



Blazing Atomic Bombs in the Poetry of Edith Sitwell and Elizabeth Jennings

Edith Sitwell ve Elizabeth Jennings Şiirlerinde Yanan Atom Bombaları

Zümre Gizem YILMAZ KARAHAN

Abstract

Ankara Sosyal Bilimler Üniversitesi,
Yabancı Diller Fakültesi, Ankara,
Türkiye.

ORCID:

Z.G.Y.K.: 0000-0003-3148-2447

Corresponding Author :

Zümre Gizem YILMAZ KARAHAN

Email:

zumregizem.yilmaz@asbu.edu.tr

Citation: Yılmaz Karahan, Z. G. (2020). Blazing Atomic Bombs in the Poetry of Edith Sitwell and Elizabeth Jennings. *Journal of Humanities and Tourism Research*, 10 (2), 305-312.

Submitted: 05.01.2020

Accepted: 23.03.2020

This article provides an insight into the condition of women poets especially during the world war times. Exemplifying from two distinctive women poets dealing with the themes related to war in their poetry, this article displays a female perspective on war. With the changing façade of fighting after the introduction of technological devices into the battlefield, war is disconnected from the trenches, and has thus expanded its spatial positioning to the Home Front in which civilians reside. Unlike the First World War which mainly took place in the trenches, the new fighting conduct of the Second World War induced the experience of war for everybody, let them be soldiers or civilians. For this reason, it is more frequent to see a female voice on the Second World War. Within this framework, this article delves into two women poets in whose poetry one can trace representations of war, hence providing examples of war representations in the poetry of Edith Sitwell and Elizabeth Jennings.

Keywords: War Poetry, Edith Sitwell, Elizabeth Jennings, Women Poets

Özet

Bu makale özellikle dünya savaşları sırasında kadın şairlerin durumuyla ilgili bir fikir vermektedir. Şiirlerinde savaşla ilgili temalar kullanan iki önemli kadın şairden örnekler vererek, savaş üzerindeki kadın yorumunu göstermektedir. Savaş alanına teknolojik aletlerin gelmesinden sonra değişen savaşa yöntemleriyle, savaş cepheden koparılmış ve sivilin yaşadığı Sivil Cepheye doğru mekân konumlamasını genişletmiştir. Genel olarak cephelerde geçen Birinci Dünya Savaşının aksine, İkinci Dünya Savaşının yeni savaşa yöntemi asker ya da sivil herkes için savaş tecrübesi edinmeyi beraberinde getirdi. Bu sebeple, İkinci Dünya Savaşıyla ilgili kadınların sesine daha fazla rastlanır. Bu bağlamda, bu makale şiirlerinde savaş temsilleri görebileceğimiz iki kadın şairi inceleyecek, böylece Edith Sitwell ve Elizabeth Jennings'in şiirlerindeki savaş temsillerini örneklendirecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Savaş Şiiri, Edith Sitwell, Elizabeth Jennings, Kadın Şairler

1. INTRODUCTION

We are nothing, we are
A dream in a cosmic mind,
We are a solitude, an emptiness,
We only exist in others' thought, we grow
In fitful seasons, yet we leave our marks,
Our scratches on dark walls, our prints, our spoors,
Our persecuting wars (Jennings, 1986: 200).

Inside the horror of Nagasaki and Hiroshima lies the
beauty of Einstein's $E=MC^2$. (Winterson, 1997: 103)

The First World War was the first war in which new technologies were used for the mass-destruction of people who were fighting for their nations in the trenches. Therefore, the First World War witnessed first visions of manipulation and misuse of technology. But, the destructive influence of the weapons was limited to the trenches. That is to say, the "Home Front" was safely protected since the war was away from the homes of the soldiers. Unlike the First World War, the Second World War, however, completely excluded the close-fighting side of the war, and promoted cold fighting through buttons to push that drop bombs. Such an immense change also emerged in the literary arena with a shift from such trench poets as Wilfred Owen, W. H. Auden, Rupert Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon as close witnesses of the hot war in the First World War to the abundance of "armchair" poets writing about the horrors of war at home as war is also expanded into civilians in the Second World War. This large scale extension also came forward in the mood of the poems. While the First World War poetry shows more patriotism and propaganda for fighting heroically, the Second World War is more filled with stories of calamity.

