

Rhetoric in Women's War Poetry

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Abstract:

Rhetoric of modern literature has taken immense turns since World War I, including the blurred space between literary genres and elimination of the distinctive elements of each genre as an enclosed literary entity. This paper deals with modern movements of poetry concurrent to the break of World War I, such as Imagism, an Anglo-American movement and Acmeism, a Russian movement. Through a scrupulous study of Hilda Doolittle's and Anna Akhmatova's poetry, rhetoric of war poetry is demonstrated comprising narratives, cinematic devices and myths interwoven with verses.

Keywords: War poetry, Hilda Doolittle, Anna Akhmatova, Imagism, Acmeism

Most war poets were soldiers experiencing war at the front in World War I; however, things entirely changed in World War II due to severe genocide. Either severely touched or untouched by war, women poets expressed the loss of their men in the battlefield. Severely touched by warfare circumstances and catastrophes, Hilda Doolittle (H. D.) and Anna Akhmatova express their feelings through literature. Anna Akhmatova, (1889-1966), who is considered the Queen of Russian poetry, was the most acclaimed Acmeist poet of all time. Akhmatova suffered from persecution during Stalin reign. However, what was immensely heartbreaking to her was that her son who was taken to jail several times. Known for her association with the Imagist movement, H. D. has contributed in enriching modern English poetry along with Ezra Pound and Richard Aldington. H.D., (1886 – 1961), is an American poet and novelist, who was much influenced by Greek mythology and Freudian psychoanalytic theories. H. D. lived most of her life in London, enabling her to witness the tumultuous catastrophes of air-raids on London. Akhmatova and H. D. wrote about warfare, as "the poetry of the Second World War distinguishes itself from that of the First in part through its overwhelmingly civilian character. As a result, poets dealt not so much with the immediate experience of warfare... but with the distance and invisibility of its violence" (Johnston 24 – 5). H. D.'s *Trilogy* consists of three parts: *The Walls Do not Fall* (1944), *Tribute to the Angels* (1945) and *The Flowering of the Rod* (1946). Akhmatova wrote her epic *Requiem*, her tragic masterpiece, between 1935 and 1940, *The Way of All Earth* in 1940 and started her poem about Leningrad Siege, named *Poem Without a Hero* in 1941 and finished it twenty years later. Despite belonging to two different movements, these two poets were touchstones of modern poetry as they represented clear manifestation of modernism and its tendencies.

Apocalyptic description is sophisticatedly elaborated to illustrate the state of inner and external destruction. In the "Dedication" of her *Requiem*, Akhmatova employs cinematic devices to facilitate the visualization of the war scene. These devices are demonstrated in the use of disruptive-associative montage, in which "the emergence of new imagery at the end of a sequence invites the viewer to establish ideational connection between two topics, one fully developed, another just emerging" (Petrić 95). She uses this technique to compare her forlorn psychological state with the strict rules of prisons. The persona says: "A grief so great would lay a mountain low, / Would make the rush of mighty rivers cease, / But has no power to move the prison bolts" (Akhmatova 57, *Poems*. Ll. 1-3). The hyperbolic metaphor of "grief", described in magnitude, emerges to reveal its hopelessness in front of prison bolts. The main topic is the prison and convicts while the emergence of the new imagery concerning "grief" results in

creating a cinematic parallel between the two shots. Moreover, in the "Epilogue", the persona maintains a close-up camera eye in her focusing on certain facial details, she says: "I've learned how faces fall down to bone, / How terror can escape the lowered eyes... / Of cuneiform-like marks upon the cheeks" (61. Ll. 1-4). Such zooming in on facial details, defeated by grief and fear, enables the reader to picture the whole scene as if he/she is watching a film.

Likewise, H. D. creates a similar technique in her *The Walls Do not Fall*, but in a different way. H. D. employs disruptive-associative montage, affluent with mythical references. Her poems oscillate between two different worlds: reality and myths; moreover, she creates a parallel field for the two of them. To illustrate the apocalyptic period, she starts building a comparison between the destruction of London during the war and the destruction of Amon Temple in Karnak Village of Egypt. In part (1), the persona says: "and rails gone (for guns) / from your (and my) old town square: ... still the Luxor bee, chick and hare / pursue unalterable purpose" (Doolittle 3. Ll.2-4). This comparison brings out the significance of symbols used in these verses: Luxor bee, chick and hare. "The bee in Egyptian mythology came from the tears of Ra, an ancient Egyptian god of the sun. The bee, chick, and hare are all symbols of fertility and regeneration" (Doolittle 174). Those symbols entail longing for hope and resurrection, assured in the last part of the *Trilogy*, after the devastating obliteration.

