

Light Against the Darkness: Poetry and Social Movements

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Budd L. Hall

We have spoken

So we stand
In rooms and open spaces around the world
As poets speaking words against the darkness
As listeners hearing words against the madness
Taping syllables across the bombsights of
Warcraft waiting orders to depart
Filling muzzles of guns with sounds like sand and silt
Creating images of young children
Each with a small yellow flower
To stand in front of each soldier, with a smile

We are writing lines which technically describe the
Pulling of the plugs in the bottom of the seas where
Aircraft carriers float...at least for now
Broadsheets of hope pasting themselves across the windows
of the Whitehouse
Pamphlets with the words to the songs of peace
Pouring out of each computer printer in the world at the
same time
Melodic lines, hooks and beats joining words
Musicians flooding our radios with streaming sounds of
something new
Brushstrokes and colours and lines of paint and texture
combine with text as
Newspapers and magazines reinvent themselves

And with our words
And with our sounds
And with our utterances
And with our dreams
And with our shouts of anger
And with our songs of a new day
We confirm that from this point on
All is changed
War will be no more
We have spoken

I wrote this poem for a poetry for peace reading night in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada in February of 2003 at the time when tens of millions of people throughout the world poured into the streets of their communities in protest against the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Our evening of poetry in our small community in Canada was part of a simultaneous explosion of words that were let loose on web sites, in books, on the radio and television, in blogs and newsletters. Much attention had been given to an incident in Washington D.C.. Laura Bush, the wife of the U.S. President, had issued invitations to poets to come to a conference at the White House. Gary Hamill, one of the invitees in turn requested that poets send him poems to express their opposition to the war in Iraq. He was completely overwhelmed when more than 11,000 poets responded to his website, poetsagainsthewar.org. The Whitehouse suddenly cancelled the poetry conference once news of the protest reached them, but more and more poetry web sites blossomed as if by magic around the world. Subsequently, a portion of the Gary Hamill submissions were published in a collection called, Poets Against the War. I would like to share one of the poems from this collection, a poem by Fawzia Afzal-Khan, a well-known American poet of Pakistani heritage.

Billy Bush Sam-ton

Osama
Sam A
Uncle Sam

Will you
Defend me
Against the SOB
Who fondled my breasts
And squeezed my ass

He said Lie
Through your tongue
Baby its okay
You're defending the
Integrity of your
Man
-ly Nation hood
Not
Hoodwinking but
Upholding the
Truth (of)
Justice
Law
Democracy

That's why
It's okay
To nukefry
Those damn boys in
Af-Ghan-is-tan
And Sudan
I-raq
And I-ran

Barbarian chauvinists
Not like us oh no
Monika

Don't be disappointed
I've vindicated your
Honor
See, by striking
Those afroasian breasts

So very different from
Your soft white ones

I am a
Real man now
Are you proud
Of Me

Prior to the 2003 protests, in the year 2000, Susan McMaster, an Ottawa-based poet, led with the backing of the League of Canadian Poets created an audacious project linking poetry and peace. The question raised by Susan McMaster and the other poets was, "Can peace be waged through poetry?" The idea was simple. Invite poets to write poems for peace and then take them to the Parliament and read them to each and every one the Members of Parliament. The poems were lovingly written and then individually wrapped in hand coloured and individually designed poemwraps, wrappings to enclose the poems so that the poems would not get lost on the desk of a busy MP. Some MPs received the poems with interest. Some were unable to spend the time to listen. Did the project make any difference? It certainly made an impact on the lives of the poets in that they had never thought of an organized poetry campaign of this sort. And while, we will never know all of the reasons, it is worth noting that three years later, when George Bush called on Canada to become a member of

the Coalition of the Willing in the attack on Iraq, Canada declined the opportunity.

I would like to share with you a poem from this collection, published as Waging Peace: Poetry and Political Action edited by Susan McMaster. This is written by Margaret Atwood, Canada's best-known author and poet

The Loneliness of the Military Historian

Confess: it's my profession
That alarms you.
This is why few people ask me to dinner,
Though Lord knows I don't go out of my way to be scary.
I wear dresses of sensible cut
And unalarming shades of beige,
I smell of lavender and go the hairdresser's;
No prophetess mane of mine,
Complete with snakes, will frighten the youngsters.
If I roll my eyes and mutter,
If I clutch at my heart and scream in horror
Like a third-rate actress chewing up a mad scene,
I do it in private and nobody see
But the bathroom mirror.