It seems apt to highlight here that the Second World War has deeply changed the façade of the war, in consequence of which the civilians as well as the ones fighting in the trenches were also included in the bombings through the "aerial subjugation of whole armies and populations" (Rawlinson, 2000: 58) at the same time. As Mark Morrisson underscores, "no one could doubt that the discourse of atomic physics changed utterly at 8:15 A.M. on Monday, 6 August 1945" (2002: 605) especially after the bombs dropped upon Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Winston Churchill (1874-1965) also underlined the spatial shift with the Second World War in one of his speeches about the new war strategies: "'The whole of the warring nations are engaged, not only soldiers, but the entire population, men, women and children', Churchill told parliament on 20 August 1940: 'The fronts are everywhere'" (qtd in Rawlinson, 2000: 31). This explanation sheds light on the annihilation of the idea of women and children that are exempt from the horrors of the war. This spatial change inevitably filtered into the literature of the epoch. For instance, the reflections of this change manifested itself especially in women's poetry, who were now more included in the sufferings of the war than in the First World War due to the new tactic of attacking the population of the enemies through technological weapons providing murder on a large scale. Nevertheless, the traditional gender roles ascribed to women in literature were still influential in poetry, and women's war poems of the time, such as those of Edith Sitwell and Elizabeth Jennings, were generally an elegy of a loss (of husbands, lovers, fathers) within the reality of atomic bombs. That is to say, women were still not active agents of the war.

Traditionally, women have been excluded from the literary arena as a result of their being categorized as the objects of the male inspiration, which goes back to the Apollo-Daphne myth. Unable to consummate his love with Daphne as a result of Daphne's transformation to a tree, Apollo establishes the cult of the best poet crowned with laurel; the leaves of the daphne tree. Therefore, women, represented by the laurel, become the rewards for men performing the best

poetic performance, invoked by the Muses. In this line, women are reduced to objects inspiring men to create literary works, as a result of which they are deprived of creative abilities. For this very reason, women had to find an escape from this view. This endeavor to find an escape resulted in a number of women writers – like Margery Kempe for instance – writing with an excuse of religious mediation and/or translation of the words of male authors. However, with the social change of the roles of women in society, and especially after feminist movements, the literary arena witnessed the gradual acceptance of women writers. We can observe this acceptance in our times when we look at the example of Carol Ann Duffy, crowned as the poet laureate, an honour she held between 2009 and 2019.

2. EDITH SITWELL AND HER WAR POETRY

Concordantly, Edith Sitwell (1887-1964), whose life span covered two world wars, complained about the lack of women poets in literature with the exception of Sappho, Christina Rossetti, and maybe Emily Dickinson – since she finds Dickinson’s poems inadequate – and further stated that “I had to learn everything – learn, amongst other things, not to be timid, and that was one of the most difficult things of all” (qtd in Dowson, 1999: 9) in a letter to the English poet Stephen Spender (1909-1995). Apart from the modernist techniques with her “consciously ‘modernist’ images of the *Façade* poems” (Young, 1981: 47), which were innovative and experimental in her time, she was also influenced by the French Symbolists, especially by Rimbaud (Braybrooke, 1951: 237) and by such artists as Picasso, Matisse, and Stravinsky. She was already using nursery rhyme in her earlier poems, but towards the middle of her career, according to Pearson,

[s]he made a lot of what she called her personal poetic ‘technique’, and was absorbed by such things as the ‘texture’ of particular words, with assonances, dissonances, rhythms and repetitions to produce particular effects. She had begun conscientiously performing what she would term her poetic ‘exercises’ – teaching herself to use words much as a composer uses notes and phrases in his music. (1978: 179)

Attending to Pearson’s remarks, Gregson underlines that Sitwell focused “upon the free-floating signifier, and especially upon the sound of poetry [...] [, and] rhythm, rhyme and assonance are the most shaping motive forces behind her composition” (2011: 10). In relation to the necessity in utilising the rhythms in poetry, Sitwell herself states as follows: “At the time I began to write, a change in the direction, imagery, and rhythms in poetry had become necessary, owing to the rhythmical flaccidity, the verbal deadness, the dead and expected patterns, of some of the poetry immediately preceding us” (1957: xv).

Furthermore, she also mixed her technique with her interest in war poetry. She was aware of the futility of the war, and that is why especially after the break of the Second World War her poems enriched in the moral decline of the humankind in consequence of war. In 1919, she edited an anthology entitled *Wheels*, “which she dedicated to the memory of Owen”¹ (Rawlinson, 2007: 119). And during the Second World War, she adopted a new poetic role, which is, according to Pearson, “the impassioned prophetess of doom” (1978: 253). She also made various references to certain religious figures in her poetry. “Still Falls the Rain,” for example, veils the reality of atomic bombs of the Second World War with the religious references to Christ’s suffering on the Cross for the humankind:

Still falls the Rain –
Dark as the world of man, black as our loss –
Blind as nineteen hundred and forty nails

¹ Wilfred Owen is one of leading poets of the First World War who died fighting in the trenches.

