

# Impact of War on the Soldiers' Psyche in Ernest Hemingway's

## *A Farewell to Arms*

Mahavir Singh

Assistant Professor Department of English Dyal Singh College, Karnal, Haryana  
mahavir1964singh@gmail.com

### **Abstract**

*A Farewell to Arms is an amply applauded world-class autobiographical war-novel that delineates an eerie atmosphere of the war-theatre during the First World War and the prowess of the enthusiastic soldiers followed by their ensuing agony of participating in it. The sense of knightly-valor and war-heroism attracted Hemingway-like numerous young men into the actual battle-field but the ultimate realities left them shell-shocked and frustrated. The novel opens with the callous, dreary, dismal and uncanny before-war tranquility intensified by the incessant rain and fatal maladies. The realistic portrayal of the deployment of troops in the trenches and evacuation of the wounded soldiers is reminiscent of Hemingway's own involvement in war that causes in him a war-hallucination and insomnia. In the beginning Henry, the protagonist, takes war only as a friendly-match without being satiated with the subsidiary duties of an auxiliary-soldier and wants to take a first-hand taste at the front but his wound turns him into a grave and committed soldier. He is a passionate brave*

*fighter but summarily execution of the Italian officers by their own battle-police during Caporetto retreat ceases his obligation to the Italian army. The heart-rending death of Passini and irresponsible attitude of the battle police kill sentimental heroism in Henry-like volunteers. As a military reformist, Hemingway finds that the soldiers fight valorously but the discrimination among ranks, harassment in the name of discipline and fear of forfeiting their ancestral property cause in them abhorrence for their top brass leadership. This research paper is a modest attempt to tell the responsible dignitaries to treat the soldiers as the normal human beings who need genuine equipment and national affection in war. Though, they are expected and accustomed to do the difficult things yet they are not supermen to do the impossible. The military top brass is also suggested not to harass the soldiers unnecessarily as they are the battle robots to save us from the external aggression. The leadership should provide them proper facilities in service and rehabilitation after retirement so that they may not repent for defending the nation whole-*



heartedly.

To demonstrate the manly prowess, courage and heroism, there was no better place than the battle ground in the olden times when the soldier used to fight eyeball to eyeball. During the First World War, which was eloquently orated by David Lloyd George, the British Prime Minister, as “a great fight for human liberty”(18), the concept of nationalism emerged that further glorified the war and fighting for one’s country became something honourable and sacred duty. The patriots who displayed extraordinary courage in wars were elevated to the status of national heroes. That’s why, in his *Public Papers*, the US President Woodrow Wilson whole-heartedly applauded the heroic patriotism of the officers of the Atlantic Fleet “who died under it (the US flag)” (85-86).

With the same notions of romantic chivalry and sportive adventure, the numerous young American expatriates voluntarily participated in the First World War. Hemingway, for whom a “man who lacks courage, a mere slave to his fears, is not truly free and not truly human”(Rama Rao 42) accepted his grandfather, a civil war veteran, as his role model and enlisted himself as an ambulance lieutenant in the

Italian army. His duty was to evacuate the wounded soldiers from the front but he was not satisfied with this ancillary duty and his knightly-prowess and war-heroism dragged him into the actual battle-field where he was badly wounded. His early initiation to violence and his later experiences in hunting, fishing, bull-fighting and boxing taught him the ever-true lesson that “in life one must be hard, that only the tough-skinned survive”(Maurois 39). That’s why, not only in Hemingway’s short stories but almost in every fictional work he wrote, war finds a proper mention in one way or another. He has delineated his experience of the First World War in *In Our Time*, a collection of short stories and the novels like *A Farewell to Arms*, *The Sun Also Rises*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, *Across the River and Into the Trees*, etc. However, the most comprehensive fictional document about his war-experience remains *A Farewell to Arms* in which he taught the readers how to “fight for the right of a life worthy of humanity”(Srivastava 5).

In *A Farewell to Arms* there are many references to the original war and the troop-movement, though the account of war is restricted to the Italian-Austrian front only. The novel opens with



the dreary movement of the Italian troops towards the front where the dismal and uncanny before-war tranquility permeates the whole atmosphere which is further intensified by the incessant rain and war-born fatal maladies like frostbites, chilblains, jaundice, gonorrhoea and pneumonia. Hemingway vividly cites an example: “at the start of the winter came the permanent rain and with the rain came the cholera. But it was checked and in the end only seven thousand died of it in the army”(AFTA 8). The realistic portrayal of the deployment of troops in the trenches and evacuation of the wounded soldiers is reminiscent of Hemingway’s own involvement in war that caused in him a war-hallucination and insomnia.

