Reclamation Of Personal Memory Of War In Select Texts Of British And Canadian Literature

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Abstract
This paper proposes to find a distinction between Colonial and Canadian thought. The first step will be to look for a Postcolonial understanding of the Colonial literature that commemorated the War and eclipsed the Canadian experiences. The tentative texts I'll be examining are British poet Rudyard Kipling’s "Two Canadian Memorials" (Epitaphs of the War) and the poem “In Flander Fields” by the Canadian poet John McCrae. In these texts, I look for the features that subsume the Subaltern under the Colonial. I try to differentiate between the 'legacy' of the soldier and the 'memory' of the individual. As Marita Sturken says in "The Wall, the Screen, and the Image: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial" - "The act of commemoration is a legitimating process." The act of commemoration necessitates the choice of one narrative over the other. The voice of the dead in these poems is only heard as the legacy that they pass on and not as the memory of a person. Where required, evidence from memoirs and letters of Canadian soldiers from World War 1 will also be used to supplement the reading of the fictional and poetic texts. Secondly, the paper will also examine Post-Colonial texts in Canadian literature such as the poem "Survivor" by Amabel King and the novel Generals Die in Bed by Charles Yale Harrison to understand how they have broken away from the Colonial hegemony. I’ll demonstrate it by tracing the shift from the collective consciousness of the soldier to the individual. By examining similar texts in Canadian fiction, I will give evidence of how the memory of violence and horror of the individual soldier is reclaimed.

Keywords: Legacy, Subaltern, Personal, Communicative and Cultural Memory, Memory

Introduction
British writer H.G. Wells called World War 1 “The War That Will End War,” published in The Daily News on August 14, 1914. This phrase quickly spread like wildfire giving the world hope of a clear blue sky after the storm. World War 1 war gave the world a binary of good vs. evil and that once the war is over there will be eternal peace. At least that
was the notion misconstrued by the public and exploited by the warmongers. The war went on for four years and eventually led to another World War.

War narratives reflected the pointlessness of this bloodshed, particularly, the narratives of the soldier and the civilian. But the soldier, someone ready to lay down his life for his country became the symbol of war and shrouded the individual. Under the banner of the Allies, the Subaltern was not distinguished from the Colonialists. The heroic fervor and loyalty to the motherland were not to be questioned. Hence the Subaltern’s bravery was exalted along with his master, who was regarded as his brother. But his lament as an individual was, at least for a time ignored.

The question is how did the voice of the Subaltern get subsumed? The answer would be through the modes of commemoration. A public commemoration can give a sanctioned history. But beneath it could be an intentional forgetting of certain narratives. In the works of literature I’m examining here (poetry and prose) I would show how the legacy - valiant death in war - was consolidated by public commemoration through literature. And how this led to the subsuming of the individual.

The subsuming of the individual can be explained by the distinction between ‘Communicative Memory’ and ‘Cultural Identity’ made by Jan Assmann in his essay ‘Collective Memory and Cultural Memory’. Communicative memory has a small temporal horizon of 80-100 years and is based exclusively on everyday communications. Thus every community conceives its unity through common images of their recent past. E.g.: family, neighborhood, etc. Whereas cultural memory is based on foundational memories. Assmann defines it as “Cultural memory is a kind of institution. It is exorcised, objectified, and stored away in symbolic forms or the sights of gestures are stable and situation transcendent. They may be transferred from one situation to another and transmitted from one generation to another.” These symbolic forms could be memorials, mnemonic institutions, etc. As time passes cultural memory gets accumulated in such symbolic forms in a disembodied form so that they could be re-embodied later on. These ‘figures of memory’ (texts, rites, monuments, recitation, observance, etc.) stay in a detached state from the present time. Yet there remains a strong connection between everyday culture and this objectivist culture. This connection is called the ‘Concretion of identity’. A group bases its consciousness upon this connection which allows the group to reproduce its identity. Whilst this concretion of identity occurs, there is determinism that goes on identifying with particular things and excluding others. Thus communicative generational memories are created with a particular foundational myth at the center. Hence the memory of one who chose to fight the war is heroic and honorable, and the one who refused is regarded cowardly. This is self-evident from ancient times, as is evident in the lines “Come back with your shield - or on it” (Plutarch, Mor.241) Only the valiant is willing to face death. The one who turns away from battle is a coward. This perspective has always remained throughout centuries.

