CHAPTER-II

HEMINGWAY AND WORLD WAR I:

A FAREWELL TO ARMS

War has been generally regarded as an avenue where an individual can demonstrate and put to test his courage and heroism. The ancient epics depicted battles between different gods crying for supremacy. The growth of the concept of nationalism led to the glorification of war. Fighting for one’s country came to be regarded as something honourable and sacred. The feeling of patriotism inspired people to participate in wars and those who displayed extraordinary courage and skill in war were elevated to the status of national heroes. Thus, war acquired a romantic aura of adventure, courage and heroism.

It was with these romantic notions of individual courage, honour and heroism that young men enlisted to participate in the First World War. But they were soon disillusioned because modern warfare is certainly not an arena where one can accomplish heroic feats. The rapid development of science in the twentieth century led to the invention of highly developed and refined fighting equipment. The emphasis shifted from the courage of man to the efficiency of machines. As Quincy Wright noted:

In historic civilizations men and animals provided the power for military movement and propulsion. In the modern period, wind and sail, coal and the steam engine, petroleum and the internal combustion engine, jet propulsion and missiles, have successfully revolutionized naval, military, and aerial movement, as gunpowder,
smokeless powder, high explosives, and nuclear bombs have successfully revolutionized striking power.

(Wright 64-65)

In this kind of war, man becomes an infinitesimal and replaceable unit, completely reliant on machines, there being little scope for individual courage and heroism.

Hegel the great German philosopher maintains that the history of the world is not a scene of happiness. Periods of happiness are blank pages in it. Humanity undergoes struggle and analogism, suffering and oppression in order to fulfill its own calling and also that of the universal spirit. Struggle for Hegel is the law of development and an individual reaches his full height only through compulsions, responsibilities and sufferings. Ernest Hemingway was unconsciously guided by such ideas. The first half of the 20th century was filled with two World Wars, the Spanish Civil War, The Great Depression, Russian and Chinese Revolutions and the process of De-colonization of the Third World. In fact it was the most stormy period of world history. Hemingway is placed in these turbulent times to grapple with complex issues and situations.

Hemingway had a certain romantic notion of man - brave, virile, sporting, and a kind of macho figure, and he strongly believed in individual courage and heroism. The Hemingway protagonist goes to the war with these romantic notions and comes back a totally disenchanted man, shaken by the spectacle of senseless and brutal human slaughter. He finds nothing glorious, sacred or heroic in modern mechanized warfare where there is no man-to-man confrontation, no opportunity of close mortal combat to bring out the best in him. The grim reality he encounters there makes him feel like Frederic Henry in *A Farewell to Arms*:
….embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain. We had heard them, sometimes standing in the rain almost out of earshot, so that only the shouted words came through, and had read them, on proclamations that were slapped up by billposters over other proclamations, now for a long time, and I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like the stockyards at Chicago if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it. (A Farewell to Arms 165)

After the experience of the situation on the battlefield, the Hemingway protagonist perceives, to his utter horror and dismay the shallowness of the war slogans. What he sees there is not war but mass murder, a far cry from the romantic notion that had originally inspired him. This encounter with the reality of war results in disillusionment and disgust.

A Farewell to Arms, is set against a sharply realistic background of the war and the tensions arising in northern Italy. The novel offers remarkable description of war on the Italian front. The novel is situated in the thick of the First World War and is a conceptual reorganization of the times. Hemingway speaks of the cruel, ugly truth about war and what he has written is authentic, vivid and substantial. The novelist derived most of the raw material from his personal experiences and has himself remarked that true fiction must come from everything you have ever known, ever seen, ever felt, ever learned. This fact applies in his own case, too, as his experiences with war formed much of his creative world. His shattering experience gets fictionalized in the experience Frederic Henry goes through. The disastrous
consequences of the war find place in the overall fate and misery Frederic Henry bears or confronts. To quote:

“This was a strange and mysterious war zone but I supposed it was quite well run and grim compared to other wars with the Austrians. The Austrian army was created to give Napoleon victories; any Napoleon. I wished we had a Napoleon, but instead we had II Generale Codorna, fat and prosperous and Vittrio Emmanuele the tiny man with the long thin neck and the goat beard. …………………………. What was the matter with this war? Everybody said the French were through. Rinaldi said that the French had mutinied and troops marched on Paris.” (A Farewell to Arms, 34)

