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Introducing Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen as War Poets: Interpretation on Expressions

ABSTRACT

Cohen and Dylan are the world wide famous singers but many have forgotten the literature that could be taught using their songs. This research article is scripted with the objective of exploring the qualities of war poets in the everlasting duo of Cohen and Dylan. This research article also aims to exhibit the emotions expressed through the select songs of the stalwarts Cohen and Dylan. Attempts are made to probe into a few historical back ground like the World Wars to justify and to substantiate the statements mentioned. Analyses of the select songs are done based on a few characteristics of war poets and poetry. Thus, this research critique is an effort to explain the importance of teaching the works of such singers, lyricist and poets in literature classroom to give a better understanding of those unforgotten lessons of the past.

Keywords: Emotions, Impact, Songs, War poetry, World Wars..

Introduction:

Leonard Cohen and Bob Dylan are considered and accepted as legends in the field of literature. Their themes are universal but they talk about their own land its beauty and pain. Leonard Cohen was born on 1934 in Canada; Dylan was born on 1941 in America. Their entry into the literary world is almost same and moreover, they have faced the effects and impact of Second World War. In economical condition, both Canada and America started to flourish with the concepts of capitalism. From the article “American History from Revolution to Reconstruction and Beyond”, it could be understood that though the industrialisation grew up, the economic condition of farmers’ become worst. Many people gave up their land because of large scale businesses. In Canada too, the industrial and manufacturing sectors started to overtake the agricultural sector.

This economic and political setup is the seed for writings of Cohen and Dylan. As Pablo Neruda states “I grew up in this town, my poetry was born between the hill and the river, it took its voice from the rain, and like the timber, it steeped itself into the forests”. Similar to this ideology, the themes and ideas of Cohen and Dylan always deal with emotions of common man. They became very popular with the help of mass media and mass culture but they never failed to express and explain the pain in common man’s life.

Themes and Writing Styles:

Cohen is a versatile person. He led his life as song writer, musician, singer, poet, novelist and painter. He is very particular in choosing the themes. His writing has high influence of culture, war, political and injustices in society. He transforms himself as character while he writes. Once he explained about himself in an interview for a question which helps to understand about his principle “Why this severe attitude onstage, without ever moving around, without ever smiling, almost like you aren’t really in the moment? He replied to that as “there are those who sing laughing, who prance around and make a show. I sing serious songs, and I’m serious onstage because I couldn’t do it any other way”. It is not a statement, it is propaganda.

Dylan also has multi-dimensional personality. He is an expert in many musical instruments like guitar and key board. In earlier stage of his journey in music, Dylan is known for his revolutionary thoughts and protest mind. A few themes are commonly used by him during

that period they are travelling, dreams, death, ignorance, memories of broken heart, reality of life and its originalities.

The deep analysis in the writings of Cohen and Dylan helps the readers to understand how much the role of war and its impact has occupied an important space in their writings and it is vividly understood as well. The above mentioned themes give clear picture about them as war poet.

Impact of War in Dylan and Cohen's Work:

War has immense power to bring change not only in society but also in the thought of an individual. Dylan was born in the post war period. The readers can smell and identify the traces and impact of war in his writings. Dylan reflects the ideology of his generation through his thought. The American poetry takes very different dimensions in 1945. From the article titled "American poetry, 1945-1990: The Anti-tradition" written by Kathryn Van Spanckeren. It clearly shows the nature of poetry in America during that time. To make it brief and crystal clear, Kathryn explained that, the concept of originality is emerged. The writers give much importance to emotions and came up with variety and uniqueness in style. The influence of mass media and modern technologies were very high in the writings of Americans. She states that it is very difficult to summarise the concept and style of American poetry during that period because there are many schools and styles flourished with lot and lot of ideologies.

Similar to American poetry, Canadian poetries also faced the tremendous change and adaptation in its style. The new kind of writings and writers were produced by the impact of Second World War. The Canadian writers also had chosen the path of originality in expressing emotions. Writers blend the concept of aristocracy and colloquial to attract the audience from every corner. Poetry in Canada gets difference sense and moved in different direction. Canadian literature produced many notable figures in English literature in that post-war time. Margret Atwood is one among them.

The similarity between American and Canadian poetry is the concept of originality flourished and then writings and styles have varieties and dimensions. In 1967, Cohen moved to USA for his career. In history of literature, the First World War plays a vital role because it brought so many changes in writings as well as it produced Great War poets and writers. Many

writers claimed that literature does not have impact of Second World War but it is not true. The Second World War gives different dimension to the writings and variety in style and themes. Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen's writing are best examples for the impact of Second World War. Though they are not considered and celebrated as War poets, they came up with writings which are described about the war and its impact in different view.

