CHAPTER V

THE OTHER BATTLEFRONT – GENDER AND THE TWO WORLD WARS

"War is men’s business, not ladies", we are told in Gone With The Wind, but the wars of the century force us to acknowledge that it is very much women’s concern as well. Advances in military technology have blurred any distinctions that might have existed between the home front and the war zone. Mass communication and psychological warfare affect all sectors of belligerent societies. Women, like men have been mobilised for both civilian and military work. They have moved from auxiliary roles such as nursing to combat duty. As defense workers producing armaments they have both complemented and supported the predominantly male armed forces. Moreover, whether employed or not, all women have had to contend with rationing, food shortages and evacuation. In all these ways and more perhaps, the realities of the two world wars contradicted the myth that war compels men to go forth and fight in order to protect their women, who remain passive and secure at home with the children.

Behind this myth is the belief that men are naturally aggressive, while women as mothers have an affinity for peace. It might be argued that this polarity between the genders, like that of battlefront to home front, helps to guarantee social stability. For, paradoxically, war unleashes aggressiveness in defense of civilisation – violence intended to contain violence. “Images of femininity, nurturance and the family,
qualities that fend off the barbarism implicit in war, can be invoked to restore the balance and protect our faith in the social order.¹

The Goddess of Peace, the image of women as other, took many forms in the propaganda and mass culture of the two world wars. The Great War linked women’s patriotic duty to motherhood: legions of nationalistic mothers were pictured bravely sending their boys off to war. The Second World War eroticised images of femininity producing romantic and kittenish sexual partners and Hollywood pin-ups. “No matter how she is manifest, this Goddess always contrasts with, even while supporting Mars.”²

Despite various attempts at reassessment after 1918 and 1945, the mythical differentiation between men and women in relation to war persisted, in part because scholars employed categories that masked the realities and complexities of women’s participation in the conflicts. Similarly, literary scholars, customarily exclude women’s voices from the canon of war literature, favouring writings based on the actual experience of combat.

Two recent waves of scholarship, have, however, begun to question the mythology of war’s gender. The first explores the cultural construction of soldiering and its psychological implications for men. At the Somme in 1916 John Keegan discovered that the “will to fight”, was for many men, an uncertain phenomenon at best.³ Paul Fussell and Eric Leed take up the same theme in their studies of soldiers’ cultural and literary responses to the Great War, showing that their ambivalent

² Higgonnet, Margeret Randolph – Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars (Yale, 1987) Pg. 2
attitudes towards aggression were coupled with deep fear, disorientation and passivity. Although these works concentrate on war’s effect on men, they provide one model for the study of women and war by showing how soldiers “drew upon the cultural repertoire of meaning…… to define felt alterations in themselves”. The interplay between cultural forms and self definition is one of the central themes of Fussell’s thesis.

In the second wave of new scholarship, feminist historians challenged the assertion that the two wars were entirely male enterprises. Their studies described the many roles women played in the military resistance, and medical corps, as well as heavy industry at home. These historians, find however, that in war as well as in peace there were sharp differences in the activities, responses and status of men and women. While wartime may have impelled women out of the domestic sphere, they nonetheless tended to remain in subordinate relationships to men, who continued to dominate the labour market and monopolise political power.

Both of these trends in the historiography of war raise questions about gender. The discovery of the crisis of masculinity reveals that the so called masculine traits are not universal, natural attributes of men; the perception that women’s subordination persists despite profound changes in their economic and political activities suggests that status does not depend upon reaching a fixed position in the social order. How then is gender designated?

