

“War is hell” - Olive Schreiner
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Give back my dead!
They who by kop and fountain
First saw the light upon my rocky breast!
Give back my dead,
The sons who played upon me
When childhood’s dews still rested on their heads.
Give back my dead
Whom thou hast riven from me
By arms of men loud called from earth’s farthest bound
To wet my bosom with my children’s blood!
Give back my dead,
The dead who grew upon me!

South Africa’s outcry in this short poem of Olive Schreiner’s, entitled “The Cry of South Africa”, encapsulates Olive’s strong feelings about the senselessness and cruelty of war, articulated with special reference to the Boers in the Anglo-Boer War.

1. Introduction

As a member of the genteel provincial English South Africans, Schreiner - “a formidable and passionate polemicist” (Gagiano, 1993:103) - unabashedly stood up for the Boers despite being increasingly alienated from many of her family members and the local English establishment. She and her husband, Cron, openly criticised British invasion of South Africa, while especially her mother and her brother Theo (Prime Minister in the Rhodes cabinet) justified British imperialism.

According to Gagiano (1993:106):

Both sides of the family were romantics: impractical and idealistic but powerfully eloquent fighters against oppression who happened to identify different villains - Olive and Cron saw the British imperialists as the enemy to oppose, whereas the others identified the British as the justice-bearing civilisation which had to save South Africa from the Africaners’ political aspirations.

Being “the pioneering South African novelist and feminist theorist” (Chrisman, 1993:25), Schreiner’s relation to politics can never be separated from her feminism, as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar perceive:

[Olive Schreiner] has a very straightforward relation to imperialism, and to nationalism: one of absolute opposition. Since imperialism is construed as being identical with patriarchy, Schreiner’s feminism necessarily led not only to her perception of white women as a colony but also to a conviction that the oppression and exploitation of colonized peoples is analogous or even homologous with the oppression of white women (*ibid.*)[1]

Cherry Clayton (1990:108) remarks that the Anglo-Boer War “allowed Schreiner to crystallize out her South African identity, her allegiance to the country, in a way which liberated her from her own sense of victimization as a woman”.

2. Olive Schreiner: An Advocate for the Boer Cause

Even in her earlier non-fictional works, Schreiner articulates both her feminist feelings and her repugnance of British paternalism. In *Thoughts on South Africa*, written in the 1890s, for instance, she proclaims that the First Anglo-Boer War (1881) “was largely a woman’s war; it was from the armchair beside the coffee-table that the voice went out for conflict and no surrender” (1992:175). In this work she criticises the “allegedly special relationship to social and ontological ‘freedom’” (Chrisman, 1993:26) of the British. She attacks the British notion that they have a mandate to “confer ... both collective unity *and* autonomous individuality or selfhood” (*ibid.*) upon its subordinates. In *Thoughts* (1992:351) Schreiner thus argues that the Empire was driven by

the deep conviction buried somewhere in our nature ... that man as man is a great and important thing, that the right to himself and his existence is the incontestable property of all men; and above all the conviction that not only *we* have a right and are bound to preserve it for ourselves, but that *where we come into contact with others we are bound to implant it or preserve it in them.*

Oliver Schreiner’s first political publication appeared as the little 1896 booklet, *The Political Situation*, co-authored by her husband. In this book they censured British Imperialism, especially the monopolists’ attempts at getting control over South Africa’s

resources. They attacked not only the influence of these monopolists in Cape politics, but specifically singled out Rhodes' Chartered Company for taking over Mashonaland and Matabeleland to become the future Rhodesia. Olive's suspicions of Rhodes' machinations were realised with the Jameson Raid in 1896, but Olive turned down an offer to act as political commentator for English newspapers as she did not want to gloat over a fallen man.

Her first politically inspired novel, *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland* (1897), was addressed to the British public to warn them that imperialism, especially as a result of the activities of Rhodes' Chartered Company, was leading to imminent war in South Africa. Moreover, Schreiner infers that especially British women assume a maternal attitude towards subject people. She thus appeals to British women to fulfil their humanitarian mission towards their South African "child subjects ... [who are] crying for mother-love" (1974:60), but to no avail.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Schreiner was convinced that there were only "two questions in South Africa, the native question and the question - Shall the whole land fall into the hands of a knot of Capitalists" (*Letters*, 1987:278).

In 1899 Olive published *An English South African's View of the Situation*, "an eve-of-war" (First & Scott, 1989:235) plea to England to prevent war. Her "sentimental plea to English patriotism and pride" soon gives way to a vivid picture of the results of war and ends with her warning that there would be silence in the country if the Boers were defeated, but no peace since "If there were left but five thousand pregnant South African-born women and all the rest of their people destroyed, these women would breed up again a race like the first" (*in* First & Scott, 1989:236).