Works Chosen:

The works of Cohen and Dylan chosen for this research article substantiate the concept of how they can be called or recognised as "war poets". The works chosen are not for arguments, but it is to express another dimension and aspect of their writings. The selected works are not only known for elements of war, but also stands for filled with emotions and voices of common man and people who suffered. Leonard Cohen's "*The Future*" album is considered as symbol of hope, at the same time it have many references of World War. It was released in the year 1992. This album consists of nine sound tracks. From Bob Dylan, an album entitled "*Another side of Bob Dylan*" is selected. It was released in the year 1964. This album has 11 sound tracks with some revolutionary ideologies and protest songs. "*Another side of Bob Dylan*" is a failure album in business level, but it is a master piece of Bob Dylan.

War poets and Themes:

There is a general meaning and understanding that exist for war poets that is one who participate in war and then write about that experiences. How long it is to be like this? More than a World War, the post war time gave worst situation. The chaos rose within the nation or boundary. The early life of Dylan and Cohen helps to understand another phase of war in the name of economic downfall, cold war, civil war and social disorder. Similar to the soldiers, the post war children also was affected psychologically. More than standing and fighting in battleground, the next generation started to fight with themselves to survive and excel in life.

There are few themes which were normally in the concept of war poems, they are brotherhood, friendship, innocence, reality of war, religious beliefs, loss of nature, cruelty, horror and compulsory it touch upon emotions and feelings. The works chosen from Dylan and Cohen have all these concepts and packed with emotions of entire manhood. Is this not enough to consider or accept them as war poet? Second World is the primary element which makes them as

a poet. Actually they fight to regain their childhood and happiness from the cruel hands of war but they lost. Their writings are not mourning, that is memory.

Narrative techniques and way of expression from these two legends is differed from others in many ways. Both of these writers gave enough space to the readers to interpret and feel their own beats. Universality is the ultimate aim for Cohen and Dylan, and then they can switch over from one concept to another without any difficulty.

Review of Literature:

Leonard Cohen and Bob Dylan are accepted and celebrated as legends in mass culture and also in the field of literature. They have not only fans for their talent but also have followers in large numbers. Their ideas spread over the world without any limits and boundaries. The following reviews help to get maximum level of understanding about their work and ideologies.

In "The Newyork Times", John Pareles has written an article entitled "An Appraisal: Leonard Cohen, Master of Meanings and Incantatory Verse", on November 11, 2016. In this article, he recollected the earlier days of Cohen and gave the brief explanation about major works of Cohen. Pareles described the writing style of Cohen and appreciate that as "He toned his song with serene gravity, revealing once again how carefully chiselled every one of his quatrains is. And with every line he shared, implicitly and in his lyrics there was a humbling knowledge of mortality". Pareles talks about the concept of eroticism and sensuality in Cohen's writing with the help of few lines from his album. Moreover, Pareles came up with clear understanding with in -depth interpretations. He discussed about his voice, using musical instruments, style of music, rhythm and title of albums. This kind of understanding from Pareles show how much Cohen's role is there in history of music and literature.

"How post modern is Cohen's poetry?" is a research article written by Clint Burnham. In this article, Burnham applied the aspects of postmodernism and its techniques in the writings of Cohen. He stated that "Beautiful Losers" of Cohen is first post modern novel in canada, and as well as Cohen's poetry also have same effects. For that he has shown the poem "Flowers For Hitler" as an example. Burnham highlights the themes and concepts of post modernism to understand Cohen's writing techniques. He talks about this as "I propose to begin by outlining what i see as some of the key features of post modern culture: the notion of the death of the

subject, the prevalence of pastiche, space as thematic-formal concern, and the dialectic of high and mass culture.” This article analysed postmodernism aspects and how Canadian literature is in literary history. He poured his anger towards few critics; he believed that this kind of understanding from readers and writings from Cohen helps to uplift their standard.

Jeelena M.Zandial, Faculty of philosophy in University of Novi Sad. Her research article titled “Prophetic elements in Leonard Cohen’s poetry and music” discuss the Cohen’s experience in religion and prophetic visions through his select poems and songs such as “Prayer of my wild Grandfather”, “Story of Isaac”, “Future”, and “First we take Manhattan”.