In the novel, the entire account of the war on the Italian-Austrian front spread over two years and involved scores of characters from several nationalities as reported by the narrator which are directly observed by him. The war is seen in all its implications. Hemingway was drawn into the actual battlefield because of the sense of knightly-Powers and war-heroism but the ultimate realities left him shell-shocked and alienated. Halliday calls, Hemingway “a philosophical writer” and says that “his main interest in representing human life through fictional forms has consistently been to set man against the background of this world and universe, to examine the human situation from various points of view.” (Halliday 297) The message is not only significant but also the requirement of the present times as Hemingway’s own participation in two world wars enabled him to give literary reality to one of the major experiences of his generation and the generation that followed. In other words, war and violence are the materials of Hemingway’s approach. A Farewell to Arms is based directly on Hemingway’s Italian war experiences and is one of the best American war novels. It is a story of one man’s withdrawal from the war into love, a love which ends in futility.
The reason for Hemingway to write so much about the war, as he himself explained, was because it constituted the “constant, bullying, murderous, slovenly crime” (Donaldson 130). Hemingway had seen much war in his lifetime. In the First World War, he served as a Red Cross Ambulance driver in the Italian army and was severely wounded while distributing supplies to the Italian soldiers near Fossalta-di-Piavo on the Italian front. Later he described the First World War as “the most colossal, murderous, mismanaged butchery that has ever taken place on earth. (EH xiv-xv) It was this war that had left a most terrible and life-long impact on Hemingway as well as on the writers of that generation.

It is noteworthy that after being frequently exposed to war from an early age, Hemingway wrote in 1942: “I have seen much war in my lifetime and I hate it profoundly” (EH pp. xxx-xxxi). It is this hatred for war that forms an important aspect of his fiction, and the war had such a pronounced effect on his mind that even when it is not being dealt with directly, its shadow is always lurking in the background. In Hemingway’s writing career two political events of his life had a significant decisive influence. One was the First World War; the other, the Spanish Civil War. In both the cases he did not fight directly but participated in the happening actively. While in the First World War he was seriously wounded, he passed through the Spanish Civil War safe and unscathed. But both the experiences had far-reaching impact on his writing.

The early writings of Hemingway were entirely the writer’s post-war creations, and carried unmistakably the deep mark of his exposure to the horror of war depicted in the novel. *A Farewell to Arms* is based directly on Hemingway’s Italian war experiences and is one of the best American war novels. It is a story of one man’s withdrawal from the war into the domain of sweet romance that doesn’t last long. As an intellectual, Hemingway’s utmost concern is to provide the reading public a
possible rethinking about war and the havoc it causes. This intended rethinking leads to peaceful co-existence amongst nations. It is a matter of widely acknowledged truth, that all human beings in the world want peace and peaceful co-existence. Even then, we have the most destructive wars between nations. The war mechanism had almost become a million times wicked and harmful because of the advent of the new weapons. Hemingway projects the view that it is the use of these that makes war an impossible enemy to fight with, and man should bid farewell to it.

The world which Hemingway described is limited by violence and death and man’s estrangement with the world. His typical protagonist lives in perpetual revolt against his own finitude, against his situation in the violent and chaotic world.

For Frederic in *A Farewell to Arms*, the war is a shattering experience that mutilates his body and confounds his reason. Throughout the novel his life and things around him that he holds dear, stand threatened by violence and death. The barbarism of war and the biological treachery of childbirth destroy his relationship with Catherine and force upon him a fatal view of his place in the universe. Catherine’s death is merely the climax of endless scenes of violence, mutilation, dying and emotional confusion that wear out Frederic’s mind. With growing despair and subsequent emotional withdrawal, he watches soldiers who die from cholera or from self-mutilation the degeneration of his close friend Rinaldi, and the misguided execution of officers by their own men. It is this inherent mortality that Hemingway explores and probes deeper in *A Farewell to Arms*.

In the novel Hemingway felt that war was the common denominator to which the motive power of his world could always be reduced. It served him as a barricade against emotions, and every emotion was given a special poignancy and truth, as it was set against the war. The very opening chapter shows the gloominess of war which
spreads its tentacles and clutches on nature with its diabolic approach and “natural elements take on a symbolic function.” (Baker 95)

Hemingway focuses attention on both aspects of war—one is what it does to the non-combatants and the other to the soldiers themselves. For the non-combatants, war brings unimaginable suffering to the young and old, men and women uprooting and killing them, burning their dwellings, which in turn causes destruction and ruin of the landscape. As for the combatants, it exposes them to brutalities which lead to callousness, resulting in psychic disintegration. In the war the protagonist is usually a soldier, probably an extension of Hemingway himself seeking an opportunity for personal heroism and dignity through sacrifice.