Upon the Cross. (1957: 272)

Rain here predicates the constant bombings out of which civilians experience suffering similar to that of Jesus. To put it somewhat differently, the poem's subtitle "The Raids, 1940. Night and Dawn" refers to "Boeing B29 Superfortresses dropping their payloads, [and] 'rain' itself provides a naturalistic and euphemistic poeticism" (Robinson, 2007: 516). Furthermore, the poem displays that although one dies under the bombings, the bombs still have an influence on his/her body since they continue to deform the body and make most of the bodies unrecognisable. So as to illustrate the deterioration of the bodies more sharply, the poem also entails a reference to Lazarus and Dives, yet "she intentionally conflates the stories of the two different Lazaruses in the Bible—Lazarus, brother of Martha and Mary of Bethania, whom Jesus raises from the dead (John 11: 41–4), and Lazarus the beggar who is spurned by the rich man known as Dives in the Middle Ages (Luke 16: 19–31)" (Morrisson, 2002: 624). The poem shows the intermeshment of these two stories as follow:

Still falls the Rain
At the feet of the Starved Man hung upon the Cross.
Christ that each day, each night, nails there, have mercy on us –
On Dives and on Lazarus:
Under the Rain the sore and the gold are as one. (1957: 272)

Pointing to the equalizer status of death, the poem draws attention to the fact that regardless of social status or class everybody is equally destined to death embedded in the rain of the bombs. In this sense, death equals all bodies from all nations.

Differently, in "Serenade: Any Man to Any Woman," Sitwell touches upon the compulsory separation of the two lovers. After this separation, love turns into "an expression of the death-wish which is annihilating Europe through war" (Ower, 1970: 257). This annihilation comes with the bombs, and the bombing sequences in the day and at night are referred to as a dark angel filled with enmity towards the lovers:

Dark angel who are clear and straight
As cannon shining in the air
Your blackness doth invade my mind
And thunderous as the armoured wind
That rained on Europe is your hair. (1957: 276)

The aeroplanes are associated with the dark angel, which is explicitly the angel of the death; and nature is itself an evil entity since the bombs drop as if a natural event of a wind, a blazing star from the sky, or a "rainbow shining in the night" (1957: 276). These lines also venally uncover the trans-corporeal² link among human and nonhuman bodies and matter through hinting at the material circulation of the human body mixing into the air. This material concurrence of human and nonhuman also reveals itself with the poem's reference to the Deluge in that instead of water, blood is flooding all over the land as a result of the aerial bombings: "From a universal Flood /Than Noah knew: but yours is blood" (1957: 276).

Sitwell not only represents the relationship between two lovers but also the theme of maternity embodied in her war poetry. For instance, "A Mother to her Dead Child," as Sitwell accepts, is "a frightful poem to write, really an agony; and I can't ever read it aloud. It makes me feel my eyes are bleeding" (qtd in Lewis, 1965: 19). The poem is an elegy written for the dead son after the war, and an expression of the longing of a desperate mother for her son. Although time

² For further research, look at Stacy Alaimo's *Bodily Natures* (2010).

passes and spring comes, the mother has lost her existential meaning and joy embodied in the ontological existence of her son. Apart from the longing of the mother, the poem also has essentialist undertones in the sense that it reinforces the notion of "Mother Nature" since the dead soldier is regarded as going to his new mother, and his mother's breast is equated with the fertility of nature:

Return from your new mother
The earth: she is too old for your little body,
Too old for the small tenderness, the kissings
In the soft tendrils of your hair. The earth is so old
She can only think darkness and sleep. (1957: 286)

Nature as "the scapegoat of the social problems" (Estok, 2009: 211) is where the mother directs her agony and hatred because of the loss of her child.

Unlike this private story, "The Song of the Cold" gives a more general picture, and emphasises that the ones who fought for possession have now become lost civilisations. Even though the bombers do the Arithmetic well in order to determine the coordinates of the place to drop the bomb, they only repeat the history. In the end, they only have the

counting of small deaths, the repetition
of nothing, endless positing and suppression of
Nothing . . . So they live
And die of inanition . . . (1957: 294)

The poem further defends the brotherhood of mankind, and draws attention to the fact that during war times people are killing the ones "who were once your brothers" (1957: 292). In this sense, the poem again touches upon the equality brought with death as John Ower rightly emphasises that "the harnessing of the basic energies of the universe in the service of war confers an enormous power, but it is one which destroys man and nature, victor and victim without discrimination" (1970: 261). The poem vindicates Ower's notes as such: "Now falls the Night on Lazarus and Dives - /Those who were once brothers, those who shared the pain/ Of birth, and lusts, and the daily lesser deaths" (1957: 294), within which it consciously uses the mythological and religious figure of Lazarus interchangeably.