Gordon Ball (2007) has stated in his study that “Poetry and music have shared common ground, from the Greeks to Pound to Ginsberg. Categorize Dylan’s work as you will, but its literary qualities are exceptional; its artful idealism has contributed to major social change, altering and enriching the lives of millions culturally, politically, and aesthetically; the voices acclaiming it are many and distinguished. The Nobel Prize for Literature, which in over a century of being awarded has covered a territory broad and diverse, is a deserved form of recognition for such extraordinary accomplishment“.

Impact of War in Bob Dylan’s another Side of Bob Dylan:

Another side of Bob Dylan captured and reflected the thoughts of Dylan and pain in his life. This work can be considered as form of Auto-biography. He discussed every aspect in society and with lot and lot of emotions. Through the help of emotions, Dylan carries lot of information and ideas to others. Based on the qualities and themes of war poetry, this work is categorised under five concepts, such as

- Brotherhood
- Reality of War
- Loss of nature
- Revolution
- Fear and death

These five concepts will be discuss and proved through the lines of Bob Dylan in the album “*Another Side of Bob Dylan*”.

- **Brotherhood**

“Brothers and sisters” is considered as magical word in this world. Love towards others is one of the finest qualities in any human being. Every religion taught the concept of brotherhood as ultimate goal.

“All I really want to do” is the first song in the album “*Another Side of Bob Dylan*”. This song has six stanzas and end with same line, that is “is, baby, be friends with you”. This single line itself clearly expresses the Dylan’s view and longingness for relationship in brotherhood. In these six stanzas, he came out with emotive words and expression. Moreover he tried to start friendship with others and he expects the same.

I ain’t lookin’ to compete with you,
 Beat or cheat or mistreat you
 Simplify you, classify you,
 Deny, defy or crucify you.
 All i really want to do
 Is, baby, be friends with you. (Bob Dylan)

These lines are filled with many emotions such as “cheating, pain, diversity, punishment and love”. To understand his view, there is no need for any literary analysis or theories because he has used the language of very common man for explaining and confessing the universal ideologies. These words of Dylan are neither an apology nor a confession. It is a voice of a man who suffered by war and enmity. He wants everyone to be with beautiful relationship. Dylan never expects any sympathy or empathy from anyone, but he expects small amount of respect and acceptance from others to lead a new life. He explained this idea in his own words in last stanza of the same song as,

I don’t want to fake you out,
 Take or shake or forsake you out,
 I ain’t lookin’ for you to feel like me,
 See like me or be like me,
 All i really want to do,
 Is, baby, be friends with you (Bob Dylan)

- **Reality of War**

War never produces patriotism, it produces more refugees. Citizen of a country turned as homeless refugee in a day. Lack of love creates split in the life of every people. Dylan describes his state of mind and condition of the nation in a song titled, "*Spanish Harlem Incident*". Feeling homeless makes the people restless and compels them to search their own identity, Dylan states that as,

I am homeless; come and take me
 Into reach of your rattling drums
 Let me know, babe, about my fortune
 Down along my restless palms (Bob Dylan)

This world failed terribly to listen others and helps them in war times. Enmity eradicates humanity. Bob Dylan tired because of crying and explaining his situation to this world. He got frustration in one stage and said that in the song "*To Ramona*",

The flowers of the city
 Though breathlike gat deathlike at times
 And there's no use in tryin'
 Though I cannot explain that in line (Bob Dylan)

- **Loss of Nature**

Nature and love is always an interlinked concept. From ancient literature works we could find traces. Even climatical conditions and different seasons are used to associate with various emotions. Dylan also handles the same method and compares the nature with his lady love. He thinks about his past and wishes to regain all good days. In the song "*Black Crow Blues*", he compared this situation as separation between lovers and laments for that as

I wake in the mornin', wand'rin'
 Wasted and worn out
 I woke in the mornin', wand'rin',
 Wish' my long-lost lover
 Will walk to me, talk to me
 Tell me what it's all about (Bob Dylan)

He needs some kind of solace from nature and he expects the nature to pamper and protect him. He explained this state in philosophical way, that is

Sometimes i'm thinkin'
 I'm too high to fall
 Sometimes i'm thinkin'
 I'm too high to fall
 Other times i'm thinkin' i'm
 So low I don't know
 If I can come up at all (Bob Dylan)

Dylan finished this song with a comparison that he compared himself with “Scare crow” and then it has some serious satirical tone.

- **Revolution**

Every revolution may not lead to war but every war results in revolution. Meaning for revolution is re-thinking or re-evolution. It is something giving birth to new ideas, concepts and policies. The two World Wars make the people to think about politics and economics. Dylan is a man who expressed his view without any restriction and fear. In the song, “*I Shall be Free*” and “*Motorpsycho Nightmare*” he explained about political domination and directly used leaders name and made a crucial attack on few ideologies.