Ill-health forced Olive to refrain from acting as war correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian*, but her influence was noticeable in the publications of, for example, Edward Carpenter and Keir Hardy who portrayed the Boers as a simple, defenceless, non-capitalist society pitted against the full military and economic force of the British empire. Olive's ideas were fiercely attacked, for instance by Karl Pearson who justified the war as

“a step towards the fulfilment of a Darwinian plan” (in First & Scott, 1989:242), as well as by Sydney Webb who regarded the war as “wholly unjust but wholly necessary” (*ibid.*). George Bernard Shaw wrote in similar vein:

the fact remains that a Great Power, consciously or unconsciously, must govern in the interests of civilization as a whole; and it is not to those interests that such mighty forces as goldfields ... should be wielded irresponsibly by small communities of frontiersmen (*ibid.*).

Although fairly sympathetic in examining Schreiner’s pleas for the Boer cause, First and Scott (1989:243-244) do criticise her views of the Boers as biased:

In her revulsion from imperial policy she committed herself to its antagonist in the white man’s war. Her political - and sentimental - attachment to the Boer, later the republican, cause had not been an easy adherence for an English-speaking South African. The more isolated she was for her heretical views, the more committed she grew. She had always lived as an outcast, one had to stand outside the mainstream for the sake of principle (*ibid.*:243).

First and Scott scathingly proceed by stating that “it was nevertheless a failure of political intellect for Olive to refuse to see the republics for the racially bigoted despotisms they were (*ibid.*).

Arthur Davey (1978:160), however, points out that although Schreiner “was one of the few colonial writers to have gained a reputation ... as an outspoken critic of the drift to war and its consequences”, she did not make a significant impact in Britain. However, her pamphlet *An English South African’s View of the Situation: Words in Season* was published in London, while the *London Leader* “commented favourably” (*ibid.*) on her writings.

At the beginning of the war, Olive hoped that the Boers would stay out of colonial possessions, but was against British annexure of the republics. She, however, was prohibited from speaking out openly because her brother Will was in office, but after the fall of his cabinet, she was outspoken against annexation and the burning of farms, as her speech at a conference in Cape Town (9 July 1900) reveals:

The day was coming when England would realise that the most deadly foes she had ever had were the men who, to satisfy personal greed and ambition, had produced this war. Unless England should immediately refute and reverse her entire course of action, every farmhouse which the British soldiers were burning down today was a torch lighting the British Empire in South Africa to its doom; every trench which the brave English soldiers dug was a part of the tomb of England; every bullet which took the life of a South African found its billet in the heart of the British Empire; every political prisoner of South Africa, who in his cell that night would dream of freedom, will one day realise it in his own person or that of his descendants (in Schoeman, 1992:100).

She often succeeded in winning an audience's attention by adding some local colour to her speeches. In this instance she, for example, said:

the little African mierkat - torn, wounded and bleeding - might yet creep back alive to its home in the red African earth South Africa to-day, lay torn, wounded and bleeding at the feet of England. It was the hour of England's might; but the day would come when England would know that for her also the path of justice would have been the path of peace" (*ibid.*).

Having heard her speaking against the war at one of the congresses of women, the writer H.W. Nevinson wrote of her:

I described her at the time as a short heavy brown-haired woman, but when she began to speak she was transfigured. Indeed, though she stood perfectly still, she was transfigured into flame. Indignation can make the dumb speak and stones be eloquent. But this woman was not dumb, and was no stone. I have heard much indignant eloquence, but never such a molten torrent of white-hot rage" (in Scott & First, 1989:246).

These women's meetings were met with severe distaste and ridicule by the English Press, while Olive in particular was singled out for censure, since she spoke out as an English-speaking woman of English descent, as the following reference from a London weekly reveals: "... the cackle at the Metropolitan Hall Hen Convention on Monday was an hysterical affair, quite to the liking of Olive Schreiner" (in Schoeman, 1992:102-103). In South Africa as well Olive's speeches and writings were severely criticised. In a letter in the *Cape Times*, a certain George Max King, for instance, referred to her work as "the ravings of a disordered though talented mind" which he had read with "indignation at her distortion of facts and perversion of the truth; amazement at the intensity of her hate and hysterical rage, [and] pity at such debasement of her talent in the fostering of race-hatred"

(in Schoeman, 1992:127).