The individuality of the soldier is condensed into a symbol- the legacy of all the dead. A post-colonial reading of the war poetry will reveal that the memorialization can create the aforementioned ambivalence. The reason is a change in perspective that came out of
disillusionment. Before the war, the individual’s personal loss was for the country. Is the individual’s lament over his personal loss as visible as the collective loss? In the poem “Two Canadian Memorials” by British poet Rudyard Kipling, there is a demand made by the dead which cannot be refused- the continuation of martyrdom. Therefore the individual is secondary. The first stanza of the poem-

“We giving all gained all.

Neither lament us nor praise.

Only in all things recall,

It is Fear, not Death that slays.”

The last line reads- ‘And trusts that world we won for you to keep!’ This is the call for the continuation of martyrdom. Juxtaposing this poem with the poem “In Flanders’ Fields” by the Canadian poet John McCrae, we can find the same strain of thought in the lines-

“We are the dead. Short days ago

We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,

Loved and were loved, and now we lie

In Flanders’ fields.”

The plea is to keep the legacy of the dead alive, hence the sacrifice of the soldier must continue. The following lines give the emotional thrust to those who are alive:

“If ye break faith us who die

We shall not sleep, though poppies blow

In Flanders’ fields.”

Thus, whether the bitter tone that reflects the “never again” theme resonates with the individual lament can only be contested. Because the master narrative, of the legacy of the dead bequeathed to those alive, is so powerful that whether the Canadian’s bitterness springs from within the individual is ambiguous. Instead, we can clearly detect the mutual strain of thought in the Canadian and the Colonial- the sacrifice of the ‘soldier’. Thus the memory of their past only serves as a trope for the legacy. The poppies that grow near their graves same ambiguous quality found in the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial. The quality of being a symbol that keeps the fire of martyrdom burning generation after generation. Albert Wm. Drummond, a Private in the Canadian army during the War. The poem’s dominant theme is disillusionment. The poet sees dead bodies everywhere. Unlike the collective memory of the dead in Kipling’s and McCrae’s poems, the individual soldier is mentioned, as a ‘mangled form’ whose ‘icy hands’ clutch a letter which reads, “My darling wife”. The poet concludes with the stanza
“Let all who live go swear by God
That ne’er again shall man
Go forth to war, intent to shed
Blood of his fellow-man.
Let not that blood be on our souls,
Let war for ever cease,
That man to man the whole world o’er,
May brothers live in peace.”

Only here do we see the yearning for peace by raising the cry ‘no more’.

The idea of bravery has always been an essential ingredient in the World War I narrative. The line ‘It is Fear, not Death that slays’ in “Two Canadian Memorials” is an instruction that resonates the sentiment in the Shakespearean phrase, “A coward dies a thousand times before his death, but the valiant taste of death but once.” It was a common thing since the eighteenth century in the United Kingdom and the countries of the British Empire for women to give men who haven’t enlisted in War a white feather, taken as the symbol of cowardice. An article in the Guardian titled “Order of the White Feather: My ‘coward’ grandfather” tells the story of a Southern Londoner who joined the army despite his short sight, because a woman (one of the members belonging to the Suffrogates) gave him a white feather. He was later killed in the war.

The idea of honor is ancient and transnational. The monstrosity and pointlessness of war are eclipsed by lofty thoughts that glorify it. They can be traced from the lips of Horace to Rupert Brooke. The line “Dulce et decorum est pro-Patria Mori” by Horace, which means “It is sweet and proper to die for one’s country” also resonates in Brooke’s poem “The Soldier” where he says-

“If I should die, think only this of me:
That there’s some corner of a foreign field
That is forever England.”

This line indicates the long historical trajectory of honor associated with war and death. The poem, “America’s Answer” by R.W. Lilllard answers the call of the Canadian soldier “In Flander Fields”-

“Fear not that ye have died for naught
The torch ye threw to us we caught!”
Ten million heads will hold it high;”

This shows the transnational nature of war. Thus the re-embodied memories are associated with the glorification and the necessity of war.

As Astrid Erll puts it in her book, Memory in Culture, “The cultural memory is founded on ‘myths’, stories about a common past and hope for the future.” These myths are the foundational narratives. They are regarded as binding and obligatory. Erll points out that the cultural and communicative memory overlaps, i.e. there are memories that can be regarded as foundational even though they happened in recent times. For example, the Vietnam War would be a good example of disillusionment. If we take the example of the French revolution we have the poor overthrowing the monarchy- the tyrants. Even though the revolution happens more than two hundred years ago, it became a catalyst for many events after it, this it took the form of a foundational event. Sturken calls these ‘communicative generational memories’ as they are part of life experiences and could be regarded as both communicative and cultural memories. Unfortunately the master narrative the world derived from the cultural memory was that of sacrifice and honour.

As Sturken says “The act of commemoration is a legitimating process.” The act of commemoration necessitates the choice of one narrative over the other.