Hemingway’s *A Farwell to Arms* brings into focus the insane brutality of war in a manner that eschews emotion, symbol, or rhetorical suggestivity so that an ominous impression of fright and horror, of waste and chaos emerges. The novel opens with the callous, dreary and uncanny before-war tranquility intensified by the incessant rain and maladies associated with destruction. The realistic portrayal of the deployment of troops in the trenches and evacuation of the wounded soldiers may be attributed to Hemingway’s own involvement in the war that causes in him a war-hallucination and insomnia. The nitty-gritty of the system and use of military jargon is not possible without a personal experience. As a military reformist, Hemingway finds that the soldiers fight valorously but the discrimination among ranks and fear of forfeiting their ancestral property bore in them abhorrence for the top brass leadership. Henry is an enthusiastic fighter but the execution of the Italian officers during Caporetto retreat brings to halt his obligation to the army. This trivial and irresponsible attitude of Military Police kills sentimental heroism in Henry-like volunteers. The heart-rending death of Passini and the inhuman exploitation in the
name of stern discipline cause in soldiers either depression or violent aggression that culminates into suicide of a soldier or murder of an officer. In the beginning, Frederic seems to be a careless mercenary who takes war as only a friendly-match but the wound he receives while fighting turns him into a committed soldier. The title of Hemingway’s war novel is said to have been borrowed from a poem by George Peele, a poet and dramatist of the Elizabethan age in England. His poem called ‘A Farewell to Sir John Norris and Sir Francis Drake’ dated 1589 is included in The Oxford Book of English Verse edited by Robert Bridges. (Bhim S. Dahiya, 20) Peele’s powerful poem advocates the cause of imperial war asking the youth to take up arms for wining honour and glory for their country. On the other hand, Hemingway’s novel condemns the war. It lays stress on bidding farewell to war and violence and takes recourse to the activities of love and sport.

*A Farewell to Arms* is a novel about World War I dealing with liberty of individual citizens as well as nations. It is a war novel that explores the politics of war as well as its disastrous consequences for human society. The war in the epic sense appealed to Hemingway as an opportunity to bring out the best in man. But the experience of war soured him considerably. Hemingway worshipped courage but he came to realize in course of time the spectacle of bloodshed caused through machines was no war but mass murder.

Hemingway was not even twenty when he joined the First World War as a member of the Redcross Ambulance crew, and got severely wounded in the action. This experience remained with the young writer for a pretty long period through his fictional writings. The trauma of getting wounding affected Hemingway much more than the thrill of the war that possibly had prompted him to get enlisted.
Frederic Henry is repeatedly asked why he joined the war and invariably, he either avoids the issue or gives an evasive reply. On one such occasion, Frederic says to Catherine Barkley:

I don’t know. There is not always an explanation for everything (A Farwell to Arms 17)

Again, later, when a bartender asks him why he went to war, Frederic says:

“I don’t know. I was a fool” (A Farwell to Arms 227)

Whatever romantic or idealistic notions of the war that Frederic Henry may have had are quickly destroyed by the reality of the war. When Frederic leaves the line, escapes through the river and joins Catherine in the Hotel, he even hates to read the newspaper since it covered the war or to hear anything about the calamitous happening. It becomes evident that no conviction, no commitment and no strong reason prompted Frederic to go to war. It was a youthful euphoria, a sense of adventure and a vague ideal that prompted him to go to the war in the first place. And that precisely explains why Frederic Henry got disillusioned about the whole thing so soon.

As an intellectual, Hemingway’s utmost concern is to provide the reading public a possible rethinking about war and the havoc it causes. It is widely acknowledged that all human beings want peace and peaceful co-existence. Still, we have the most destructive wars between nations and its mechanism has become a million times more wicked and harmful as time passed and newer of weapons were brought into use. It is the use of these that makes war an impossible enemy to fight with.
The world which Hemingway has described is defined by violence and death and man’s estrangement from the world. The typical protagonist in Hemingway lives in perpetual fear and state of disgust. He lives in constant revolt against his situation in the chaotic world.

Depicting the entire complex of the war situation in Italy the hero’s story becomes only an efficient instrument of structure and perspective in the final analysis. The description here shows how the war has disrupted the peace and domestic life of innocent people in Italy. In the middle of descriptions of war on the Italian front where Henry is participating the narrator keeps interpolating reports about happenings on the other fronts, such as France. Besides, the participation by the British and the American soldiers is stated or discussed several times extending thereby the boundaries of the canvas on which Henry’s story occupies the pivotal place. ‘Hemingway’s treatment of the theme in the novel is most realistic. He uses as narrator a central character whose perspective on life is starkly rational.’ (Dahiya 27) Hemingway succeeds in creating a war novel to expose war, a political novel to expose politics, a romantic novel to expose romanticism, and a modern novel to expose modernism.