According to Margaret Higgonnet the study of gender consists not merely of a set of social roles but also of a discourse that gives meaning to different roles within a

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4 Fussel, Paul — The Great War and Modern Memory (New York, OUP, 1975) Pg. 79
5 Ibid, Pg. 81
binary structure. Moreover, although the fundamental difference between masculine and feminine appears to be universal, the gender system takes a different form in each culture. Finally, gender systems are not fixed but respond and contribute to social change, assimilating new social phenomena and reconstituting the fundamental distinctions between the genders. To study women in wartime then a new historical perspective is called for, one in which women are studied in relation to men and is part of socially identifiable gender systems. This perspective avoids the pitfalls of isolationism, which stresses the uniqueness of women's experience and because it examines that experience virtually in a vacuum, cannot always explain change in women's lives. The study of gender systems also avoids the problems of assimilationism which, by emphasising parallels between actions and achievements of women and men obscures historical distinctions between the two. By insisting that feminine identity and roles, must be analysed as part of a system that also defines masculine ones, the study of gender moves women's history, from the margins to the centre of “mainstream” history.

Perhaps nowhere will the shift be more dramatic than in the study of war. As a first step war must be understood as a *gendering* activity, one that ritually marks the genders of all members of a society, whether or not they are combatants. The implications of war for men and women are, then, linked in symbolic as well as social and economic systems. “During war, the discourse of militarism, with its stress on ‘masculine’ qualities, permeates the whole fabric of society, touching both women and men.” In doing so it draws upon preexisting definitions of gender that establishes the post war social assignment of men and women.

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7 Wright, Gordon – *The Ordeal of Total War, 1939-45* (New York, 1994) Pg. 11
The discourses that give meaning to gender take many forms. In wartime the most explicit and deliberate efforts to redefine masculinity and femininity have appeared in propaganda, the principle tool of government seeking to mobilise people to assume unaccustomed roles. Many of these official definitions are echoed in the popular media, while letters, diaries and snapshots described personal reactions to sexual upheaval. In essence total war has acted as a clarifying moment, one that has revealed systems of gender influx and thus highlighted their workings. Emergency conditions either altered or reinforced existing notions of gender, the nation and the family. These ideas are, however, not created anew, but grounded in previous social and cultural sources. Within this system, female dependency is almost always presented as “natural” as is the state of peace. War appears to be “abnormal”, but warranted, in part by men’s need to protect and defend their women and families. In 1914-18 women displayed their independence by taking over men’s jobs and risking their lives as nurses and ambulance drivers at the front. By the Second World War they had gone into combat in the Soviet Union and joined resistance movements throughout Europe. But with the advent of aerial bombing, Zeppelins and guerilla combat, the symbolic value of the home front as an inviolate zone was suddenly shattered. When the home front is mobilised women may be allowed to move “forward” in terms of employment or social policy, yet the battlefront – preeminently a male domain takes economic and cultural priority. Therefore, while women’s objective situation does change, relationships of domination and subordination are retained. During the two wars the arbitrariness of gender designations stood briefly exposed.

The first war seemed to offer women even greater social opportunities than the second, for it shattered stifling nineteenth century concepts of womanhood. Seeing
this historians have often asked why women failed to capitalise on wartime disruptions of gender norms, for in many countries they brought female suffrage in their wake. Yet acquiring the vote or taking up new employment, did not necessarily mean an acquisition of social and political power for although wartime propaganda exhorted women to brave unfamiliar work, these appeals were contained within a nationalist and militarist discourse that reinforced patriarchal notions of gender relations. It stipulated that war was a temporary interlude and industrial employment would not permanently endanger their femininity — and neither could such employment be expected to last. Particularly, wartime with its emphasis on solidarity discouraged any expressions of women’s rights and needs, labelling them as selfish and divisive.

Thus although wartime experiences no doubt affected women’s consciousness and may have temporarily altered their identities, for many women the war years were perceived and remembered, both individually and collectively through discourses that revived rather conventional gender relations.

But conventional definitions of gender were not all pervasive, for the literature of war allowed more latitude for probing definitions of masculinity and femininity. Both male and female authors challenged prevailing myths about their sex. Yet, although modern scholars readily find oppositional discourses of gender in much of twentieth century war literature, these messages had little political impact on their authors’ contemporaries.

The reasons for this lack of effect were different for male and female writers. Men’s writings passed directly into the canon of twentieth century war literature.

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Women's wartime writings on the other hand, passed into obscurity and their expose of gender myths were submerged.