Now the connection between literature and such memory-making should be defined. How does the Colonial hegemony hold, as evidenced in the collective thought processes of the Commonwealth use the medium of literature? Erll states that literature is a medium of cultural memory. It fulfills a multitude of mnemonic functions. Since we are a mnemonic community, literature is a way of world-making. They contribute by giving the world condensed memory figures. These condensed figures are transnational in nature. They have been around for a long time. She gives three features of literature. They are Condensation, where complex ideas, feelings are compressed into mnemonic objects; Narration where there is a selection of particular memory over the other. and Genre, i.e. conventionalized forms are used to bring the message home to people.

As Marita Sturken says in her essay, “The Wall, The Screen, and the Image: The Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial.”, ‘A screen can be a surface that is projected upon; it is also an object that hides something from the view that shelters or protects.’ She points to the ‘sanctioned historical narrative’ of War Memorial that is distorted by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C. The black walls of the memorial act as a screen for two different types of discourses: a master narrative, of the participation of the United States in the Vietnam War and the experiences of its soldiers, and the other - ‘the personal memory’ of the individual.

My focus is on the personal. There is a convergence of the personal and cultural memory with different discourses of history during acts of public commemoration. The process of commemoration projects one narrative over the other. The narrative of the individual ‘I’ or ‘he’ or ‘she’ is drowned out as their emotions are regarded as the emotion of the whole. No longer are they, individuals. They are a legion, where the culture envelopes the personal.
As Sturken points out ‘whatever triumph a particular memorial refers to, its depiction of victory is always tempered by a foregrounding of the lives lost.’ We can take myriads of examples from the ancient era to the modern age. Let’s take World War 1. The War took the lives of over 20 million. Thus the memorial serves as a way of closure. This closure contains the war within a master narrative: of the triumphant victory or the bitter price of victory which is the dominant theme in the “never again” texts of World War 1 memorials. This never again texts such as Mrs. Amabel King’s The Survivor and Generals Die in Bed exposes the ugly truth. The remembrance ritual keeps the perpetual blood-shed in motion. The commemoration offers a complete narrative and its very nature sanctifies future wars, as the lives of the soldiers lost ‘shouldn’t be in vain. But as Sturken points out, the unconventional architecture of the memorial refuses the closure. This ambivalent nature can be found when we take a postcolonial reading of the texts from the war period, which gives space for the subaltern.

Mnemonic mimesis

How can one conceive literature as a medium of cultural memory? Erll does this by formulating Paul Ricoeur’s tripartite model which he has introduced in his book Time and Narrative. She borrows Ricoeur’s terms of mimesis, used to explain the dynamics of fiction-making narrative to conceive literature’s role as a medium of cultural memory. She distinguishes three aspects of mnemonic mimesis.

1. Mnemonic prefiguration - There exists a pre-understanding of cultural memory. Literature is able to access this resource, making textual prefiguration possible. Literature could refer to the material, social or mental dimensions of memory culture. This way it actualizes the elements which were previously not articulated in the social sphere. Thus different and new archives of cultural memory are brought forth through the operation of selection. In World War 1, the poppies that grow near the graves of the dead attained the status of memorials through the poem “In Flanders’ Fields”. This mnemonic figure symbolizes life sprouting from death. The seeds of poppies lay dormant for years and require some activity on the field to sprout. The war with its trenches and shellfire tilled the land, making the poppies come out of their dormancy. The end was necessary for a new beginning. This is a segment of cultural memory associated with war and nations. The soldier gives up his life for the continuation of the life of the civilians. So McCrae’s poem valorizes in a similar fashion what Rudyard Kipling does in the epitaph “Two Canadian Memorials” - the trope of the necessity of death to sustain life.

2. Literary Configuration- Once the mnemonic figures are prefigured into literature, it undergoes a process where it gets converted into fictional elements. Hence literature is not just representing realities; it is reshaping and restructuring the narrative, bringing back the old narratives in a novel way. Thus the poppies in “In Flanders’ Fields” memorialize the legacy and overshadow the individual memory.
3. Collective Re-figuration- Not only is the understanding of the text affected, but there is also an iconic augmentation of reality. Literature can change the perceptions of reality. The reader acts towards these new narratives and thus a new reality is configured. For example, the poem “In Flanders’ Fields” became a powerful recruiting tool. An American woman named Moina Mitchel swore that she will wear a red poppy for the rest of her life. Different interpretations are made by different people. The Commonwealth nations now, wear paper poppies on Remembrance Sunday. At the same time, many people are against it. Because it could also be seen as glorifying war as was the case during World War 1. In the present time, many people wear white poppies to show their objection. So there are two different ways of remembering associated with the poppies. But during wartime, the poppies sadly remained as a propaganda tool. So the validation made by the symbol of poppies subsumed the Canadian thought within the Colonial.