Prosody in H. D.'s and Akhmatova's poetry is determined by verification of line length, punctuation, stanza form in order to indicate speed of action. In her *Requiem*, Akhmatova breaks her long poem into fragmental parts. In the part named "The Sentence", the poet uses short lines. The persona says: "Today I have so much I must do: / Must smash my memories to bits, / Must turn my heart to stone all through, / And must relearn how one should live" (Akhmatova 72, Poem. Ll. 5-9). Four-lined stanzas of short verses indicate psychological trauma and shock after hearing the sentence imposed on one of the mothers' son. Nevertheless, in the eighth part, named "Death", the persona apostrophizes death to welcome its approach. The persona says: "You're going to come, no matter what—why won't now do? / I want you now—I can't bear any more. / You're simple and yet magical—to welcome you / My lights are out, you'll find an open door" (70. Ll.1-4). Hyphens signify long pauses; moreover, long lines illustrate the keening tone, in order to correspond with self-lamentation in such desperate conditions.

H. D. employs more fragmented lines and abrupt line breaks. H. D. sometimes uses stanzas of two lines which themselves break the sentence and continue it in the next stanza, known as enjambment. In part (20) of *The Walls Do not Fall*, The persona says:

Now it appears very clear
that the Holy Ghost,
childhood's mysterious enigma,
is the Dream;
that way of inspiration
is always open,
and open to everyone (Doolittle 29. Ll. 1-7).

Scattered sentences signify the shattered psyche after experiencing an irritating dream. The Holy Ghost travels through time: past, present and future. This device foreshadows the "time continuum" which is focused on in the two poets' works, since time is relative and the past keeps lurking every now and then.

In time of war, chaos prevails and eventually clear-cut distinctions are blurred. As modern poets, H. D. and Anna Akhmatova employ various literary genres within the poetic texture, but in various manners. Akhmatova, in her *Requiem*, introduces a mosaic texture, in which she combines different genres to lyrical poems. Though "*Requiem* manifests a certain organizational coherence, a unifying theme, and appears to possess a conventionally unified persona" (Harrington 88), it seems more challenging to the reader than it may seem. As the main poem is

centered in the core of the whole text, it is framed by other paratexts; such as: "Instead of a Foreword", "Dedication", "Prologue" and "Epilogue". Paratexts include any parallel text which presents the text and "any other parts of the frame which contain the text and communicate information about it to the reader" (89). The first paratext, named "Instead of a Foreword", is written in plain prose to describe the scene when Akhmatova and other Russian mothers were waiting for news about their sons in Leningrad jail. This scene was an inspiring incident, after which Akhmatova wrote her *Requiem*, as one of the mothers asked her: "Can you describe it?" In this form, Akhmatova transcends her personal experience, happening in the real world, to a broader perspective in the fictional world.

H. D. does not blur boundaries between literary genres as clear as Akhmatova does. On the contrary, she sticks to the genre she works on, but borrows some elements from other genres and weaves them within the poetic texture. Narrative aspects in H. D.'s *Trilogy* emerge from her venture in destroying grand narratives of myths. The poet displaces Greek, Egyptian and Judo-Christian myths; she takes them out of context, and employs them to serve the theme of war. The poet intertwines multiple myths from diverse cultures without privileging one over the other. Moreover, she weaves them like threads and keeps sophisticating them throughout the three poems. Isis, for instance, is a frequent mythical figure mentioned in *Trilogy*. Isis, in *The Walls Do not Fall*, is introduced as "the great enchantress who drove harnessed scorpions before her" (47). Isis's kindness is embodied in being called "the Healer". In the last part of *Trilogy*, named *The Flowering of the Rod* which revolves around the idea of resurrection, Isis's name is related to the goddess-mother symbol whether this of Astarte, Cyprus or Virgin Mary.

Virgin Mary is a central figure in H. D.'s and Akhmatova's war poetry, as each one of them delves beyond the implications of Mary's figure, as Christ's mother. Akhmatova, in her *Requiem*, employs Mary's figure, as a representative of all the anguished mothers whose sons were imprisoned in Gulag, the Soviet prison. In part X, named "Crucifixion", the persona says on the tongue of the sons, identified with Jesus: "Do not cry for Me, Mother, seeing me in the grave" (Akhmatova 19, *Poem*. Ll. 1). This sort of paradox, asking Mary not to weep in a death situation, reveals mothers' courage and guts in facing their sons' death. However, Russian mothers' case was much worse than Mary's, for Jesus had a specific grave she could visit every now and then.

Different from Akhmatova's use of Mary's figure, H. D. verifies her use in a way that resembles the process of alchemy, but alchemy of words. Alchemy was regarded by ancient Hellenistic philosophers as the process of turning sand into gold, so H. D. transforms the meaning of a single word by playing with letters order or the phonemes themselves. On different occasions, "she slowly revolves names and words ... in manner of rumination or prayer to find what they conceal" (Johnston 22 – 3). In part (8) of *The Walls Do not Fall*, the persona says:

Now polish the crucible
and set the jet of flame
under, till marah-mar
are melted, fuse and join
and change and alter,
mer, mere, mère, mater, Maia, Mary,
Star of the Sea,
Mother. (Doolittle 72. Ll. 7-14)

In this regard, H. D. plays with phonemes; she adds and omits phonemes in order to reach the core of the mother's figure. The emphasis on a mother figure appears in the relationship of magnitude between "Mer", sea in French, and "mere", the small lake. Then, the persona names various mothers from different cultures bearing similar names; "mere" is mother in French, "mater" is mother in Latin, Maia is Hermes' mother by Zeus in Greek mythology. "Mary" is Christ's mother, Mary Magdalene, or Mary of Bethany, sister of Martha and Lazarus.