To understand this, one must look at the way by which the canon was established. The two world wars altered the literature of war in several important ways. The Great War with its mass conscription of educated non-professional soldiers, created a new phenomenon: the soldier-writer. The authentic voice and the intensity of moral conflict to be found in the finest works of poets such as Wilfred Owen and novelists such as Hemingway created a new set of touchstones for the literature of war; because those who gave voice to the experience of the trenches were so imbued with the classics, they became keepers of a new canon. And despite the fact that their writings exposed the mythical quality of received notions of masculinity, they could not help creating fresh myths that were also identifiably masculine. Wartime writing became significant not only in itself, but in its impact on the rest of twentieth century literature. Hemingway considered war to be one of the major subjects "...and those writers who had not seen it were always very jealous and tried to make it seem important, or abnormal, or a disease as a subject, while really it was something quite irreplaceable that they had missed". By World War II, male writers were self consciously seeking to perpetuate the canon of war literature, their major works unified by a tone of cynicism, black humour and ironic detachment, sharing the theme of male community. Since the definition of war writing privileges actual battlefront experiences, women who are barred from combat could only participate in this literary mode at second hand. Even when women writers described the wartime losses they had suffered as women – wives, mothers, lovers – they were

9 Fussel, Paul – The Great War and Modern Memory (New York, OUP, 1975) Pg. 85
10 Hemingway, Ernest – Green Hills of Africa (New York, Scribners, 1935) Pg. 70
displaced, for the primary loss in war literature is inevitably death; mourning is secondary.

However, the prime legacy of the war years, whichever way they are perceived, is that although the women who lived through the war years made few permanent gains, the momentary experience of sexual disruption granted them an ironic view of gender that they passed on to their daughters. Turned critical, the irony of one generation became the feminism of the next.11

World War I, as we have all been taught, virtually completed the construction of anonymous dehumanised man, that impotent cypher who is thought to be the twentieth century’s most characteristic citizen. These dark implications of World War I had further implications for twentieth century literature. As Malcolm Bradbury puts it, “many critics have seen the war as the apocalypse, that leads the way into Modernism (and) as violation, intrusion, wound, the source of psychic anxiety (and) generational instability”.12 From Lawrence’s Clifford Chatterly to Hemingway’s sadly emasculated Jake Barnes to Eliot’s mysteriously sterile Fisher King, the gloomily bruised modernist anti heroes churned out by the war suffer from specifically sexual woundings. That twentieth century Everyman, the faceless cypher, their authors seem to suggest is not just publicly powerless, he is privately impotent.

Obviously, however, these effects of the Great War were gender specific problems. If one considers the sexual implications of the Great War, it becomes obvious as one of the classic cases of dissonance between official male centred history and unofficial female history about which Joan Kelly has written so

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11 Hanley, Lynne -- Writing War -- Fiction, Gender and Memory (Univ. of Mass., 1991) Pg. 48
tellingly. For not only did the apocalyptic events of this war have a very different meaning for men and women, such events were in fact very different for men and women.

From the first, as Paul Fussel has shown World War I fostered characteristically modernist irony in young men inducting them into “death’s dream kingdom”, by revealing exactly how spurious were their visions of heroism and – by extension – history’s images of heroism. Mobilised and marched off to the front, idealistic soldiers soon found themselves immobilised, even buried alive, in trenches of death that seem to have been dug along the remotest margins of civilisation. These men of war had been transformed into dead-alive beings whose fates could no longer be determined according to the rules that governed Western history from time immemorial.

With no sense of inherited history to lose, however, women in the terrible war years of 1914-18 would seem to have had, if not everything, at least something to gain: a place in history, a chance even to make history. Wrote one former suffragist: “I knew nothing of European complications and cared less … I asked myself if any horrors could be greater than the horrors of peace – the sweating, the daily lives of women in the streets”. Ultimately alienation from world affairs and such resolute feminism led to union among women – one of the unacknowledged fruits of war.