In the song “*I Shall Be Free*”, he made an attack on fake republic and democracy. He gave a clear picture about how leaders would act for votes and cheats the common man. He mentioned that as

Now the man on the stand he wants my vote,
 He's a-runnin' for office on the ballot note
 He's out there preachin' in front of the steeple
 Tellin' me he loves all kinds –a people
 (He's eatin' bagels
 He's eatin' pizza
 He's eatin' chitlins
 He's eatin' bullshit) (Bob Dylan)

It shows how leaders confuse people in the name of secularism, democracy and equality. Later to this, he speaks and describes the worst situation in America that is government restricting the voice of common man and press. Getting a word from government and using those

words to communicate with this world is not a job of creative writer or artist. Dylan is brave enough to talk about this issue in a song “*Motorpsycho Nightmare*”

This title itself enough to driven into the controversy because it is similar to Che Guevara’s “*Motorcycle Diary*”. Che Guevara is never accepted in the view of American Government and policies. American leaders hates Che Guevara for that reason but here Dylan give a hint and shown his respect towards Che. In this song, he talks about how government implemented their policies in citizens’ mind and then it restricts them to think on their own. He narrates an experience which took place in countryside with farmer. He explained that particular incident as

I had to say something
 To strike him very weird,
 So I yelled out,
 I like Fidel Castro and his beard

 You unpatriotic,
 Rotten doctor commie rat (Bob Dylan)

He escaped from that place and ran away. Later he concluded this song with satirical note against America’s policy and ideology that is

“Without freedom of speech,
 I might be in the swamp” (Bob Dylan)

- **Fear and Death**

This is the worst part in any war. Not only in the battlefield, even during post-war time resulted in psychological problems among people. They used to get fear about everything and led their life in miserable way. Leading a life as a refugee is a bad experience. The war promotes the citizen as internal refugees. Mental illness made them fragile and feared to face the future and struggles in life. Dylan conveyed this experience in the song, “*It ain’t me, Babe*”, shows how the war affects the young mind,

Go away from my window,
 Leave at your chosen speed

I'm not the one you want, babe
I'm not the one you need,
You say you're lookin' for someone
Never weak but always strong,
To protect you an' defend you
Whether you are right or wrong
Someone to open each and every door,
But it ain't me, babe (Bob Dylan)

This is the last song in the album "*Another Side of Bob Dylan*". This song consists of three stanzas and each stanza end with a same line that is "it ain't me, babe". Throughout the song Dylan confess and explain the changes occurred in his psychological and physical state. He loaded those lines with emotions about fear and loses. He is ready to face the death and lose everything but he is not daring enough to face the challenges in life.

These five major categories help to understand how Bob Dylan implements various themes and techniques regarding war. This album is a voice of humanity and then he cried like a soldier in battle field.

Leonard Cohen's "*The Future*" – A war poem:

"*The Future*", this album of Cohen is known for mixed emotions and stands unique for the narrative techniques. This album has nine songs, the title of nine songs itself is enough to convey the message and theme of this album. The titles are "*The Future, Waiting For The Miracle, Be for Real, Closing Time, Anthem, Democracy, Light As The Breeze, Always, Tacoma Trailer*". Cohen's ideologies are totally differing from Bob Dylan but they were connected mainly because of universality themes.

- **Brotherhood**

Cohen is a Diaspora writer; he followed his own style and searched for his root and culture. Lines of Cohen came into existence with more experience. He blended his experience and pain and converts that as voice of common people. In the song, titled "*The Future*", he explained the power of love in different dimension, that is

You don't know me from the wind

You never will, you never did
 I'm the little Jew
 Who wrote the Bible
 I've seen the nations rise and fall
 I've heard their stories, heard them all
 But love's the only engine
 Of survival (Leonard Cohen)

The word survival gives many meanings and it shows the poor condition of people. They expect love at least to survive not to live. Living the life is ultimate goal for any human but here they struggle even to survive.

- **Reality of War**

War destroys hope and dream of many. Sometimes it makes people weak and ill. People need some courage and encouragement to lead their life. Finding out leader in chaotic situation is not an easy task. At one stage, fear about future dominates them and they get frustrated easily. In this album, Cohen discuss about miracle. Miracle is the things which could not be predicted or expected. It is not a hope but it is a kind of belief. "*waiting for the miracle*" is a second song in this album. This song have one similarity with Bob Dylan's "*It ain't me Baby*", Cohen adopt same technique to highlight the concept.