The transnational

There is a submersion of the nationalities of the Commonwealth nations under the Empire. This is partially visible when Kipling’s and McCrae’s poems are compared, in the light of the former belonging to the empire and the latter to Canada. A similar strain is visible in the poems from the collection, Rhymes of A Hut-Dweller by Albert Wm. Drummond. The poem titled “The Motherland” has the Empire, who calls out to her sons,

“Hear, my sons, the drums of war!
I am seeking you afar,
Rally! rally! here to-day!
Though blood-red the price we pay.”

The call is answered by her ‘children’- South Africa, Australia, Canada, and India, where each country’s personified selves reply “We have come to thy side” calling the empire their mother.

Canada Replies,
“We have come to thy side, our mother
We have rallied around today,
We have climbed in our pride that birth right,
Though blood be the price we pay.”

South Africa replies,
“We have heard the call and the drum beat
For part of the empire are we-”

India replies,
“Hark to the call of the Great White King
Calling to his son to today!”
Thus by answering her call the poet intends to show the atmosphere of that time. The commonwealth nations, especially Canada were eager to prove their capacity as a free country and prove their worth to the sovereign. This loyalty towards the Empire was fuelled by the hatred felt for the common enemy- The Axis forces. The poem “The Oath” by Canadian soldier Private A. Nixon, reflects this sentiment-

“I will not take a German’s word,
He’ll break it if he can.
There is no love in a German heart,
Or faith in a German man.”

The postcolonial turn in war-literature

The disillusionment towards the war which finds voice in the literature of the war period continued to take a more powerful form in the Post-colonial texts that followed. In the poem “The Survivor” by Mrs. Amabel King, we find a Canadian feminine inter-war voice reflecting on the pointless bloodshed. What is interesting is that the mnemonic cultural memory associated with poppies is dismantled. Instead of the trope- the sacrifice of the soldier for the world, we are presented with a narrator who realizes how the dead were betrayed as their deaths were in vain. She stands in Flanders’ Fields where she gives this different interpretation, of disillusionment:

“ where poppies, blood-red swayed
To the guns, and the drums, and the marching feet
of a million men- betrayed!”

She asks ‘Great God’ whether it was ‘just’ that the lives of men had to be sacrificed this way. While in McCrae’s poem we have the legacy that has to be continued, King’s dead men gave their life hoping for the end of the war. Thus she ends the poem, ironically commenting that she is glad they are dead, because:

“I thank God they’re beyond the
Maddening truth
That War makes man its fool,
And will stalk abroad o’er prostrate world
Till sovereign Love shall rule!”

Charles Yale Harrison’s novel Generals Die in Bed is a cynical and selfish narrative of the individual. Here the uniformity in the voices reflects the condemnation of the war by this disillusioned. It has many instances which can untangle the truth from lies, misconceptions, and ignorance. We see how men who were once patriotic had become disillusioned. They kill the enemy only for their survival.
Poets like Kipling, Brooke, McCrae, fall into the category of patriotism. Even though the fundamental thoughts associated with Kipling or McCrae might have the lamentation for the loss, the Colonialists and the Canadian merge to form a collective consciousness. They are unified by their patriotic fervor. This novel barely has any such feelings. What it has is the cry of each soldier which is reflected in their mock song “Oh, my, I’m too young to die, I want to go home.” The soldier longs for his home. Here the idea of displacement is looked at from a different perspective. The “little towns in a far land” in ‘Two Canadian Memorials’, from where the soldiers come from, use displacement as the necessary element in sacrifice. To die in a foreign land is, following Brooke’s thoughts a valiant act. In the novel, the protagonist imagines what Montreal looks like. The recurring thought “So, this is War.” does not reflect the same excitement they had when they began. The same sentence is shouted by the new American recruits. The Canadian soldiers fearing the enemy might find them, because of the Americans’ earnest enthusiasm, tell them that they can have all the war after the Canadians are relieved from trench duty. When read along with the protagonist’s thoughts for home one gets the picture of a man who had lost the luster he had found in war and doesn’t want to die a futile death.