Inevitably, however, the enthusiasm with which women of all ranks and ages filled in the economic gaps men had left behind reinforced the soldiers’ sickened sense that the war had drastically abrogated most of the rules that had always organised Western culture. This barely veiled hostility between the battlefront and the

Kelly, Joan – Becoming Visible: Women in European History (Boston, 1977) Pg. 137
Quoted in Higgonet, Pg 203.
home front, along with the exuberance of the women workers who had succeeded to men’s places, suggested that the most crucial rules the war had overturned was that of patrilineal succession, the founding law of patriarchal society itself for as the early glamour of battle dissipated and Victorian fantasies of historical heroism gave way to modernist visions of irony and unreality, it became clear that this war to end all wars necessitated a sacrifice of the sons to the exigencies of the fathers and the mothers, wives and sisters. In The Parable of the Old Man and the Young, Wilfred Owen retells the tale of Abram and Isaac to dramatise the generational conflict, that along with a sexual struggle he and many other soldiers saw as one of the darkest implication of the Great War. Alice Meynall, a long time suffrage fighter, accurately foresaw that through one of the grimmer paradoxes of history the Great War might force men to grant women, a viable inheritance in patriarchal society. In her poem A Father of Women she writes:

Our father works in us
The daughters of his manhood. Not undone
Is he, not wasted, though transmuted thus,
And though he left no son.  

Even the most conventionally angelic of women’s wartime ministrations, must have suggested to many members of both sexes that, while men were now invalid and maybe in-valid their sisters were triumphant survivors and destined inheritors. Certainly both the rhetoric and the iconography of nursing would seem to imply some such points. In works by both male and female novelists the figure of the nurse ultimately takes on a majesty which hints that she is mistress rather than slave, Goddess rather than supplicant. Our mind goes back to the “cool Goddess” figure of Catherine Barkely in A Farewell to Arms. After all, when men are immobilized and

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16 Ibid, Pg. 206
dehumanised, it is only these women who possess the old matriarchal formula for survival. Above all else. The Great War triggered off a release for many women writers. Novelist Willa Cather celebrates her hero, Claude Wheeler’s escape from rural Nebraska to wartime fronts as a way of dreaming her own release from the deadening decorum of the provincial prairie town as a way “to be alive, to be conscious, to have one’s own faculties, was to be in the war”.¹⁷ So too for women the war liberated them not only to delight in the reality of the work day, ‘Herland’ (a poem by Charlotte Perkins Gillmans with its vision of a female utopia created by cataclysm that wiped out all men) that was wartime England or America but also to imagine a revisionary worldwide Herland, a utopia arisen from the ashes of apocalypse and founded on the revelation of a new social order.

For many women such intimations of social change were challenged specifically through the politics of pacifism. Precisely because these thinkers were uniformly convinced of women's unique ability to encourage and enforce peace, there is sometimes an edge of contempt for men implicit in their arguments. But it is in Virginia Woolf's Three Guineas, the post era's great text of pacifist feminism, that such hostility to men comes most dramatically to the surface, in the form of violent anti patriarchal fantasies paradoxically embedded in an ostensible non violent treatise on the subject of “how to prevent war”.

Even as they mourned the devastation of the war, a number of women writers, besides Woolf felt that society as well as their art had been subtly strengthened, or at least strangely inspired, by the deaths and defeats of their male contemporaries. In A Sun at the Front the tales of an artist father whose art is strangely revitalised by the death of a soldier son, Edith Wharton offers an encoded description of a similar

¹⁷ Cather, Willa – One of Ours (New York, 1923) Pg. 416
transformation of a dead man into an enlivening muse. More frankly Katherine Mansfield confides in her journal after the death of her brother, that through his muse like intervention she had been vouchsafed a “mysterious” and “floating” vision of “our undiscovered country”. Finally, in perhaps the most notable incident of female inspiration empowered by male desperation, H.D. writes in *Bid Me To Live* how the various defects of her husband, Richard Aldington, and her male muse D.H.Lawrence transformed her autobiographical heroine Julia into a witch with power. Tracing her own growth in an unpublished memoir called *Thorn Thicket*, she declares mystically that “the war was my husband”. And at the very least, if the war was not her husband, it was her muse – as it was for Woolf, Mansfield, Wharton and many other women of that generation.