I know you really loved me
 But, you see, my hands were tied
 I know it must have hurt you
 It must have hurt your pride
 To have to stand beneath my window
 With your bugle and your drum
 And me I'm up there waiting
 For the miracle, for the miracle to come (Leonard Cohen)

In this song, Cohen discuss about various serious things like Jew, Mozart and World War II. Cohen reveals the bitter truth and reasons behind the war and diversity. After losing everything, they hold and believe miracle. This song ends with a note "For the miracle, for the miracle to come".

- **Loss of Nature**

Cohen once again proved his style of variety in describing something from different dimensions. Loss of nature is a great destruction for any country. Today the whole world worries about endangerment of sparrows and bees. Whenever the world talks about peace, it is normally associated with dove. In this song “*Anthem*”, Cohen used dove as an object to discuss peace and importance of nature

Ah the wars they will
Be fought again
The holy dove
She will be caught again
Bought and sold
And bought again
The dove is never free (Leonard Cohen)

Though these lines are filled with sorrows and lamentation, Cohen came up with perfect satire on religion and war. Cohen used simple object to describe the bitter truth about religion and path towards war. Nature is destroyed in the cruel hands of war. Everyone is thinking about war but not environment.

- **Revolution**

“Democracy is coming to U.S.A” is the motto in this song “*Democracy*”. Cohen structured this song with happy note but he recollects all the struggles and pain in that journey. Cohen acts as a historian rather than a poet. This song is modern history and known for its didactic nature. Revolution is not a word for war, it is for peace. True revolution should bring peace in the nation. Cohen understands his role as a poet and act according to that he leads one nation towards peace. It helps young generation to understand about war and helps them to think about productive thing.

It is coming from the sorrow on the street
The holy places where the races meet
From the homicidal bitchin’
That goes down in every kitchen

To determine who will serve and who will eat
From the wells of disappointment
Where the women kneel to pray
For the grace of God in the desert here
And the desert far away
Democracy is coming to the U.S.A (Leonard Cohen)

- **Fear and Death**

Cohen talks about fear and death in very emotional state. The approach of Cohen is very much close to Bob Dylan in this concept. Similar to Bob Dylan, Cohen also discusses the psychological state, and good old memories. Fear never allowed innovative or creative ideas. It makes people only to think about their past. In the song, "*The Future*", he recollects everything and expressed his longingness towards those things. Cohen wants to regain everything.

Give me back the Berlin wall
Give me Stalin and St.Paul
Give me Christ
Or give me Hiroshima
Destroy another fetus now
We don't like children anyhow
I've seen the future, baby
It is murder (Leonard Cohen)

These lines depict the mind of people who are affected and suffered because of war. They failed to overcome their worst day's memories and start a new life. People are looking only for the past, not only in present but also in the future. It could be understood through the above lines from Cohen's "*The Future*".

Conclusion:

Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen are celebrated as icon in mass culture but they failed somewhere to gain attention from literary world. Though Dylan won Nobel Prize for his achievements, many people criticise that decision and made an intellectual argument attack towards selection panel. What makes them to restrict these two legends to enter into the literary world? It is the right time to think and find solution. Teachers and researchers should take this

responsibility. If Cohen and Dylan's work are analysed from different dimensions, definitely it results with philosophy, ideologies, theories and good piece of literature. This research article is an attempt to reach the zenith of various ideas in these legends works. Looking them as a war poet will help to get new idea about war and its results. They lead very modern way of life to teach ancient things. Already they won many hearts in this world through their songs. This kind of research definitely creates awareness and impact of their works among young minds. There is no need for an introduction to these two legends but there is a need for proper guidance to reach them and understand their works.

In order to conclude this research article, some more explanation is needed. Many people fought for freedom but they have never seen it. Few people fought and died in battle field itself. Many people born after freedom struggle but they enjoy freedom, democracy and independence. People who are born after freedom have more responsibility than freedom fighters, because they need to protect and maintain the freedom. Only a few people are ready to take this kind of responsibility and turned as leaders. Similar to this, Dylan and Cohen never participated in war but they guide one generation and makes them to understand about war. They explained everything like historians and lead like philosophers and leaders. Both of them used "emotions" as a tool to touch the mass through their songs. Yes, it is a time to act and react and re-think. Like a warrior, they fought against all evils in society. As a poet they fulfilled their duty. Especially as a war poet, they stand as legends and masters of emotive words, narratives and techniques.

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