

The Effects of the Great War of 1914 on Gender Politics as Exemplified in Jessie Pope's "War Girls"

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Abstract

The Great War of 1914 heralded a new era of gender awareness among British women. As men from every nook and corner of England were picked and sent to the war, there was a shortage of manpower to carry out day to day works. This was the time when women came out of the houses to break their stereotypical image. This social awakening which war brought is explicitly captured in Jessie Pope's well known poem "War Girls". Pope is one of the pioneers of war poetry capturing the essence of the Great War. Prior to the war women were "caged and penned up". The patriarchal constraints expected them to follow their natural roles as wife, mother, and housekeeper. The war offered women a pleasant change from pent up and meaningless chores and this relief is celebrated in Pope's poetry.

Keywords: The Great War, Jessie Pope, "War Girls", stereotype, patriarchy, and gender.

Terms Used

1. **The Great War:** also known as First World War or World War I; is considered to be the deadliest war ever fought in the history. It lasted for about four years from 1914 to 1918 and led to great loss of life and property.
2. **Jessie Pope:** was an English poet and journalist whose war poetry published during World War I got great recognition. Her poems are known for motivational and patriotic fervor.
3. **"War Girls":** is the famous war poem by Jessie Pope. It boasts of the extraordinary talent which women exhibited while men were sent to the war. The poem eulogizes the finesse with which they fulfilled all duties which were otherwise considered a "male domain".
4. **Stereotype:** generalized characteristics or belief patterns thought to represent people belonging to a specific category.
5. **Patriarchy:** societal set-up characterized by male domination.

6. **Gender:** is a cultural construct rendering differentiation between male and female based on its peculiar belief systems. For instance, the society expects females/women to be soft spoken, shy, and submissive.

The paper discusses the influence of the Great War on gender politics in the light of Jessie Pope's famous poem "War Girls". Harper Collins dictionary states gender politics as the "debate about the roles of men and women". When war broke out in 1914, the position of women in British society was largely unfavorable. The gender politics prevalent in British society before war is aptly summarized by Alfred Lord Tennyson in his famous poem "The Princess":

Man for the field and woman for the hearth:
Man for the sword and for the needle she:
Man with the head and woman with the heart:
Man to command and woman to obey;
All else confusion... (Canto V)

These lines truly depict the subservient roles women were expected to play in the British society prior to the war. Their work was considered separate from and inferior to the works done by men. Even at the workplace they were poorly paid. Once married women were expected to give up work and restore their natural duties of womanhood i.e. becoming an ideal wife, mother and a housekeeper. Gail Braybon brings to light the societal conventions that surrounded women at that time stating that, "a non-working wife was a status symbol" and she was expected to "devote herself to the comforts of husbands and children" (19). The war offered woman a pleasant relief from the pent up and meaningless chores.

Since men had gone to the war front to join the combat forces women were left back home. It was realized that the only way to keep the economy going was to employ women in the jobs which men had left behind. Now it came to the shoulders of women to maintain equilibrium between both the worlds—the familial front and work (professional) front. Women broke their conventional image and stepped into the unexplored areas of experience. As the manhood marched to the war, women were "out to show their grit". Women were "No longer caged and penned up", and they tackled the manly jobs with utmost energy and grit. Women were employed to serve in almost all spheres. It was the time when women were seen doing all sorts of jobs, they were working as lift –operators, van and tram drivers, butchers, conductors, ticket checkers, milkmaids and to the utmost surprise in munitions factories so that ample weapons and ammunition could be supplied to the British forces. The readiness and enthusiasm on the part of women to take up all sort of jobs is truly captured by Pope. However she doesn't miss to state

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and reassure that, “Beneath each uniform/ Beats a heart that’s soft and warm”. The poem furthers that taking charge of ‘manly’ work did not mean that women were neglecting the familial front. They were proving their worth in all walks of life. Pope concludes the poem:

But a solemn statement this is,
They’ve no time for love and kisses,
Till the khakhi soldier boys come marching back.

The concluding line, however, poses a question that what would happen to women once men in khakhi will be back? Whether the opportunities for women to establish them in all jobs fade away as men will come and overtake their respective jobs from them? Pope has left all these questions answered. Though, as I read about the same, I came across the fact that after the Great War was over, women fought for their rights. There was a new awakening in women as they realized their true worth. They knew their capabilities and after this there was no looking back. I would like to conclude that the poem eulogizes indirect yet exceptional contribution of “Strong, sensible, and fit” women during World War I. When men had gone to fight the war, the country had no option but to employ women in tasks which were otherwise considered a taboo for them. It acted as a blessing in disguise for women as they realized their capabilities, and this is how necessity proved a virtue for them. I find that the poem written long back in 1916 holds true for the present times too. There is seldom any sphere that is left untouched and unexplored by women, and they are excelling in all fields.

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