One of her three poems for the atomic age, "The Shadow of Cain" is about the dark side of the war. Dedicated to the English scholar Sir Cecil Maurice Bowra (1898-1971), the poem blends Sitwell's scientific knowledge with the horrific realities of the war. The title itself is very suggestive because apart from the reference to Cain, the first murderer of his brother in the history of humankind, shadow is also a reference to blazing atomic bombs as the flashing lights may at times leave shadows behind. Similar to "The Song of the Cold," this poem is also loaded with coldness as a contrast to the heat of the atomic bombs. In addition to references to the extinct species and even fossils, such as megatherium and mylodon, Sitwell once more takes up the role of the prophetess of the doom by warning humankind that they are at the brink of extinction in the face of such destructive weapons. She explicitly demonstrates the ravager potential of the atomic bombs on both human and nonhuman beings: "In that Spring when there were no flowers like thunders in the air/ And now the Earth lies flat beneath the shade of an iron wing" (1986: 371). The poem also refers to war as a "leprosy of gold" by hinting at Paracelsus's studies on the quintessence of gold in curing leprosy. Apart from signifying corruption, the reference to leprosy is very functional to comprehend the atomic bombs:

According to the theory that developed the bomb, elements do each have something more "elemental" than their humanly tangible form. Uranium, like gold in Paracelsus's

writings, can be touched and apprehended by human beings, but through a kind of alchemy, its inner "being" can release great energy. However, this energy is used entirely for destruction, and it is motivated by greed, symbolized by the very gold that heals leprosy (and heals the composite Lazarus in Sitwell's poem). (Morrison, 2002: 625)

The poem ends with an attempt to provoke a collective consciousness towards a collective guilt of mass murders in the Second World War by claiming that the ones who suffered under the "rain" will be the fire in the Judgment Day.

3. ELIZABETH JENNINGS AND HER WAR POETRY

Another distinguished woman poet dealing with a similar theme of the destructiveness of war is Elizabeth Jennings (1926-2001), who is one of the Movement poets. She is one of the leading figures in the confessional poetry with "ingenious symbolism, shifts between individual and collective voices and the role of art in consoling as well as representing pain" (Dowson, 2011: 63). And she was also "associated with a downplaying of verbal excess and a sobered, even pessimistic, outlook often associated with the supposedly diminished horizons of post-1945 England" (O'Neill and Callaghan, 2011: 2). Moreover, she was "one of three other Movement poets who studied at Oxford, but the only one to have any contact with Amis, Larkin or Wain" (Morrison, 1980: 22). Although she did not directly write on war and its horrors unlike Sitwell, one can easily track the traces of the harsh realities in her poetry as well.

Jennings displays her disapproval of the use of atomic bombs as a war strategy. Following lines from "Two Deaths" point to the flash lights of the atomic bombs which change the night in a minute: "With bright images – the blazing dawn/ Over the European ravaged plain" (1986: 67). Though it seems to be like a firework festival, the blazing images – "the blazing Polish light" (1986: 67) as referred to in the poem – actually destroy all the continent and the inhabitants including young and innocent people. The poem also touches upon the manipulation of the heroic ideal still supported for enlisting soldiers by giving a sequence of a young boy – apparently a soldier – running after being shot and disregarding the promise given to him striving to die gloriously in order to gain a heroic name. The poem clearly shows that he is simply a boy dying without dignity for an empty cause. An interesting point about the poem is that it starts and ends with the female persona's confession that she has never seen anyone dying, which puts the gender question into the core. She even explains that all the scenes she is telling is from a film, that she is far away from the dangers of the war, and that she feels guilty and ashamed of sitting comfortably while the other people suffer at the hands of the bombers.

Jennings also points to ideological side of the wars. For example, "The Enemies" portrays the invasion of a city, but ironically this invasion takes place in a very gentle way as opposed to such former battles as the bloody invasion of Troy. Despite not knowing "what the men had come to take/ Or what strange tongue they spoke/ Or why they came so suddenly through the land" (1986: 22), the local people welcome them without questioning by fear of death. The poem further describes this absurd situation as such:

The women say that not one stranger told
A reason for his coming. The intrusion
Was not for devastation:
Peace is apparent still on hearth and field. (1986: 23)

Within these lines, the poem underlines the ideological and at times colonial side of the war. The local people are imposed to the discourses of the invading forces while they enjoy peace on the surface, whereby the hegemonic power changes hands in the city.