One more point to be noted is that the honor of the sacrifice is turned inside out. The death of the soldier is also a mere War tactic as evidenced from the lines, “There are two kinds of people in this world- there’s that like wars and those that fight ‘em, pal.” The title of the book points to the hypocritical leaders of war who operate under the safety of the background. The hypocrisy reaches its high peak when after days of trench warfare, the soldier’s rest period is meant for drills, parades, etc. One General preaches, “I hope that you will conduct yourselves to the greater glory of Canadian arms.” This is bitterly ironic because the soldiers who are supposed to conduct in a way to glorify Canadian arms are transported like cattle from one battlefield to another. There seems to be no affection from the motherland. The line “We’re bloody shock troops, that’s what we are. Whenever the imperial caves in, up we go.” shows how a Canadian soldier was used as an expendable who will lead the first wave and absorb all the attacks. Also, the expendability of the soldier is exploited well by businessmen, which is evident in the lines, “And I’ll bet somebody is making a profit on those shells whether they are fired at the Germans or whether they just blow up.”

When someone is faced with the threat of death, their kindness and valour disappear. Instead of the soldier whose thought is linked to the collective consciousness of loyalty and honour, we have a selfish protagonist who stares at a ‘fat rat’. The rat has fed on the corpses. The protagonist as the novel progresses becomes similar to the rat. It is the survival of the fittest that matters. Here everything for the soldier is a matter of survival. He abandons his injured friend Frye to save his own life. The animal trope here represents a poignant aspect of human nature. This selfishness undermines his maternal affection towards the ‘Empire’. The protagonist doesn’t have the luxury of feeling honourable, fighting for the ‘motherland’. He came with his countrymen when the ‘Motherland’ called for him, but now disillusioned, his only thoughts are for survival. As he says, “The enemy victory doesn’t fill us with either fear or hatred. We are tired.” The soldiers here pray for their survival and not for the motherland’s
victory. The only true enemies for them are the lice and their captains. Death is their third enemy which they seldom mention. Then what position the German occupy becomes problematic. The hero kills a German named Karl but later saves his younger brother who surrenders to him. But at a later stage, the soldiers with the aid of barrages killed the frenzied Germans who kept on coming at them. This cannot be attributed to the eradication of the enemy in the name of the nation. The protagonist says, “We are savage beasts. I’ll kill them all.” Along with savagery is intense selfishness. Under attack, he and his companions have no mercy for the enemy. All that matters is their survival.

In the novel public commemoration via mnemonics is dismantled. In World War 1, the rumour that Canadian soldier Harry Band was crucified spread around and the Canadian government commissioned a sculpture. Thus a similar mnemonic re-figuration like that of the poppies was made for the Canadian soldier by the masses. The masses felt that, like Jesus Christ, the Canadian soldier would bring divine retribution to the enemies as Christ would on Judgement day. But in the novel, unlike Christ’s sacrifice, the soldiers’ death were that of a doomed martyrdom. It was futile. What makes them kill the enemy in the sense of survival and savagery. Also, the ‘poppy’ sentiment is mocked by the author. After hours of drilling under the blistering sun, the protagonist remarks that “Our faces are as red as the poppies of which the war poets are writing back home” - mocking the aspects of sacrifice and honor associated with the poppies.

Conclusion

The idea of motherhood is symbolically shattered when the Canadian soldiers attack the British soldiers. After months of not getting proper food and bath, muddied from top to bottom in the trenches took a toll on the nerves of the soldiers. They seize an abandoned town and defy their British captains. They fire upon them and start looting the city. Their drunkenness and disorder show the degeneration of the disciplined soldier into a savage. The loyal ‘children’ thus turned against their ‘mother’. When their captain died from his wounds he called out to his mother. Here the ‘brave soldier’ image is turned upside down; showing that beneath it is an ordinary man who seeks the peace of domestic life. The disillusionment had set in. There was clarity, only sadly at the last moment. We get the image of a child yearning for his mother and not the ‘soldier’ who yearns for his ‘motherland’. Thus the novel uncovers the individual who has been eclipsed by the soldier figure. The true nature of the individual is susceptible to fits of change. The protagonist shows mercy and spares two German soldiers but only a while before that did he force his bayonet into another German’s abdomen. He is also the same man who abandons his friend Frye who begs him to help. He leaves his friend to die so that he can save his own life. This is the quality of man where circumstances bring out different characteristics in him. He could be wise and philosophical or he could become a brute. It shatters the image of the heroic, honourable soldier and replaces them with an ordinary man who is imperfect in reality. This is how the subaltern’s voice that has been lost was regained in the novel.

The suffering itself cannot show the individual because it can be used as a propaganda tool and the truth will remain submerged. The selfish side is made evident in these narratives.
where the politics of suffering is focussed. These narratives can thus make the personal and the cultural memory of the subaltern distinctive. Through tracing the politics of his suffering one can reclaim the identity that he had: a memory of violence and suffering.

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