prop cannot move in the wind,
 Nor have red manes hanging in spring from its

branches,
And sap making the warm air sweet.
Though you planted it out on the hill again it
would be dead.
And if these years have made you into a pit-prop.
To carry the twisting galleries of the world's reconstruction. (Cole 1918: 36)

In opposition to the first part of the poem which reflects on the persona's idealized pastoral depiction of peace, the second part of the poem shows the disenchanting reality of peace which brings revival neither to human life nor to natural life. What is conducted by peace is nothing more than the death of trees which are cut down and turned into pit-props that are wooden props, used to support the roofs of mines. The poet's comprehension of the chopped larch trees as the "corpses of larches" indicate the similarity between soldiers and trees who share the fate of being slaughtered by the same selfish and destructive human desire to turn everything into expendable consumption materials, ready to be used and wasted. Parallel to the period of war that brings death to soldiers, peace brings death to nature in which the beauty of landscape is destroyed with the reconstruction of mining industry. The persona argues that slaughtered trees are substituted by the pit-props which are replanted on earth as if they are still alive. Cole, in her poem, makes an astonishing correlation between the dead bodies of soldiers and the dead bodies of trees. Analogous to soldiers, who are utilized and sent to death in war, trees are first killed, and then, transformed into commodity materials to be used for industrial growth. Subsequently, the new world order in the post war modern period is no longer defined by peace, order, and harmony but by chaos, unsteadiness, and violence.

Conclusion

Throughout her poetry of war, Margaret Postgate Cole dedicates herself to dismantle the patriotic war discourse of rulers and deals with uncovering the underlying ideology of war rather than writing traditional poems of war, lamenting the death of the loved-ones. What is distinctly observed in Cole's war poetry is an extreme sense of abhorrence and disavowal of violence, propagated by the authorities who do not have a genuine concern of the lives of their individual

citizens. Cole's socialist ideological views of war are transformed to her readers, concealed in the striking imagery of nature. Thus, pastoral discourse of nature is used by Cole as an efficient tool of creating irony, satire, and mockery in her poems. Expressing her sincere concern with the exigency of taking immediate steps to prevent wars, Cole develops a skeptical attitude to the political strategies of authorities who do not hesitate to sacrifice young soldiers for their own benefits. From this vantage point, Cole, in her poetry, avoids sentimentalized identification with soldiers and war but dives deep into the roots of warfare that is promulgated by the ideological institutions of governments that are inclined to perceive individuals as masses of people who can easily be expended for economic gains. Contrary to the mainstream convictions that women cannot reflect the reality of war since they do not have an authentic personal experience of war, Margaret Postgate Cole, as a female voice of war poetry, proves herself to be a thoroughly competent modernist poet who succeeds in disencumbering the destructive ideological foundations of war which are curtailed behind patriotic and nationalistic discourses.

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