On similar grounds, "Ballad of War" underlines ideological oppression of people, and problematises that although one speaks at the "gate of language and the golden word" (1986: 199), this golden word does not make the lustre and pain disappear. Hence, reality is in a sharp contrast with the discourse which the dominant ideology tries to set up. The poem further puts the emphasis on the continuity of brutal wars throughout history because of the human nature:

Gate of the morning and the dawn's endeavour,
Gate of mind with fantasies and war,
Gate of sickness and unconquered fever,
Yet haven't we known all such gates before? (1986: 199)

The greedy nature of human beings urges them to search for more possession, as a result of which rivalry between the persons breaks out. Despite touching upon previous wars, the poem distinguishes the Second World War leaving its print in the history by changing the spatial and strategic fighting as a result of introducing jet aeroplanes, "alien" to the civilians. The poem further reflects the surprise and shock of the civilians when they see the aeroplanes for the first time:

Who are the watchers? Why won't you reply?
Is the world sick? You turn away in dread.
What are those shadows widening the sky?
Where are the stars and is the new moon dead? (1986: 199)

The shadows in the sky refer to the bombs dropped out of the aeroplanes, and the aeroplanes are so many that they cover all of the sky by hindering the sight of the stars and the moon.

CONCLUSION

In the nuclear and atomic age where science was manipulated at the hands of war strategies, and where the nuclear weapons were directed towards the civilians in addition to the soldiers, the poems inevitably bear reflections of and references to the atomic bombs. For instance, Edith Sitwell touches upon the horrific face of the war in her poems while at the same time playing with the techniques through assonances and rhythms. One of the Movement poets, Elizabeth Jennings similarly reflects the atomic reality of the war while questioning her place in society as a woman – still in-between. She cannot decide whether she should fight for herself or wait to be protected in the traditional sense. Hence, especially in "Two Deaths" she makes her confession that she had never seen anyone dying, and moreover she is far from the dangers of the atomic bomb. Both poets reflect social ills and worries embodied in the threat felt by the civilians, and that the pieces of that fear and threat can be found in the poems of the time.

REFERENCES

- Braybrooke, N. (1951). The Poetry of Edith Sitwell, *Journal of the English Association*, 8 (47): 236-40.
- Dowson, J. (1999). 'Older Sisters Are Very Sobering Things': Contemporary Women Poets and the Female Affiliation Complex, *Feminist Review* 62: 6-20.
- Dowson, J. (2011). Towards a new confessionalism: Elizabeth Jennings and Sylvia Plath, (Ed. J. Dowson), *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century British and Irish Women's Poetry*, 62-81. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Estok, S. (2009). Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia, *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 16 (2), 203-25.
- Gregson, I. (2011). Post/Modernist rhythms and voices: Edith Sitwell and Stevie Smith to Jo Shapcott and Selima Hill, (Ed. J. Dowson), *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century British and Irish Women's Poetry*, 9-23. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Blazing Atomic Bombs in the Poetry of Edith Sitwell and Elizabeth Jennings

- Jennings, E. (1986). *Collected Poems*. Manchester: Carcanet.
- Lewis, J. (1965). Edith Sitwell Letters, *The British Museum Quarterly*, 30 (1/2), 17-22.
- Morrison, B. (1980). *The Movement: English Poetry and Fiction of the 1950s*. New York: Methuen.
- Morrison, M. S. (2002). Edith Sitwell's Atomic Bomb Poems: Alchemy and Scientific Reintegration, *Modernism/modernity*, 9 (4), 605-33.
- O'Neill, M. and Callaghan, M. (2011). Introduction, (Eds. M. O'Neill and M. Callaghan), *Twentieth-Century British and Irish Poetry: Hardy to Mahon*, 1-10. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Ower, J. (1970). Edith Sitwell: Metaphysical Medium and Metaphysical Message, *Twentieth Century Literature*, 16 (4), 253-67.
- Pearson, J. (1978). *Façades: Edith, Osbert, and Sacheverell Sitwell*. London: Macmillan.
- Rawlinson, M. (2000). *British Writing of the Second World War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rawlinson, M. (2007). Wilfred Owen, (Ed. T. Kendall), *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, 114-33. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Robinson, P. (2007). 'Down in the terraces between the targets': Civilians, (Ed. T. Kendall), *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, 504-24. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sitwell, E. (1957). *Collected Poems*. London: Macmillan.
- Sitwell, E. (1957). Some Notes on my own Poetry, *Collected Poems*. London: Macmillan.
- Winterson, J. (1997). *Gut Symmetries*. London: Granta Books.
- Young, A. (1981). *Dada and After: Extremist Modernism and English Literature*. Manchester: Manchester University Press