In this amply applauded world-class autobiographical war-novel, Henry the protagonist is front-romantic and wants to fight like Hemingway. He is not contented with the subsidiary duties of an auxiliary-soldier and wants to take a first-hand taste at the front and that’s why he takes risk to bring the food for his comrades and gets wounded. In the beginning, Henry is not fully committed to a cause but later he shows his genuine concern for his associates when he recommends the other wounded soldiers

for treatment before himself. Glorifying the bravery on Shakespearean line he proclaims that ‘the coward dies a thousand deaths, the brave but one’(103). He broods that a young man of his age should be in uniform and feels ‘masquerader’ in civil clothes. Even in the hospital he demands for a newspaper to read the news from the front, and the list of dead officers with their decorations. After deserting the army, he wants to forget the war, but his heart is still replete with the memories of his “war brothers,”(51) particularly, Rinaldi and the priest. That’s why the priest has to say, “You are a foreigner. You are a patriot”(56). He is full of military smugness and never compromises with his soldierly decorum. After getting injured, in the hospital, when Miss Gage calls him ‘a sick boy,’ he reprimands her that ‘I’m not sick. I’m wounded.’ During the priest’s visit at the hospital, Henry extenuates his wound as ‘only an accident.’ Moreover, he gladly rejoins the war after his convalescence, leaving behind his lady-love and proves his fidelity for Italy. Having listened to the major’s reluctance to join back if he got the chance to be admitted in a hospital, we think even the Italian nationals are not as faithful as Henry is. Thus, we cannot support D. S.

Savage's view that Henry was only an "occasionally involved onlooker"(100).

Though a non-combatant, Henry is highly conceited to be an army officer. During the mass retreat, he is unable to tolerate the disobedience of the two sergeants whom he provides emergency shelter in his convoy of ambulances. This arouses his wrath that provokes him to fire at them. At the Tagliamento Bridge, when the carabinieri catches him by the collar, it is only he who dares to counter-interrogate him resisting, "don't you know you can't touch an officer?" After his diving into the river, he is very much sensitive to his honour and worries that in the United States "they might call me drowned. I wondered what they would hear in the States. Dead from wounds and other causes"(167). He wants to go back to the States either as a brave winner or a sacred soldier died in war. We are surprised at John Aldridge's remark quoted by Prof. Bhim S. Dahiya in *Hero in Hemingway* about the American volunteers in World War I that "they were attracted by the romance of serving in a foreign country with a foreign army" and "wanted to experience the excitement of death without pain of it"(53).

Through his personal experience, Hemingway explores some of minute problems faced by the soldiers in the battle-field where the ration, transport and medical facilities are impaired by the continuous artillery-shelling and heavy bombardment. He portrays a sweaty, dusty and tired 'straggler' who cannot keep pace with his platoon. Henry's conversation with the limping soldier who sits down beside the road exposes the cruelties of war, insensitivity of military leadership and mental agony of soldiers at war:

'What's the matter?'

He looked at me, then stood up.

'I'm going on.'

'What's the trouble?'

'---the war.'

'What's wrong with your leg?'

'It's not my leg. I got a rupture.'

'Why don't you ride with the transport?' I asked. 'Why don't you go to the hospital?'

'They won't let me.' (29)

The straggler is suffering from hernia but afraid of his officers who are indifferent to his pain and compel him to proceed and don't allow him to get medical treatment. Even Henry is unable to help him without the 'papers' which seem to be more important than the soldier with unbearable pain. In the trenches, Henry and his drivers feel sick of old, stale, rotten and



rusty food covered with brick-dust and their officers are availing better facilities. Hemingway seems to suggest that all soldiers, whether they are officers or men, should be treated equally and, if possible, sophisticated war-equipment and proper medical treatment should be provided to them.

The adverse reactions of various characters against the prolongment of war show the boredom of unending war from where the weary soldiers want to escape. A British major tells Henry that 'the Italians had lost one hundred and fifty thousand men on the Bainsizza plateau' and 'lost forty thousand on the Carso'(98). He considers Henry lucky to be hit and been in hospital. Due to unlimited surgical operations on wounded soldiers Rinaldi, a doctor-friend of Henry, feels severely strained and in a fit of depression he moans 'this war is killing me'(121). The extreme depressing fact of war is evident in an aggressive complaint of Passini, the ambulance driver, who is ready to pay every cost for the de-induction of the war and anxiously grumbles if 'everybody hates this war' then 'why don't we stop fighting?' But Henry tries to pacify him in the following conversation:

'It would not finish it if one side stopped fighting. It would only be worse if we stopped fighting.'  
'It could not be worse,' Passini said respectfully. 'There is nothing worse than war.'

'Defeat is worse.'

'I don't believe it,' Passini said still respectfully. 'What is defeat? You go home.'

'They come after you. They take your home. They take your sisters.'

'I don't believe it' Passini said. 'They can't do that to everybody. Let everybody defend his home. Let them keep their sisters at the house.'