Although these congresses of women exercised a fair amount of influence, Merriman, for instance, regarded Olive as “illogical, appealing to feeling rather than reason” and remarked after a lengthy conversation with her that she was “excited and visionary as ever, full of vague schemes without any practical means of carrying them out”. As part of the “shrieking sisterhood”, Olive however, unabashedly continued articulating her protest against the English, as evinced by a British officer’s reaction to her statement that the spirit of the women would regain the independence of the two Boer Republics.: “Yes, the women are something too awful; they are not afraid of anything” (in Scott & First, 1989:247).

After the outbreak of war, her role was curbed by both her failing health and prohibitions imposed by martial law. While in Hanover during the second part of the war, and surrounded by sympathisers of the Boer cause, Olive became a partisan, working with women like Betty Molteno, Marie Koopmans de Wet and Emily Hobhouse, to collect funds and provisions to aid those suffering as a result of martial law. She, for instance, openly voiced her revulsion at the execution of three young rebels.

Although Olive did not write much during the war years, her short story *Eighteen-Ninety-Nine* serves as a poignant example of her empathy with the suffering of women and children left destitute on farms or being taken to concentration camps. During this period she remarked of martial law:

I’ve often wondered why and how the Christians came to invent Hell. But last night when I was lying in bed it struck me that the early Christians lived in a time very much like this under the Roman Empire during its decline and fall; and of course the poor things believed in Hell because they saw it. *Hell is martial law* (in Schoeman, 1992:151).

Olive played a key role in the work of a group of poets who fervently devoted their poetry to proclaiming the Boer cause to the world, such as those South Africans who published poetry in *New Age*. These poems later appeared as *Songs of the Veld*. Although it is doubtful if Olive published in *New Age*, she actively corresponded with pro-Boer

sympathisers like Alice Green, Betty Molteno and Anna Purcell who published anonymously in this periodical. Furthermore, Olive's series of articles, entitled "The African Boer", appeared in *Ethical World*, providing "a profound insight into the Boer mind for readers in England and South Africa alike" (Van Wyk Smith, 1978:237). In anonymous writings to *South African News* she addressed issues such as "the Boer rural myth, the indomitableness of Boer women, the execution of rebels and the historic roots of the Boer-British quarrel". Van Wyk Smith (1978:240) attributes the censure of Olive to the impact she made in South Africa:

So volatile was Olive Schreiner's writing and public speaking during the Anglo-Boer War, that the loyalist *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser* lampooned her as demented ... the distress of Olive Schreiner and her friends at what was happening in the Cape Midlands was no mere quirk ... [as] amply borne out by letters from other loyal English farmers in the area.

The aftermath of war left Olive lonely and embittered, feeling neither assimilated by the English or Afrikaners: "People who were everything to me during the war, more than my brothers and sisters when I had to try and help them get out of prison, or to get food, seem nothing to me now, and I am nothing to them" (in First & Scott, 1989:252). Olive resultantly turned to the native question, devoting the last of her failing powers to advocate a just dispensation for them in South Africa.

In *Women and War* (1911) Schreiner's feminism once again strongly asserts itself. She, for instance, states: "We have always borne part of the weight of war, and the major part" (W&L:168). Because women bear and raise children, they "pay the first cost on all human life" (W&L:169). She therefore concludes that "Without an inexorable cause, this [war] should not be!" (W&L:170).

3. CONCLUSION

This paper has endeavoured to portray Olive Schreiner as "a white South African woman, erratic, emotional, impetuous and often ridiculous" (Schoeman, 1992:217) or to use Ridley Beeton's (1987:9) words: to "help in putting a warm, modest, arrogant, angry, loving, erratic and brilliant woman together". As an exponent of change, Olive was "[s]o

far ahead of her times” (Gordimer, *in* First and Scott, 1989:4) that she should be viewed as a “brave and brilliant iconoclast of the Left” (*ibid.*:6).

Schreiner’s “sensitivity to all forms of oppression” (Clayton, 1986:7) is always apparent in her writing and speeches.

Although Olive Schreiner’s contribution to Anglo-Boer War literature may be regarded as that of “a visionary rather than a cogent political figure” it underlines the fact that “[i]t is only literature, which contains history, that is able to confer a more than statistical reality on a country” (*in* First & Scott, 1989:8).

Finally, Schreiner has earned herself a place in international intellectual circles. According to Leveson (1992:99) Schreiner should be viewed “not so much as a South African writer but as a participant in the field of international ideas” (Leveson, 1992:99).

FOOTNOTES

- [1] Chrisman, however disagrees with this view of Schreiner’s literary politics, regarding the connections between imperialism and feminism as “complex and variable” (1993:25) and advocating the more useful approach of assuming the “*interdependence* of imperialism and gender”.

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