Nothing would ever be the same again. No war would ever function, either, the way this great war had as a battle of the sexes which initiated the “the first hour in history for the women of the world”.  

Gertrude Stein’s 1937 protest against “too much fathering” informed the literary responses of many of her female contemporaries, who also experienced World War II as a resurgence of patriarchal politics. It is hardly surprising that the identification of fascism and male domination surfaced in feminist polemic even before the outbreak of the Second World War. Throughout the 1940s, Dorothy Parker, Kay Boyle, and Carson McCullers, published fiction about the vulnerability of war brides, women war workers and civilians who are threatened less by the enemy than by their so called defenders. Why did so many English and American writers perceive the Second World War as a threat to the second sex?

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18 Gilbert, Sandra in Margaret Higgonet (ed) *Behind The Lines: Gender and the two Wars* (Yale, 1987) Pg. 225
According to Stein, the First World War was “a nice war, a real war, a regular war” but nobody “no not anybody thinks this war is a war to end war”. As she so often pointed out, the Second World War was only one of a sequence of wars. A repetition, the Second World War was approached by both sexes with much less idealism than that with which they had approached the Great War. The only singularity of the Great War was that it was the first total war, waged by all against all. Not only the women who were fighting for the first time in the air force and the armed services but the whole female population was no longer insulated from the brutality of the battlefield.

From the perspective of both men and women, media coverage brought the war home, as if to “illustrate” the expansion of the theatre of war from the battlefront to the home front. Ending the possibility of a separate sphere for women, World War II seemed less a generational conflict between fathers and sons than a road to universal apocalypse.

Consciousness of the infinite sequentiality of world wars, technological advance in destructive capabilities, obliteration of a safe home front, and the ideological threat of fascism doubtless contributed to the polemical and personal critiques of warfare by literary women from Stein to Woolf to McCullers and Sitwell. Yet such factors hardly account for the belief that women were also victimised by men who were presumably on their side. As an articulation of female dread, literary women’s responses to the Second World War have gone unheard because we have failed to realise that they were grappling with male authored images that reified

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19 Stein, Gertrude – Wars I have Seen (London, 1945) Pg. 122
20 Guber, Susan in Margaret Higgonet (ed) This is my Rifle, This is my Gun (Yale, 1987) Pg. 200
gender arrangements as rigidly as they had been demarcated in the Victorian period, but in a new eroticised way.\textsuperscript{21}

Wartime propaganda, both allied and axis, did much to underline the idea that fascism directly threatened women. In countless wartime posters the woman figures as “bounty”, that is, as the bountiful fertility that must be saved or the booty that constitutes the spoils of war. At the same time, pinned up unclothed in countless photographs that decorated bunks, barracks, bombers and artillery tanks named after women, movie stars and models clearly represented what the men were fighting for. Indeed, pin-ups were used to teach camouflage techniques and map reading to new recruits as in The Naked and the Dead where the major uses a poster of Betty Grable in a swimsuit to foster camaraderie.

The eroticising of women’s image in popular British and American graphics led several cartoonists to represent heroines embattled as much by sex starved servicemen as by the enemy abroad. But more frequently allied propaganda spoke directly about and to servicemen’s fear of their women’s betrayal. The female spy, a vamp whose charms endanger national security, was not unrelated to the foreign \textit{femme fatale} whose enticements threatened the physical security of the fighting forces. As in World War I, women posed the threat of contamination, for they could contaminate fighting men with syphilis.

To a surprising extent, women in war literature of the second war are represented as “bitch Goddesses” – not a single female character in the most representative of these novels, The Naked and the Dead shines through as positive. Each and every woman represented in the Time Machine inter chapters comes across as unscrupulous manipulators. Whether they are dead, disloyal or frigid wives,

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid
nymphomaniacal girl friends or whores the female characters in The Naked and the Dead play no part in the action except as “gauges” located in the Time Machine sections that returns the reader to civilian life. Even the love that saves men from the “lie of Authority” and serves as an alternative to Cummings’ philosophy of the will to power is a love between men: when Ridges and Goldstein bear the burden of Wilson’s maimed body back to the beach, Wilson becomes their “heart”. This brotherhood is echoed in countless novels of the second war. Significantly, the predominant female characters in A Farewell to Arms shine in their innate goodness – both Catherine Barkely and other nurses in the hospital are represented as good humoured and sensitive individuals.