Frederic Henry, the narrator in *A Farewell to Arms*, is a first-person reliable narrator who tells only as much as he has seen and known. He does not give much credence to things just heard, for he would not trust anything that reason does not find trustworthy. He does not exclude things from the narrative just because he happens to see them differently. In such cases, he dramatizes rather than reports about those things. He brings the different views about characters face to face with each other in dramatic conversations that dominate the narrative in the novel.
Hemingway’s choice of the first-person narrative about World War I, the war that he describes in *A Farewell to Arms*, is the case in point. As such, observations such as the following:

‘In the last War there was no really good true war book during the entire four years of this war. The only true writing that came through during the war was in poetry. One reason for this is that poets are not arrested as quickly as prose writers would be if they wrote critically since the latter’s meaning, if they are good writers, is too uncomfortably clear. The last year, during the years 1915, 1916, 1917, was the most colossal, murderous, mismanaged butchery that has ever taken place on earth. Any writer who said otherwise lied. So the writers either wrote propaganda, shut up, or fought. Of those who fought many died and we shall never know who were the fine writers who would have come out of the war who died in it instead.

But after the war the good and true books finally started to come out. They were mostly all by writers who had never written or published anything before the war. The writers who were established before the war had nearly all sold out to write propaganda during it and most of them never recovered their honestly afterwards. All of their reputations steadily slumped because a writer should be of as great probity and honestly as a priest of god. He is either honest or not, as a woman is either chaste or not, and after one piece of dishonest writing he is never the same again.

A writer’s job is to tell the truth. His standard of fidelity to the truth should be so high that his invention, out of his experience, should produce a truer account than anything factual can be. For facts can be observed badly; but when a good writer is creating something, he has time and scope to make it of an absolute truth.’

(“Introduction” to *Men at War*)
The world changed at a rapid pace towards the end of 19th century and results were felt intensely by the generation of thinkers and artists whose works appeared in 1920s. The seeds of change were sown as early as in the mid-nineteenth century when the process of Industrial Revolution had set in.

G.S. Frazer’s description of the effects of the war on England cannot be very different from its effects on the American society:

The great war unsettled society in many ways. It has a great liberating effect; it hastened the emancipation of women; it promoted a temporary merging of social classes. Young men from humble background received commissions; young officers like Graves and Sassoon gained a new questioning attitude towards their inherited code. But above all, the First World War shattered Great Britain’s rational self-confidence and produced doubts, uncertainty, and confusion. Instead of the thoughtless hopefulness of the Edwardian decade there was ‘a new realism’ – tendency to think of man as a strictly limited creature. Man was no longer a giant figure striding to perfection, though he might achieve a certain decency through harsh self-discipline.

(Fraser 96-97)

In America a group of young writers and artists was similarly judged by the matriarchal Gertrude Stein when she called them ‘Lost Generation’. It was a phrase used to describe the generation of young writers disillusioned by the experience and aftermath of World War I. These writers generally felt that the traditional values they
were brought up with were a sham, given the senselessness of the war and the consequent devaluation of human life. Experience of war led to a collective national trauma.

The ‘lost generation’ went through the traumatic experience of the war, suffered the loss of religious faith and faced the rapid urbanization which shattered the old institutions of family and marriage. The oncoming world of science which blew up the old myths and superstitions and economic depression together with the ones mentioned - that was all these produced a social situation which was no better than the wasteland. The young sensitive minds found it unbearable to live in peace and, indeed, many of them decided not to. They killed themselves in order to escape the anguish they felt and the traumas they experienced. Those who survived often found themselves on the brink of madness. *A Farewell to Arms* is the study of a twentieth century multiplicity in which there appears a broken psyche of modern man. The modern man has to face the chaotic forces of the twentieth century. Hemingway has captured the mood of the time showing concern as to where humanity will go when it has no future, where will it go when its dear ones are dead; when everything becomes unreal to it. This makes Hemingway a representative of his times. He captures with remarkable effectiveness the helpless and spiritual barrenness that his generation felt and experienced. This, he becomes a true representative of the “lost generation”.