In general I might agree with you:
Women should not contemplate war,
Should not weigh tactics impartially,
Or evade the word enemy,
Or view both sides and denounce nothing.
Women should march for peace,
Or hand out white feathers to arouse bravery,
Spit themselves on bayonets
To protect their babies,
Whose skulls will be split anyway,
Or, having been raped repeatedly,
Hang themselves with their own hair.

These are the functions that inspire general comfort.
That, and the knitting of socks for the troops
And a sort of moral cheerleading.
Also: mourning the dead.
Sons, lovers, and so forth.
All the killed children.

Instead of this, I tell
What I hope will pass as truth.
A blunt thing, not lovely.
The truth is seldom welcome,
Especially at dinner,
Though I am good at what I do.
My trade is courage and atrocities.
I look at them and do not condemn.
I write things down the way they happened,
As near as can be remembered.
I don't ask why, because it is mostly the same.
Wars happen because the ones who start them
Think they can win.

In my dreams there is glamour.
The Vikings leave their fields
Each year for a few months of killing and plunder,
Much as the boys go hunting.
In real life they were farmers.
They come back loaded with splendour.
The Arabs ride against the Crusaders
With scimitars that could sever
Silk in the air.
A swift cut to the horse's neck
And a hunk of armour crashes down
Like a tower. Fire against metal.
A poet might say: romance against banality.
When I awake, I know better

Despite the propoganda, there are no monsters,
Or none that can be finally buried.

Finish one off, and circumstances
And the radio create another.
Believe me: whole armies have prayed fervently
To God all night and meant it,
And been slaughtered anyway.

Brutality wins frequently,
And large outcomes have turned on the invention
Of a mechanical devise, viz radar.
True, valour sometimes counts for something,
As at Thermopylae. Sometimes being right –
Though ultimate virtue, by agreed tradition,
Is decided by the winner.
Sometimes men throw themselves on grenades
And burst lie paper bags of guts
To save their comrades.
I can admire that.
But rats and cholera have won many wars.
Those, and potatoes,
Or the absence of them.
It's no use pinning all those medals
Across the chests of the dead.
Impressive, but I know too much.
Grand exploits merely depress me.

In the interests of research
I have walked on many battlefields
That once were liquid with pulped
Shells and splayed bone.
All of them have been green again
By the time I got there.
Each has inspired a few good quotes in its day.
Sad marble angels brood like hens
Over the grassy nests where nothing hatches.
(The angels could just as well be described as vulgar
or pitiless, depending on the camera angle.)
The word glory figures a lot on gateways.
Of course I pick a flower or two

From each, a press it in the hotel Bible
For a souvenir.
I'm just as human as you.

But it's no use asking me for a final statement.
As I say, I deal in tactics.
Also statistics:
For every year of peace there have been four hundred
Years of war

A timeless tradition

Perhaps second only to themes of love, poetry has a rich and nearly timeless connection to social movements, to the protection of the weak, to the causes of hope, and as a mantra against hopelessness. Poets such as Dante, Milton, the Italian political theorist, Antonio Gramsci, Bertold Brecht, Kenneth Rexworth, Nobel Laureate Pablo Neruda of Chile, W.B. Yeats of Ireland, Anna Akhmanova of Russia, Adrienne Rich of the USA, William Blake of England, Saadi Youssef of Iraq and thousands of the better and lesser known have built bridges between poetics and politics; between image and imagination, and between voice and voicelessness. Even the legendary Bengali Nobel poet Rabindranath Tagore occasionally lent his poetic voice to the politics of his day, and equally important has been quoted by the many involved in social movements struggles.