Whether she is the silent recipient of “V letters” or the photographed face peeping out of the pocket of a dead man, the good girl in the literature of the second war is marked by her absence. More comically in Heller’s Catch-22, after Doc. Daneeka has been declared dead by his superiors, his wife is so delighted by the insurance payments she has received, that she evades his pleading letter. Like Sgt. Ssheisskopf’s wife, who wears a friend’s WAC uniform in order to take it off for all the cadets in her husband’s squadron, Mrs. Daneeka is a predator. Thomas Pynchon’s V is no doubt a sardonic reference to the phrase Victory girl which was used through the war years as a euphemism for a “whore”. In Gravity’s Rainbow, Slothrop’s map of London is sprinkled with stars – “Carolinas, Marias, Anns, Susans, Elizabeths” – each marking the place where he has had an affair and each appearing a few days before bomb sites of V-2 rockets mysteriously appear.

While literary women may not have faced physical assaults, they were bombarded by images that required a retort. No slower than George Orwell to perceive totalitarianism as a Big Brother, literary women did not react to his face with
Orwell’s nostalgia for a pre war world of renunciatory motherhood or with his longing for a redemptive fraternity. 22 On the contrary their art frequently begins with a critique of both fascist and liberal militarism and ends with a rejection of precisely the images of women that their male literary counterparts promulgated.

What the war teaches women is that they must relinquish any dreams that they may have had about joining forces with men. In The Member of the Wedding, Carson McCuller’s Franky Adams, a girl who “wanted to be a boy and go to war as a marine”, envies “soldiers in the army who can say ‘we’ for the war and yet would not include her”. But when she turns herself into a feminine F.Jasmine Adams and meets a soldier, she discovers that their conversation “would not join”: her first date talks a “kind of double talk that try as she would she could not follow”. 23 Kay Boyle seems to summarise all the attitudes of her gender in Army of Occupation and Men when she implies that what women face in wartime is not only the unleashed violence of sex starved men but also the elaborate images such men construct as a compensation for and retaliation against the sex that they are presumably fighting to preserve – but they are really preserving themselves to fight. 24 Even though such black women writers as Gwendolyn Brooks and Ann Petry record the suffering of black soldiers in an army as fascist in its racism as are Germany’s services, they also present the ways in which even these victimised men treat their women as whores. 25 It is in this context that we need to read the most ambitious poem written by a woman about the war, H.D.’s Helen in Egypt in which the so called “cause” of the Trojan war attempts to extricate herself from the guilt with which she has been imbued. H.D.’s exiled Helen

22 Hanley, Lynne – Writing War: Fiction, Gender and Memory (Mass., 1991) Pg. 36
23 Ibid, Pg. 39
24 Ibid, Pg. 39
represents a major incongruity in the literary responses of men and women to the Second World War, for while male artists reasserted an ideology of separate spheres, women writers perceived themselves and female culture to be in danger of destruction.

Concerned less with military manoeuvres and more with sexual antagonism, the literature women wrote about World War II needs to be understood as a documentation of women’s sense that the war was a blitz on them. From Doris Lessing’s *Children of Violence* series to Catherine Ann Porter’s *Ship of Fools*, women’s literary works depict the ruin of the war as the sight for the ruin of women’s lives or communities. For Harriet Arnow’s *Gertie in The Dollmaker*, it means relinquishing “herland”: she is removed from her Edenic farm and catapulted into the industrial hell of Detroit’s war factories where she loses her economic independence from her husband, her children and her art.26

The literary response of men to the Second World War helped explain why for so many women artists, the weapons of war – like the cannon of combat – could only result in what Sylvia Plath called “charred skirts and a death mask”.27