Hemingway asserts emphatically in his writings that courage, endurance and love are the only sustaining factors in a world where man is destined to be trapped and broken, where life can only end badly. Fredrick Henry, Hemingway’s protagonist in *A Farewell to Arms* sends out this message fully in his own life which is a tale of spiritual victory through victimization by agents: social, political and providential.
In the novel, Fredrick Henry emerges out of his harrowing wartime experiences. He is one of Hemingway’s alter egos who embodies some of his most private desires. It is at the front that Hemingway gets to know the harsh world that wants to solve all conflicts by waging wars, a world of wolves where everyone wars on everyone else. The years following the first World War witness the revolt, the breaking away and the partial return to the parental home of the so-called lost generation. The War makes Hemingway see death without disguise and gazing at its grim face he treats organized death as a social phenomenon inherent in a world that surrounds him. Crippled and frustrated by their wartime experiences, depressed by the fear of coming crises people fall victims to the social disease of the age. Tired and empty - hearted they are haunted by the end of hope. As a literary artist Hemingway comes nearest to the decadent philosophy of his time through his wounded characters.

_A Farewell to Arms_ is a true book about the First World War, drawn from Hemingway’s own experience of the war in which he fought and got wounded. Frederic Henry tells the “Whole Truth” in the novel. He narrates the events of the war on the Italian-Austrian front with utmost honestly. He is a reliable narrator who would not deviate from showing numerous details about the war. Hemingway writes about violence because he knew it closely. _A Farewell to Arms_ demonstrates violence associated with war. There is a thrill of emotion and action in it. The tragic destruction of innocence and the richer and deeper exploration of sophisticated minds makes this novel a representative of the time to which it belongs.

The doom, pathos, and futility of human life, particularly during war times is a major theme of the novel. The couple in the novel is caught in the maelstrom of war and tries to shield itself from the haunting horror of war. Frederic Henry and Catherine Berkley are always surrounded by the haunting presence of war, its
magnitude, madness, horrible pain and futility. This novel is an account of an individual consciousness of violence, which is meaningless. Even in Switzerland, after the couple is shadowed by the doom of war and engulfed by it, the destiny of the lovers gets caught in the shattering disillusionment of the war. The artist in Hemingway was profoundly influenced as well as shaped by happenings witnessed in the war, both as a participant and as a war correspondent. He explained this in his Introduction to the 1948 edition of *A Farewell to Arms*. The novel is conventionally regarded as one that is concerned with themes of love and war.

*A Farewell to Arms* projects the later phase of Hemingway’s experience and shows his concern with the aftermath of the war. This novel is Hemingway’s experience regarding his active involvement in the war. The writer was not acquainted with Nihilism when First World War broke out. He had not yet abandoned all his illusions, values and aspirations associated with words such as honour, sacrifice, glory etc.; these needed to be tested on the crucible of experience to find their validity for him. War and love offered him appropriate answers for testing out their validity. Hemingway tested them in *A Farewell to Arms* through his protagonist Frederic Henry, who is placed in the arena of war. The results are horrible. He is now disillusioned and frustrated with the so-called glories of the world. Only death and destruction emerge as the abiding reality against which all ideas and aspirations sound hallow. Love turns out to be the illusive diversion.

Hemingway retains the traditional narrative technique of unfolding the events of his novel’s plot in chronological order and sequential arrangement; his narrator is not a traditional “teller” describing events and characters but also one who evaluates them. Henry the narrator-hero “shows rather than tells”. ‘More than half the space in the novel is occupied by dramatic conversations in which the characters carry forward
the narrative uninterrupted by the narrator as narrator. The narrator only reports whatever he has seen. He does not permit his own personality, his subjective self, any kind of distortion of the observed facts.’ (Dahiya 49)

Hemingway’s hero-narrator avoids abstractions and clings to the concrete details of events and characters to communicate the feelings and thoughts about the infolding scenario. Hemingway’s technique is related to his approach to life. Just as he would maintain his firm commitment to his liberal values of peace and freedom and show his commitment by acting on it rather than by asserting it in abstractions, so does he preserve his narrative commitment to truth by showing what he has seen and heard, never indulging in what might have been or that which may be in store, as also how and why a person behaves, or an event happens the way it does. He would just translate into words the event or the character as it appears before him or as he has experienced it. Hemingway’s narrative technique is, thus, determined by his attitude to life, which is reflected by his attitude to language.