One of the greatest of the world's poetic traditions is that of the Urdu Ghazals of India and Pakistan. Through contemporary musicians of the diaspora such as Karen Ahluwalia of Canada who sings in classical traditions, but with 21st century themes and lyrics, the musical form of this vast sea of poetry is washing the shores of many countries. The Urdu poetry recitals, a musha'irah, we know continue to attract large audiences. And although I am most poorly

informed of the contemporary Urdu, Hindi and English poets of the sub-continent, I have noticed the very extensive poetry of solidarity with the Palestinian cause written in Urdu, reputedly one of the most extensive in any language. I have also read about the rise of Urdu political poetry during the Khilafat Movement in the early 20th century when Indian Muslims were being mobilized to come together at least in part to work with the early non-cooperation movements of Ghandi-ji.

The love sonnets of Ghalib, once largely limited to South Asian students and scholars are now studied in universities in many parts of the world. Ghalib could certainly not be described as a social movement poet. He was so very comfortable in the world of the Mughal court poets in 19th Century Delhi. He was in attendance daily at the Red Fort and at the Musha'ira of his times. Even the dramatic and historical turning point in Indian history, the Delhi revolt of 1857, where the British army leveled virtually every house in Delhi and through the last of the Mughal Emperors out of the Red Fort, left him with mixed feelings. While he decried the loss of his feudal world, he could not countenance the bad manners of the sepoy and the unwashed masses that went about their months of armed resistance to the British Imperium in such an undisciplined manner. But even the apolitical and secular Ghalib could not avoid the occasional political observation. From a poem he did in 1858,

Each soldier of England is now a potentate.
Men are mortally scared to go out in the bazaar,
The Chowk is the execution ground, the house of dungeons.
Each speck of Delhi dust
Is thirsty for the Muslim blood...
Ev'n if you meet your woeful friends-
Oft bitterly,
Oft a-weeping
They describe their sorry lives and bruised hearts

Among contemporary Indian poets, I have recently come across the work of Mallika Sengupta, a Bengali writer of unapologetically political poetry. She is Poetry editor of Sananda, the Bengali women's fortnightly and winner of many literary awards. As she says, "Ideology ruins poetry, but not always. Rather every poet has to face this challenge at some period in her life...I think a good poet can always insert ideology into poetry without destroying aesthetic conditions"

From her long poem Kathamnabi, comes this translated excerpt:

I am "her" voice, recounting her tales.
From Vedic age to the 21st century.
The fire that has remained stifled in the ashes of
History, smothered by time and age,
I am that woman – I speak of her.
I read tears, I write fire,
I live in infamy and consume its ashes
I endure violence, and still breathe fire.
I live as long as this fire burns within me.

Again from the Bengali language are the poets of Bangladesh associated with the birth of Bangladesh and the social movement poetry traditions of the sub-continent. Two such poets are Sanaul Huq and the great Shamsur Rahman. From a piece which Rahman did explicitly linking poetry and politics comes this excerpt:

Liberty, you are
Tagore's ever-youthful poetry, his indestructible songs
Liberty, you are
Kazi Nazrul Islam, that noble soul
With his shock of wavy hair,

Always acquiver with the ecstasy of creation,
Liberty, you are
The red colour of mehdi
On the tender palm of my sister

...

Liberty, you are
The exercise books where I write my poems
Just as I choose

The Mysteries of Poetry

By now, Like me, some of you may be asking yourselves, how is it that the written form that deliberately ignores grammar and syntax, is often rather difficult to figure out, is almost universally disliked by secondary school students and is most often dropped from our lives as adults can be so sought after by those who struggle for new spaces in their families, communities, nations or the world?

Victor Hugo in his Preface to Les Miserables notes that, "So long as there shall exist, by virtue of law and custom, decrees of damnation pronounced by society, artificially creating hells amid the civilization of earth...so long as social asphyxia is possible in any part of the world; -- in other words, and with a still wider significance, so long as ignorance and poverty exist on earth, [poetry] of this nature cannot fail to be of use."

Pablo Neruda tells us that, "Poetry is an act of peace. Peace goes into the making of a poet as flour goes into the making of bread"

The Father of Cuban Nationalism, Jose Marti, feels that, "A grain of poetry suffices to season a century"

Marge Piercy, the US social movement poet, in her book, The Low Road,

explains that, "In poetry, the exchange is one of energy. Human energy is transferred, and from the poem it reaches the reader. Human energy, which is consciousness, is the capacity to produce change in existing conditions".