'They hang you. They come and make you be a soldier again. Not in the auto-ambulance, in the infantry.' (40)

Henry frightens him that the enemy would conscribe them in their infantry, take over their land and humiliate their sisters which is even worse than war. Henry, Passini and other three drivers are badly hit by a trench-mortar shell and Henry recounts the painful death of Passini:

He bit his arm and moaned -----  
Oh Jesus Christ ----- It was Passini - ---- purest lovely Mary shoot me. Oh Jesus lovely Mary stop it. Oh oh oh oh,' then choking, 'Mama mama mia.'  
Then he was quiet. (44)

The inch by inch death of a soldier lying on a stretcher above Henry in an ambulance is particularly disgusting when his blood drips on Henry's face continuously. In ordinary course of life, most of the men would be sickened by such an experience that is a normal phenomenon for a soldier and that's why Schneider remarks that the novel is "an expression only of bitterness, disgust, a desolation of soul, a remorse"(24). The insufficient stretchers to evacuate the wounded men and inefficient doctors in the field cause untimely death of the soldiers.

During the Caporetto retreat the Italians are afraid of the Germans and fire indiscriminately on anything they see. At the Tagliamento Bridge, the only passage for the retreating army, the carabinieri of the Italian Military Police are summarily trying the Italian officers and executing them in the pretext of being deserters. The officers feel humiliated to be interrogated by such people who are totally detached from the actual battle ground and reproach them as traitors. Hemingway mocks at the following dialogue between the officers of the battle police and a lieutenant-colonel they are going to shoot:

'Your brigade?'

He told them.

'Regiment?' He told them.

'Why are you not with your regiment?'

He told them.

'Do you not know that an officer should be with his troops?'

He did.

That was all. Another officer spoke.

'It is you and such as you that have let the barbarians onto the sacred soil of the fatherland.'

'I beg your pardon,' said the lieutenant-colonel.

'It is because of treachery such as yours that we have lost the fruits of victory.'

'Have you ever been in a retreat?' the lieutenant-colonel asked.

'Italy should never retreat.'

'If you are going to shoot me,' lieutenant-colonel said, 'please shoot me at once without further questioning. The questioning is stupid.' (161)

The hollow phrases of the battle police -- 'sacred soil of the fatherland,' 'fruits of victory,' and 'Italy should never retreat' are instantly punctured by one simple question of the lieutenant colonel that 'have you ever been in a retreat?' They should obstruct the advancing enemy force instead of shooting their own officers. Henry, who is voluntarily participating in the war to defend Italy, is suspected to be a





German spy only because of his accented dialect. When a carabinieri catches him by the collar he dives into the Tagliamento river and his obligation for the Italian army washes away forever. Henry later realizes that, in a modern war, there is no place for sentimental heroism. Hemingway applauds self-respect of soldiers which motivates them for the supreme sacrifice and condemns the ignominious trials of the battle police.

As a military reformist, Hemingway forcefully rejects the inhuman harassment and exploitation in the name of stern discipline that cause in soldiers either depression or aggression which sometimes culminates into suicide of a soldier or execution of an officer. In case of depression a soldier is good for nothing and in aggression he can kill his own associates. During retreat, we learn a strange thing that the common soldiers abhor their own officers. Piani has to conceal the real identity of Lieutenant Henry otherwise the frustrated soldiers could kill him because they take officers responsible for their inhumane condition. Some war-weary and home-sick soldiers throw away their rifles and when an officer inquires about their brigade, a soldier shouts that they belong to 'Peace

Brigade'(158). Even the 'sleeping' becomes a luxury for them. Aymo is shot dead by the Italians themselves, Bonello is over-scared and goes to surrender himself, and after his desertion from army Henry is chased like a criminal.

Thus, Hemingway has lively described the eerie atmosphere of the battleground, bravery of the soldiers, inefficiency of doctors and scarcity of the field facilities. The grudges of the soldiers are necessary to be checked and reconciled immediately. The indifference of carabinieri and the impersonation of the battle-police can compel the brave fighters to withdraw from their real motives. The episodes like the forfeiting their property, harassment of the members of their family are evident to arouse hate in the common soldiers for the mechanical military system. The soldiers hate their own officers and Hemingway worries how a battle can be won in such an unfaithful way. That's why Henry turns against false idealism of 'glory', 'honour' and 'courage' which once were highly motivating words for him.

The nuclear, biological and chemical warfare has generated the new diseases which have made the war more horrible. Even then Hemingway motivates

the soldiers to fight for the sake of humanity and their motherhood and anticipates them to keep their haughty head high because it's the first and foremost duty of a soldier to save the nation irrespective of the cost he has to pay and sometimes he gives "more than his life" (Fiesta 29). But, Hemingway's purpose behind his treatment of war-weary world is not simply to delineate the valour and anguish of the soldiers but also to tell the responsible dignitaries to improve the condition in which they have to live and fight. The leadership should also arrange their proper rehabilitation with respectable job and hefty salary so that they may not frustrate and repent for their service in army. Sometimes the common people make them laughing stock and cause the national harm as in such conditions the soldiers don't let their sons to join the force. We must pay our touching-tributes to these national heroes who do the things we are afraid of.

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