The dramatic technique of “showing” rather than “telling” is remarkably used by Hemingway in *A Farewell to Arms*. Here, the narrator maintains with utmost integrity the purity of his objective. As in the very opening of the novel:

In the late summer of that year we lived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains. In the bed of the river there were pebbles and boulders, dry and white in the sun, and the water was clear and swiftly moving and blue in the channels. Troops went by the house and down the road and the dust they raised powdered the leaves of the trees, the trunks of the trees too were dusty and the leaves fell
early that year and we saw the troops marching along 
the road and the dust rising and leaves, stirred by the 
breeze, falling and the soldiers marching and afterwards 
the roads bare and white except for the leaves.

(A Farwell to Arms 3)

The description has the character of a painting, full of concrete images. It 
conveys the writer’s view of the war as effectively as no painting can ever do. The 
manipulation of metaphors in the description communicates the narrator’s concern 
about the ravages of war. The falling of leaves early that year, the powdering of 
leaves by the dust raised by the marching soldiers, and the roads left afterwards bare 
and white except for the leaves, convey more powerfully the narrator’s implied 
feeling about the war than could have been done by a direct and sentimental 
expression. The dust powdering them and the powdering dust was raised by the 
soldiers has used the technique of indirection and implication that is certainly much 
more subtle and powerful than any discursive or rhetorical rendering in prose can be.

‘Just as the narrator does not directly intrude in the description of settings or scenes, 
the same way he does not allow his subjective view of other characters vitiate his 
painting of their portraits. Hemingway carefully selects details about his characters 
and includes only the essential ones in the narrative. For instance, the priest’s wearing 
of the military uniform like other soldiers with the only difference of wearing the 
additional cross is highly suggestive. The “only difference” makes all the difference. 
It shows how the priest remains a priest even in war. The narrator maintains neutrality 
and objectivity and yet successfully communicates his impression about the 
character.’ (Dahiya 53)
Hemingway does not rely much on direct description of events. He puts
greater reliance on the dialogue than on the description. Even exposition of both
characters and events is generally made through the dramatic device of the dialogue.

‘What is the stick?’

‘It belonged to a boy who was killed last year.’

‘I’m awfully sorry.’

‘He was a very nice boy. He was going to marry me
and he was killed in the Somme.’

‘It was a ghastly show.’ (A Farewell to Arms 18)

‘The main strength of Hemingway’s narrative is dialogue it has structural and
thematic value and it. It is always crisp and pointed. Besides, it is always concentrated
on an issue. Free from long speeches of explanation, it is always marked by half-
utterances and is developed through an interaction of difference utterances.’

(Dahiya 54)

The setting for A Farewell to Arms is the war itself, and the romance of
Frederic Henry and Catherine Barkley, particularly their attempt to escape the war
and its resulting chaos. The war is a parable of twentieth-century man’s disgust and
disillusionment at the failure of civilization to achieve the ideals it had been
promising throughout the nineteenth century. ‘In A Farewell to Arms Hemingway
makes a very intricate but meaningful combination of images and symbols in order to
be able to express whatever he has to convey to his readers. Hemingway uses natural
symbols—the mountain, the plain, the river, the dust and the falling leaves—to create
an autumnal mood.’ (Baker 95)
The trunks of the trees too were dusty and the leaves fell early that year and we saw the troops marching along the road and the dust rising and leaves, stirred by the breeze, falling and soldiers marching and afterwards, the road bare and white except for the leaves. *(A Farwell to Arms 3)*

The rain is a symbol of disaster, since it brings disease and death in the army. Catherine not only sees herself dead but actually dies in the rain. Baker points out two major symbols—the mountain and the plain: the former for “the image of life and home”, and the latter for “the image of war and death.” *(Baker 109)* Rain is a recurring symbol in the novel. Frederic Henry and Catherine try to escape to Switzerland across the lake in a boat, their journey is lashed by rains, and they stand in danger of losing sense of direction:

\[\text{What time is it?'}\text{ Catherine asked.}\]

\[\text{‘It's only eleven o' clock,' I said.}\]

\[\text{‘If you row all the time you ought to be there by seven o'clock in the morning.’}\]

\[\text{‘Is it that far?’}\]

\[\text{‘It's thirty-five kilometres.’}\]

\[\text{‘How should we go? In this rain we need a compass.’}\]

*(A Farwell to Arms 39)*

And it is in the rain that Frederic walks back to his hotel, leaving Catherine behind at the hospital, dead and lifeless:
…after I had got them out and shut the door and turned off the light it wasn’t any good. It was like saying good-bye to statue. After a while I went out and left the hospital and walked back to the hospital in the rain. (A Farwell to Arms 94)

Thus in A Farewell to Arms, ‘rain’ stands for disease and sickness, want and scarcity, misery and misfortune, gloom and depression, fear and insecurity, darkness and destruction. In the opening pages of the novel, Hemingway speaks about ‘the permanent rain’ that causes cholera and spells disaster:

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.