As a result to the free play of the word "Mary", Mary's figure "takes a central place as a representative of a maternal, amniotic, and oceanic state, in which identity becomes fluid, here subject to the flux of phonemes"(Johnston 44). Various "Marys" or mothers are celebrated to embody the eternal bitterness of a sad mother throughout the ages. In part (16) of *The Flowering of the Rod*, the persona says: "I am Mary--O, there are Marys a-plenty, / (though I am Mara, bitter) I shall be Mary-myrrh; ... I am Mary, I will weep bitterly, bitterly... bitterly. (Doolittle 136. Ll. 9–10, 22-3). Mothers had to weep in bitterness or "myrrh" in Hebrew. Thus, both Akhmatova and H. D. create an innovative female icon through the goddess-mother figure regardless its cultural origin.

Mythical and Hellenistic themes are equally employed in the two movements, Imagism and Acmeism; "one finds numerous examples of poems whose form and imagery were inspired by the classics and by Oriental masters" (Rusinko 44). Both H. D. and Akhmatova embroider their poetry with such symbols in order to reinvent new messages and meanings out of classic myths. In Akhmatova's *The Way of All the Earth*, the persona presents an image of the frightening laughing Medusa from Greek mythology to embody devastation of "old Europe" in the twentieth century. "In Akhmatova's poem the war was yet another manifestation of the real twentieth century, a dark time of wars and revolution" (Hodgson 208). Among trenches, "smoke-shrouded cities", fire and death, Medusa appears in the scene. In part (2), the persona says:

A medusa lies dead,
Over it I stand lost;
The Muse met me here once,
I pledged her my troth.
"You?"—she didn't believe me,
She laughed long and loud (144, *Words*. Ll. 13-18)

Despite her past beauty, just like Europe before war, Medusa turns now to be a monster. Nevertheless, her spooky laughter and warning voice after her resurrection anticipate the ability of rebirth after death. Taking her personal life in consideration, Akhmatova was silenced and deprived of writing poetry during Stalin's reign. However, she resumed writing after the 1940s, which was her new rebirth. In the light of the poem, "she describes all this in apocalyptic terms, suggesting historical catastrophe (and again implying that there had been a period during which she wrote no poetry at all" (Harrington 21). The persona says: "But then a cunning voice / Warned me away: / "You'll return many times, / This won't be the last" (145, *Words*. Ll. 23-26). In another sense, Medusa from a feminist perspective brings to mind feminine power and ability to fight regardless ugliness and devastation, which is a common theme often repeated in Akhmatova's poetry.

H.D. employs Hellenistic themes in Greek mythology to the utmost employment which brings out a similar version of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. In this way, H.D. tends to put two distinctive periods of time against each other, ancient age and modern age. In *The Walls do not Fall*, the persona calls for the ancient gods of knowledge, Thoth and Hermes, in order to witness the magnitude of devastation during the Second World War. In part (9), he says:

Thoth, Hermes, the stylus,
the palette, the pen, the quill endure,
though our books are a floor
of smouldering ash under our feet;
though the burning of the books remains
the most perverse gesture
and the meanest
of man's mean nature (Doolittle 16. Ll. 1 – 8)

The figure of Hermes is also related to the inner knowledge, for he is maintained to be the "the god of holistic medicine, the guide of souls, of journeys and cunning wisdom" (McNeely 85).

Hermes acts like a mediator through whom an unconscious refugee is sought, especially in a time when every sense of rationality is destroyed as long as the worst crime ever is committed, books burning by the Nazis.

Making gods of pens, letters and palettes, in the time of war in the modern age, evokes the famous proverb, "the pen is mightier than the sword". In part (10), the persona says: "O Sword, / you are the younger brother, the latter-born, / your Triumph, however exultant, / must one day be over" (Doolittle 17. Ll. 11–14). In this apostrophe, the sword is addressed to face the truth of its short life span, for its triumph will soon be over. Thus, later in part (11), the persona asserts: "without idea and the Word's mediation, / You [the sword] would have remained/ unmanifest"(18. Ll. 3-4). H. D. appears like a prophet poet who has great ambitions for poetry as a universal remedy and broadening force. The power of the "word" is asserted over the power of the sword. This very idea corresponds with Anna Akhmatova's *Poem without a Hero* about the assertion on the power of art and poetry in particular against shabby regimes and block-headed governments.

All in all, H. D. and Anna Akhmatova, though belonging to two different nations, through their movements, Imagism and Acmeism respectively, share many similarities and differences. Clarity, simplicity and economy of words are common features in the poetry of the two movements. Cinematic and narrative devices are broadly manifested in H. D.'s and Akhmatova's poetry. New invention of myths and Christian figures and intertwining them with poetic texture are lucid examples of modernism that both poets belong to. Finally, as it appears to be, war, even if letting everyone down, could evoke inspiration and creativity within poets to present their unique masterpieces.

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