Muriel Rukeyser, believes that poetry lives in the very heart of democracy. She says that, "The sources of poetry are in the spirit seeking completeness."

But the fullest explanation of how and why poetry works and why it is such a natural ally to social movements and political work comes from Adrienne Rich a feminist and activist poet from the U.S. "The giving and taking of a poem", she writes, "is, then, a triadic relation. It can never be reduced to a pair: we are always confronted by the poet, the poem and the audience. The reading of a poem, a poetry reading, is not a spectacle, nor can it be passively received. It's an exchange of electrical currents through language...that daily, mundane, abused and ill-prized medium, that instrument of deception and revelation, that material thing, that knife, rag, boat, spoon
reed become pipe
tree trunk become drum
mud become clay flute
conch shell become summons to freedom
old trousers and petticoats become iconography in appliqué
rubber bands stretched around a box become lyre.

And all this has to travel from the nervous system of the poet, preverbal, to the nervous system of the one who listens, who reads, the active participant without whom the poem is never finished."

Keep this in mind when thinking of the political rallies that you have been to where you heard a poem. Think about the evenings of public poetry in India or Europe or Canada or Australia. Think about the capacity of poetry to tap into both the conceptual and affective, the head and the heart

simultaneously, and you will enter into the mystery and the joy of poetry yourself.

In closing I would like to share two more of my own pieces with you.

The first, an early piece, was written in 1989, at the time of a planning meeting for the United Nations International Year of Literacy. Among those in the car, which is the setting for this poem, was Lalita Ramdas, Distinguished Board Member of PRIA and internationally known peace educator from Maharashtra.

Mwizi

Mwizi, thief, the cry goes out
Shattering the tranquility of our
International delegation waiting
At the Mombassa Ferry

Hundreds, adrenalin-pumping
Young men
Streak past our
Car windows
As we wait,
Along with buses filled with
Sun-seeking European tourists and
Goods lorries, small vans
Jammed with coastal people
Going to town

“They will kill him” says the driver.
Our calm and reasoned
Semi-philosophical talk about
Illiteracy in the world

Dramatically contextualized

By clumps of suddenly
Passionate youths in
Pursuit of one of them who has
Fallen prey to need,
To empty-stomach-no-job
No-clothes-no-dreams
Need.

“God, how we have failed the youth”

“You see how little there is for young people to do?”

“A violent, destructive environment
creates these kinds of responses”

“Remember for a person who
Has only one shirt, the theft of that shirt means he can't
Leave home that day”

We in our nice car
We, on our way to tell the press about how
We will help to make a better world
We, speaking to cover up
Our sense of
Horror
Fear
Embarrassment
Powerlessness
Lack of response

The flow of the crowd has changed
The tide of men is shifting back
A young man whose already
Shabby clothes are ripped and
Torn, is
Brought back past our car by
Jeering on-lookers
His face wet with

Blood and tears
He is still alive for now

But each of us has died
A little
Sharing of a world we
Do not like and
Know not how to change

My final piece is one of my most recent ones. K'Naan is a young Canadian rapper born in Somalia. He has recently released a new CD of wonderful poems set to hip hop beats. His poetry speaks of the continuing wars in Somalia and by metaphorical extension all wars in Africa and elsewhere where the victims are always the poorest and the youngest. His music and his poetry inspire me and have brought forth this piece as a tribute to this young and extraordinary voice.

For K'Naan

Mogadishu was his home
Rocket launchers were his poems
Father's words were in his blood
Tears on leaving were a flood

Blown from childhood
To a ghetto neighbourhood
From what he knew as food
To something not so good

Spirits of Africa
In the streets of Toronto
African words make no sense,
But they ought to

School's not for me then
I need my freedom

Who wants to know me?
African refugee me?
Challenge the system
Stand up and listen

We are here
We are here an
We ain't goin' no where
Don't be square
Our hair
Our care
Your stare
Despair

Leaders of G-8
Don't you be too late
Participate
Create
Disseminate
Gyrate
Orate
Sensate

The world is ours now
Ancestor's blood says how
No turnin' back now
Tomorrow is now
No refugee row
Give me the whole cow!
Or at the very least
Stand aside
My pride
Is movin' wide
Welcome to my tribe