(A Farwell to Arms 4)

‘Rain is also a symbol of disaster as it brings disease and death in the army.’

(Baker 95)

Rain is also associated with Catherine’s sense of fear:

‘You’re not really afraid of the rain, are you?’

‘Not when I’m with you.’

‘Why are you afraid of it?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Tell me.’

‘Don’t make me.’

‘Tell me.’

‘No.’
'Tell me.'

'All right. I’m afraid of the rain because sometimes I see me dead in it.'

'No.'

'And sometimes I see you dead in it.' *A Farwell to Arms* 14)

And in spite of all assurances and comforts that Frederic gives her, Catherine keeps on crying because of the fear of ‘rain’:

'It’s all nonsense. It’s only nonsense. I’m not afraid of the rain, Oh, oh, God, I wish I wasn’t. She was crying.

*(A Farwell to Arms* 114)

It is in the rain that Frederic leaves Catherine behind at Milan on his way to the battle front:

‘God-bye’, I said. I stepped out into the rain and the carriage started. Catherine leaned out and I saw her face in the light. She smiled and waved. The carriage went up the street, Catherine pointed in toward the archway. I looked, there were only the two carabiniere and the archway, I realized she meant for me to get in out of the rain. I went in and stood and watched the carriage turn the corner. Then I started through the station and down the runway to the train. *(A Farwell to Arms* 142)

It is important to see that the retreat of the Italian army, taking place at Gorizia, is accompanied by rain:
The next night the retreat started. We heard that Germans and Austrians had broken through in the north and were coming down the mountain valleys toward Cividale and Udine. The retreat was orderly, wet and sullen. In the night, going slowly along the crowded roads we passed troops marching under the rain, guns, horses pulling wagons, mules, motor trucks all moving away from the front. There was no more disorder than in an advance. (*A Farwell to Arms* 168)

In the course of their retreat, the Italian troops are to move back beyond the river Tagliamento at Caporetto. Frederic too joins the retreat with the other members of his ambulance unit; but as he comes to the bridge over Tagliamento and watches the security guards stationed there checking and interrogating the retreating troops, he fears that, being an American and not an Italian, he may be looked upon as a suspect and placed under arrest or killed. Frederic is much too desperate to brook any delay; he is so keen on getting back his freedom, meeting Catherine, and spending the rest of his life with her in safety, and it is in this mood that, even though the river is in spate, he jumps into it: “I ducked down, pushed between two men, and ran for the river, my head down, I tripped at the edge and went in with a splash. The water was very cold and I stayed under as long as I could.” (*A Farwell to Arms* 201)

The symbol of timber, a conventional symbol that we find in the following passage, lends solidity and substance to the symbol of river as an agent of freedom and security:

When I came up the second time I saw a piece of timber ahead of me and reached it and held on with one hand. I
kept my head behind it and did not even look over it. I did not want to see the bank.... The piece of timber swung in the current and I held it with one hand. I looked at the bank. It seemed to be going by very fast.... I held on to the timber with both hands and let it take me along. The shore was out of sight now.

(A Farwell to Arms 201-202)

Frederic's plunge into the river is a kind of baptism, an initiation into a new kind of life, a life far removed from dirt and filth and blood and violence. Frederic's “anger: was washed away in the river along with any obligation.” (A Farwell to Arms 208) Frederic’s plunge into the river is a leap into freedom and safety.

In A Farewell to Arms, as we see, war itself, standing for disorder and violence and destruction, is ‘a symbol for the chaos of nature’ (West 630) in which Frederic is trapped. As Frederic Henry is about to leave for the battle front, he and Catherine pass beside a cathedral during rain. However, while they see a soldier and his girl taking shelter in the cathedral, they themselves do not take shelter there; instead, they go to their hotel room in Milan. Typically enough, Fredric is a hero who finds himself swinging to and fro between two worlds, the world of tradition and the world of uncertainty. And it is perhaps in terms of religious consciousness that we find both Dr. Rinaldi and Catherine’s nurse-friend, Fergusson, making use of snake as a symbol. Quite interestingly, Rinaldi calls himself ‘the snake’ (A Farwell to Arms 153), ‘the snake of reason’ (A Farwell to Arms 153), in fact, while Fergusson looks upon Frederic as snake for having seduced Catherine. She tells Frederic: ‘You’re worse than sneaky. You’re like a snake. A snake with an Italian uniform: with a cape
around your neck.’ *(A Farwell to Arms 220)* Referring to ‘that special combination of naturalistic and symbolic truth-telling’ (Baker 115), Baker states:

Projected in actualistic terms and a matter-of-fact tone, telling the truth about the effects of war in human life, *A Farewell to Arms* is entirely and even exclusively acceptable as a naturalistic narrative of what happened. To read it only as such, however, is to miss its controlling symbolism: the deep central antithesis between the image of life and home (the mountain) and the image of war and death (the plain). (Baker 108-109)

The feeling of distress, despair, loneliness and insecurity pervades the narrative of *A Farewell to Arms*. The row of beautiful but cold marble busts at the hospital reminds Frederic of ‘cemetry’ *(A Farwell to Arms 27)*, and the image of the worn-out carpet at the hotel in Milan where Frederic and Catherine are staying represents the process of decay that is associated with war. The image of a dog searching for something in the empty cans points to the futility of human pursuit:

Outside along the street were the refuse cans from the houses waiting for the collector. A dog was nosing at one of the cans.

‘What do you want?’ I asked and looked in the can to see if there was anything I could pull out for him; there was nothing on top but coffee-grounds, dust and some dead flowers.

‘There isn’t anything, dog’, I said. *(A Farwell to Arms 242)*
At this moment, Frederic is haunted by a feeling of nothingness. And, similarly, the image of a pile of empty saucers on the table in front of Frederic is a reminder of the emptiness of life.

*A Farewell to Arms* deals with the effect of war on human life, with what happened to a small group of people on the Italian front during 1917-18. This novel seeks to draw our attention, as James F. Light says, to ‘the four ideals of service’. (Light 169) He observes:

Each of these ideals is dramatized by a character of some importance, and it is between these four that Lt. Henry wavers in the course of the novel. The orthodox religious ideal of service is that of the Priest… Another selfless ideal of service is that of the patriot Gino…. A third is the code of Catherine Barkley who wishes to serve her love and who sees in such service her personal substitute for conventional religion. The last is the ideal of Rinaldi who, as a doctor, wishes to serve mankind by alleviating the wounds of war. (Baker 169)

‘There is ‘the central antithesis between the image of life, love, and home (the mounting) and the image of war and death (the plain).’ (Baker 116)

The regular pattern in *A Farewell to Arms* is a running alternation between the narrative passages and dramatic conversations, and then between action and interaction, and finally between war and love, or tension-ridden and tension-free moments. It is through these contraries that Hemingway makes his novel’s structure full of variety and suspense, surprise and recognition, shock and exultation, and it is through these very contraries that he communicates his integrated vision of life.
The first-person narrative technique does not allow any freedom to the narrator for making comments on events and characters, not even the liberty of imposing his own viewpoint on the reader. A direct expression of ideas or opinions in the narrative never appears; whatever direct expressions are made by Frederic in the novel are done in his capacity as an experiencing character rather than as a storyteller.

Thus, the first-person narrative technique, executed with a reliable narrator for the purpose of showing rather than telling an experienced truth of life, gives *A Farewell to Arms* a high degree of concentration and intensity because the entire action of the novel is focused on the limited experience of the central character. Hemingway has made a very effective use of the technique in *A Farewell to Arms*, which successfully communicates the novelist’s view of war and his vision of life.

In a senseless war, where man does not have to rely on his own inner resources but on sophisticated weapons, where the whole act of fighting is either suicide or murder, the only courageous thing to do is to walk out of it. The act of desertion, which would otherwise have been labeled a cowardly act, becomes here an act of courage.

The Hemingway protagonist says his farewell to arms, makes his “separate peace” (EH Stories 139) and declares that he is “not in His kingdom” and in this state of alienation goes about the task of restoring himself. The nature of modern warfare and the brutal scenes of horror not only resulted in disenchantment, but also brought about a total collapse of all values man had hitherto cherished, leaving him dazed in a meaningless world, struggling to justify his existence.

In the final analysis what the novel suggests is that “you cannot escape the obligations of action—you cannot say “Farewell to Arms”, you cannot sign a separate
peace. You can only learn to live with life, to tolerate it” (Ray West 36). We have to take up arms against life and live zealously; we have to encounter death and accept it stoically. The message is not only significant but also the requirement of the present times. Hemingway’s own participation in the two World Wars enabled him to give literary reality to one of the major experiences of his generation and the generation that followed.


______, *A Fare Well to Arms*. Doaba Publications. Delhi, 2007.


